

# Finding Meaning In Life: “A Path with a Heart”

Spring 2008    RELP 1577    TTh 1:30-2:45pm    ADM 303

## Syllabus

### Dr. Seth Holtzman

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### Course Summary:

*“Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you....Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question....’Does this path have a heart?’ If it does, the path is good; if it doesn’t, it is of no use.”*

This course examines how the vocation of a human being includes having a meaningful existence; that is, right living (“a path with a heart”) requires us to discover what is meaningful. We will consider meaning in various contexts--relationships, experiences, thoughts, actions, and plans, but we will focus on the need to discover meaning in a career and in the larger life one is living.

The culture spews a bewildering array of explicit messages about careers: Do what makes (the most) money. Do what others are doing. Do what is easy to do. Do what fits in with the status quo. Do what is respected by others or what your parents approve of. And what is wrong with making money, fitting into one’s society, gaining the respect of others, and meriting one’s parents’ approval? But we will consider cases of people who have followed these paths only to find that they were paths without a heart. We will note that, unless one’s career is meaningful to oneself, it has a destructive effect on one’s life and self. As important as this criterion of success is, though, what other criteria are there?

At least the culture sends out strong, explicit messages about careers. Often there is only a loud silence regarding the need to, and how to, live a meaningful life. Religion addresses that issue, of course. But some people do not find their way into a religion or are alienated from one. Other people involved in a religion remain blind to what it has to offer. In any case, the work of religion needs to be bolstered by the voice of the culture. And our culture provides little in the way of a voice. We will examine what the culture does convey, usually implicitly: that one should live a life that satisfies one’s desires; or that one may choose most any life, since there are no standards for judging a good/bad or better/worse life. We will consider theoretical problems with these approaches to life as well as cases of people who have followed one of them only to rue the decision. We will consider what traditional wisdom and contemporary knowledge have said about how to shape up a meaningful life. And we will see why our era is one in which meaninglessness threatens to a degree never experienced before.

We will examine our own lives, too. Are we pursuing a path with a heart? How can we find one? What should we look for? How will we know when we have found it? We will consider some people’s own stories of search and discovery. And we will consider the role of education in helping us identify a meaningful life and career.

Class formats will be lecture, Socratic questioning, and guided discussion.

<u>Expected learning outcome</u>	<u>Means of Assessment</u>
<i>A successful student should be able to demonstrate:</i>	<i>By successfully completing:</i>
an understanding of the human need for meaning	midterm, shorter paper, and final exam
an understanding of the importance of a meaningful life	midterm, longer paper, and final exam
an understanding of the sources of meaning	midterm and final exam
an awareness that meaning is philosophically problematic in modern Western thought	midterm and final exam

### **Requirements and Grading:**

1) Attendance is required. During class, I will elicit ideas from you to test your grasp of readings, lecture, and overall course. Try to participate through questions, comments and discussion. Be present, mentally active and prepared. Participation can raise your final grade by 1/3 of a grade.

2) A 2-3 page paper on the human need for meaning. Due Friday, Feb. 15. **20% of your grade**

3) A take-home essay midterm requiring you to show an understanding of the broad ideas of the course. Handed out on Friday, Feb. 29<sup>th</sup>, and due on Monday, March 10<sup>th</sup>. **25% of your grade**

4) A 4-5 page paper on living a meaningful life. Due Monday, April 28<sup>th</sup>. **25% of your grade**

5) A final exam, part essay. Exam date: Friday, May 2, 3:00-6:00pm Bring blue book; write in pen. **30% of your grade**

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### **Criteria employed in evaluating written work:**

#### **Responsiveness to the Assignment**

Writing should fulfill the purpose of the assignment directly and completely.

#### **Content**

Writing should reflect an understanding of the subject. It should make good use of the relevant concepts, distinctions, positions, and reasons included in course readings or brought out in lecture or discussion. It should be organized so ideas are arranged logically and clearly. Main points should be backed by substantial and relevant details. Your work should be backed by good reasons. Your claims and reasons should be consistent with each other. Anticipate and respond to any reasonable objections.

#### **Execution**

Writing should use precise words and well-constructed sentences that clearly represent the writer's reasoning. It should adhere to conventions of grammar, capitalization, spelling, and usage. Writing style should be appropriate to the academy. Your work should be clearly written, its claims precise, its structure clear, with an explicit overall direction. It should be intelligible to an interested student.

#### **Citations and Documentation**

Writers must clearly differentiate their own material from source material. When writers use material that is not their own or not common knowledge, they must document the source of the information using a standardized (i.e., either MLA or APA) method.

Other requirements: on time, typed, paginated, tidy (stapled or bound), standard margins and fonts, and dark print. Failure to meet these requirements will hurt your assignment grades. Your papers should have a cover page with your name, course name and number, date, my name, and a title.

## Grading:

"A"	Superior mastery
"B"	Good mastery
"C"	Satisfactory achievement
"D"	Less than satisfactory achievement
"F"	Unsatisfactory achievement; Failure to achieve minimum competency

I use +/- grades, though A+ is not a possible final course grade.

A+ 97-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69
A 93-96	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66
A - 90-92	B - 80-82	C - 70-72	D - 60-62

Grades can and should measure achievement only, not effort.

## Texts:

- 1) [Living a Life that Matters](#), by Harold Kushner  
(& [When All You've Wanted Isn't Enough](#))
- 2) [On the Meaning of Life](#), by John Cottingham
- 3) handouts

## Reading and taking notes:

I expect you to do all the reading; you will need to, in order to do well in the course. Some of the material is easy and accessible on your first try. Other assignments are quite taxing and will require multiple readings. I suggest the following strategy for any difficult reading: read it once quickly simply to get the gist; then read it carefully for details, not worrying about the overall picture; then read it normally, fitting the details into the overall picture.

Lectures (and assignments) might sometimes track the readings but may also range far afield. Come to class having done the readings. Since lectures can cover material not in the readings, this is another reason to attend each class.

Most students take very sketchy notes. Perhaps they think that they cannot both take notes and listen or perhaps they do not appreciate the value of taking notes. Learn to write while you listen; it not only can be done, it usually enhances your grasp of what is being said. Take as many notes as you can, without losing too much of what is being said. This class is not one in which you can get by with writing down only key terms and definitions. Your notes are an invaluable resource for understanding the course and for the final exam. This course focuses on understanding concepts and ideas, not on memorizing facts. Your notes should reflect that.

## Absences and violations:

To help with attendance--and to learn names--I will start a seating chart in the first few days. Pick your permanent seat; notify me to change it. I will check attendance promptly at the beginning of class. If late, you risk being counted absent; if late enough, it may count as an absence anyway. Avoid tardiness; if you are often late (without good reason), I will choose to count you as absent. Sleeping in class and other forms of mental absence count as an absence. When absent, you are responsible for assignments and notes. Get notes from a classmate. If you still have questions, you may contact me.

No absences are excused. After 2 penalty-free absences, which you needn't explain to me, further absences lower your final grade: for 3-4 total absences, minus 1/3 grade; for 5-6, minus 2/3 grade; for 7, minus 1 grade. Missing the class immediately before or after a vacation counts double. Over 7 absences for other than an emergency is automatic grounds for an "F" (or an "I" in some cases), regardless of your grades.

Respect the people and ideas in our class. I don't care if you bring a drink or sport a hat or wear rags. I care that you pay attention to me and to others (so, no cell phones or activated pagers/beepers/watches), that you are on time and ready to work, that you bring a positive attitude to class even if you are struggling, and that you contribute positively to class.

Cheating, working with others to complete individual assignments (unless this is allowed), and falsifying an emergency to skip class or an assignment, all violate the Honor Code. So does plagiarism, employing a writer's ideas (and words) without giving the writer due credit. See me for help about borrowing someone's ideas or words for your use.

## OUTLINE OF COURSE TOPICS

### I. The problem of meaning

*"Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve."*

- a) What is meaning?
- b) What makes something meaningful?
- c) What makes something meaningful to an individual?
- d) Only humans need meaning; peak experiences
- e) Human experience of the transcendent
- f) The effect on the self of secure or insecure transcendent meaning

### II. Meaning and career

*"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."*

- a) Messages from the culture about career
- b) Problems with cultural conceptions of career success
- c) Work, leisure, and fulfillment
- d) Finding your gifts
- e) Doing what you love (but this requires meaningfulness)
- f) Being productive

### III. Meaning and the human vocation

*"The true profession of man is to find his way to himself."*

- a) Messages from the culture about living a life
- b) Problems with those cultural conceptions of living a life
- c) The idea of a human vocation
- d) Meaning and the human vocation
- e) "A path with a heart"
- f) Rejecting the self-centered self
- g) Living from the perspective of the Ultimate
- h) The modern threat of ultimate meaninglessness