



TEN POWER QUESTIONS

FROM "WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?"
TO "HOW CAN I CREATE MEANING IN MY LIFE?"

TEXT: ANNETTE REISSFELDER PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM

Man, as Spanish philosopher and part-time politician Ortega y Gasset noted 80 years ago, is a meaning-generating machine. The need to make sense of what we experience inexorably leads to the questions above – consistently some of the most difficult questions we face. But pondering these very questions also differentiates us from all other forms of life, makes us have higher aspirations, and look for growth.

While our instinct is to look for answers, powerful questions may teach us more. This is also why it is still worthwhile to read the works of classic philosophers like Aristotle and Plato: it is just amazing how good they were at spotting the questions, even though their answers often cannot convince, especially in the light of today's scientific perspectives. The right question at the right moment can have amazing impact:

it can soothe an angry heart, focus a turbulent mind, and thus change the course of actions and events.

Such questions usually ask to be answered several times over the course of our lives. When we explicitly avoid them, we may sense that they will debilitate us at this moment, and choose to come back to them later, or address them with a guide. There is power in transforming unanswer-

able questions into answerable ones, and especially, into actionable ones. This is what good questions do: not just challenge you, but inspire and guide you when the big thoughts are claiming your attention. At first glance, some of the questions I've selected here may seem mundane, but they hold no small promise, especially in combination.

Concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, is an excellent resource in the quest for meaning in life. His big insight was that the perennial question "What is the meaning of life?", one that philosophers and adolescents have struggled with for millennia, could be answered – once it had been transformed. He also grappled with this question, as anyone who had witnessed their entire intellectual and emotional world disintegrate, followed by the horrors of camp life, would. Yet he found surprisingly simple answers once he reframed the

question. In a nutshell: it is not us who get to demand of the world, “What is the meaning of life?” Rather, life is demanding that we answer the question with the actions and decisions we make. We create meaning in and with our choices and beliefs.

1) *What is the most important thing?*

In our times and age, media and pop songs try to make us believe that the days of having to make hard choices are over when today, we can have it all, and now. This is of course complete fantasy, and should be treated accordingly. The truth is, not only do we need to know what the most important thing is to us, but we also consistently have to put it first. Many women fall for the “wanting it all” myth, and expect from themselves to almost effortlessly produce a fulfilling career, beautiful home, happy family, stable relationship, meaningful friendships, along with being a supporting daughter, and all that in the perfect body. Many would add to this already frightening list that they want to be appreciated by everybody... This myth is especially debilitating for women; for as long as, when things get tough, the caregiving responsibility for one’s family, as well as that of their family of origin (sometimes both...), remains with the female of the species, the full range of choices isn’t available to them. Except if women create their life around their career – and that requires a very supportive husband.

2) *How much is enough?* What I will say now may sound extraordinary from someone associated with personal and professional development: there is a lot to be said for being happy with what you have, and who you are. I be-

lieve it is valid for everybody to question whether a career in management will take them towards the things they want from life, or rather away from them; this question is especially relevant for women. No misunderstandings – of course women can deliver in management roles, it just takes a higher toll on most of them when they can’t work on “their terms”.

I know this isn’t what the current equality myth suggests, but I’ve heard enough about the deepest ambitions and aspirations of senior men and women in the last 18 years to say that most women are less good at filtering out everything out but the current topic at hand. Therefore, in a male environment, women risk constantly overexposing and overstretching themselves. Obviously, women should aim high if this is where their true passion lies, and receive the same support, mentoring and opportunities a male talent would receive. My point is: I just don’t believe it is the right choice for every talented woman – and ironically, it is somehow not OK at the moment if a woman has other priorities in life... Is this choice?!

Many of those who give their best on all fronts end up torn between the manifold expectations on one side, and the societal myth that if they can’t make it, it’s their fault, as it clearly can be done. So they turn to the self-optimizing industry to learn the techniques – from stress management to mindfulness... Nothing wrong with good skills training, but when the real issue isn’t skill-related, incremental improvements through skills training won’t produce the desired results. This is where only the liberating,

clarifying questions typical of a good coaching relationship can bring lasting results, and inner peace.

So here comes the next question I’d like you to ponder for a minute: how much is enough – in just one generation? *What do you need to achieve before you know you’ve done enough by your own standards?* I believe people could be much happier if they answered this question pretty early on in their lives, and then revisited it every five to ten years; our deep ambitions change over the course of life.

What it means is that once you have settled for a clear priority, you measure yourself by metrics that relate to that goal - and stop comparing yourself to people with different priorities. Once you truly own your priority, you can decide what is important, and opt out of races that don’t matter. It is also easy to ignore “successful” people when their success isn’t in the metrics of your priority. I’ve made this point before, but an astonishing percentage of the highly successful men and women I meet professionally – those of whom almost everybody else believes “have it all” – don’t feel like this about their lives at all; they still “suffer” from what they don’t have, and want. Developing the quiet confidence that Seneca termed *euthymia*—*the belief that you’re on the right path and not led astray by the many tracks which cross yours of people who are hopelessly lost* is a beautiful aspiration. And one that will take time to embrace!

3) *Is this taking me towards my deepest goals?* There are times when we feel very alive—active and are learning and thriving, and leveraging – and sense that we are feeding our longing

for meaning. This is what happens when we follow our intrinsic motivation; we don't need to protect our energy because it flows freely. Most of the time though, we work on goals that are more rational, i.e. other people's goals (for us). This makes sense, and such work enables us to get the means to do other things we enjoy – but at the end of the day, we may need to willpower ourselves into staying the course. I believe that we spend too much time working on unquestioned goals, so we'd be well advised to realize what we absolutely, truly need to achieve so that we can feel good about ourselves – and what we don't!

How is this important here? The point is that people experience meaning in their lives when they feel that they are in the right place. This constant striving for more takes us right out of this feeling; we “buy” into the myth that stretch goals are for everyone. I am working predominantly with people who do need (to set themselves!) stretch goals, but these are a small minority in any population. Just like only about 2-3% of people have a truly entrepreneurial mind-set, for example.

4) *Is this in my control?* Epictetus argues that the chief task of the philosopher is to make the distinction between what is in their control and what is not—what is up to us and what is not up to us. We waste incredible amounts of time on the latter and leave many opportunities on the table by mislabelling the former. Our actions, our thoughts and feelings are largely up to us. Other people's actions and external events are absolutely not. But here's where it comes full circle: *our responses to other peo-*



ple, external events or even the weather are in our control. Making this distinction, and making it a regular practice, will make us happier, stronger and more successful because it focuses our resources where we can make a difference. One powerful way to do that is tackle question No. 5.

5) *What is in my perfect day?* Many people, I for one, have a love-hate relationship with routine. This isn't about those boring but necessary routines – but about the ones that make your eyes shine! The science is clear: it is precisely good routines that make us experience our lives as meaningful. The line of thought goes like this: you construct your life day by day. If you know what your ideal daily routine looks like, you can make decisions and/or plans for ensuring that you'll experience at least some of it on a regular basis. So, if you take an inventory of the most enjoyable and satisfying days of your life, you can give these space in your everyday life, and make sure that your job, personal life, and especially your next decisions can actually take you *towards* these. If you enjoy being in harness and that's what makes you perform best, find a role that comes with a lot of responsibilities, deadlines and set requirements. If you prefer influence or freedom over material success, pick something that allows for that. And so on – just make sure that your decisions create an environment that doesn't constantly force you to *not be yourself*.

6) *Am I doing my job?* The last thing basketball coach John Wooden would say to his players in the locker room before a game was, “Well, I've done my job.” The question is: *Are you doing yours?* Do you even know

what that job is? We can be very busy, exhaustingly busy, and still not be doing our job. We get caught up in things that don't matter, are interfering and encroaching on someone else's job, or we can just plain procrastinate. All these things certainly keep us busy, but not working on the job that actually matters. Which leads us to a higher-level version of that same question – No. 7.

7) *Does this actually matter?* Many wise people never let their mortality – or the fact that the part of our life where we can decide what we worry about is limited – slip too far from their mind. *Memento mori* helps them

year's time? If you don't put so much weight on the moment you are failing, this opens you up to the full experience of the next moment.

On a more mundane note, this question can simplify our lives - and help us remain focused on the one thing we decided to focus on. Which includes to “keep saying no” to the hundreds of good ideas that are constantly flying in our direction in favour of “the one” – as Steve Jobs and others famously observed.

8) *Am I choosing to worry or be afraid?* When you worry, ask yourself, “Does getting upset provide me

“There are naive questions, tedious questions, ill-phrased questions, questions put after inadequate self-criticism. But every question is a cry to understand the world.”

Carl Sagan

ask: “Given the shortness of life, does this thing I'm thinking about, suffering from, throwing myself into even matter?” If you think about it, you'll typically find that the answer is no. It's a useful routine to ask this question before we throw good time after bad. “You could leave life right now,” Marcus Aurelius reminded himself, “Let that determine what you do and say and think.” In light of that, does what we are worked up about actually matter? What will this momentary disappointment look like in a

with more options or fewer?” Other useful questions include ‘What am I choosing to not see right now?’ What important things are you missing because you chose worry over introspection, alertness or wisdom? Obstacles in life make us emotional, but the way to survive or overcome them is by keeping our emotions in check. It is crucial to keep steady regardless of what happens, or how much external events may fluctuate. Greek *apatheia* is the calm equanimity that comes with the absence



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of irrational or extreme emotions. When you find yourself indulging in those emotions, one way to get back on track is by reminding yourself of the cost they incur: you seriously risk missing something by being nervous, scared, or anxious, because your brain doesn't operate very well on that cocktail of hormones. Most people agree that they actually cannot afford missing much when stakes are high – but unfortunately, these tense moments are not when we get to make a choice... Rather, this is good when practices that we have built over time “pay back”.

9) *If I am not for me, who is?* A lot has changed in the socialisation of women in the past decades, so today, most women would agree that it doesn't make them a bad person to want to be remembered or to want to make it to the top. Still, we could potentially be holding a pretty hollow and outer-world-driven aspiration, so may want to look beyond such motives and find out what deeper needs they could be serving. This connection to our deeper fibres enables us to draw strength in moments of crises, where we need support and encouragement. Much like General Marshall, of the Marshall Plan, who had the same traits everyone else has: ego, self-interest, pride, dignity, ambition, but these were “tempered by a sense of humility and selflessness.” When he was offered the command of the troops on D-Day he told Roosevelt: “The decision is yours, Mr President; my wishes have nothing to do with the matter.” And even though Eisenhower led the invasion and performed with excellence, Marshall's opportunity to dramatically impact history came soon after. People who

get this balance right don't have to fall in love with the image of what success looks like, but can focus on a higher purpose instead. And once you are in touch with your higher purpose, absolutely be your most enthusiastic fan!

10) *Who do I spend time with?* I'm sure not even Goethe was the first to observe that looking at who you spend time with lets him tell you who you are. We understand that who we know and what we do influences who we will become: what we do puts us around people, and the people around us affect what we do. When we are around people who inspire and validate us, we have a different experience of life from when we are around people who drag us down. We seem to “get” that a child who spends time with other children who don't want to go anywhere in life, probably isn't going to go anywhere, either. What we get less is that adults who spend time around people who aren't driven by any deeper curiosity and values, and tolerate mediocre relationships or unhappy lifestyles may find themselves making similar choices. Since our life comes to resemble the environment we are setting for it, it's smart to choose our surroundings wisely. It is as beneficial to be in company with people who can inspire you, as it is to be in company of those whom you can inspire.

I often think how fortunate I am to have so much choice in life, courtesy of being born at the right time, and how easy it is to take this for granted, or worse, something that I must surely deserve... My life would be dramatically different if I happened to be born in Yemen, Sudan or Greenland. We only need to go back

one or two generations and look at the life of our ancestors. How much control over her time did my grandmother have when she was my age? How many friends could she freely share her thoughts with? What relationship with her body did she have? Could she revisit her choices, or “press reset”? She seemed to enjoy her role in the world, however limited this role may seem to me today. In modest ways, she found pockets of choice where she could be her own judge of things, and ignored what society, family, or status expected from her. Everything else was given...

It may sometimes feel strange to flip your definition of meaning to what matters to you - your joys and values, but it is also invigorating. The strongest benefit is that knowing and holding true to your model of meaning manifests in the authenticity of your everyday life. Also, you won't have to wonder if at the end of your career or life you will have made a meaningful impact in the world around you. You will have made these choices every day to elevate your personal experience of meaning. What a privilege! /BW