

what makes for a meaningful life?

What a beautifully deep question!

A meaningful life is a life that matches or fulfils your unmet needs. A meaningful life and a fulfilled life are synonymous.

Settlers, Prospectors and Pioneers can all have meaningful lives - but they will be very different from one another.

A sense of contented achievement, of a life "well-lived", of giving back more than you started with - or ever hoped to achieve - is a state that all groups can experience. It is often at this point, when the subconscious needs are being fulfilled, that people realize they have meaningful lives.

In fact it is this state of meeting one's needs that causes a "crisis". You realise – become consciously aware - your life has become meaningful in terms of your dominant values/needs. The crisis comes with the realisation that there is "something more" - another level of meaningfulness you know is there but can't yet describe.

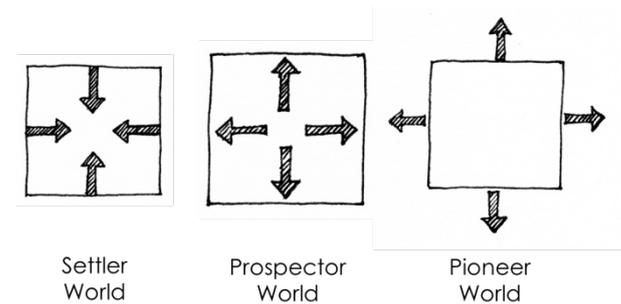
When people, pundits and experts think, discuss and write about a "meaningful life" in the 21st century they invariably refer to the Pioneer version of a meaningful life - based on values attributes like Benevolence, Caring, Universalism, Forgiveness, Justice, etc.

This approach tends to exclude other Maslow groups who don't have these orientations as dominant values. By extension, these Maslow groups do not and cannot have a meaningful life - which is true if the only measurements are Pioneer measurements.

But it isn't true that the only measurements of "meaningful" are Pioneer derived - the Pioneer measurements are valid only for Pioneers.

This isn't just about semantics - the long history of moral philosophy and religion is rooted in the world of the Settler, whose version of a meaningful life contains elements of the Pioneer orientation, yet is *entirely* different.

Rose¹ illustrates the three worlds of settlers, prospectors and pioneers as follows:



In these diagrams, the inside of the boxes represents the known, the familiar and the acceptable. Outside of the box represents the unknown, the unfamiliar and the (possibly) unacceptable. The arrows indicate the typical driving forces for each group – Settlers always inwards; Prospectors always outwards but inside the box; Pioneers outwards and outside the box.

The Settler would have a meaningful life if they were completely normal (in the middle of the box - not wracked by earthly fears, uncertainties, and doubts). The edges of the box are negative emotions and negative actions. If the Settler can become "everyman" and not "edgyman" they will have a meaningful life.

In other words they see others as having less of these negative emotions and thoughts than they do. They feel that if they could rid themselves of these things and see life for what it really is - the revealed truth - they would be leading a meaningful life that could connect them with others - a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood and connectedness to others who may still be "lost souls", like they were before they realised they had a meaningful life.

Much of 20th Century western psychoanalysis was rooted in Settler issues of alienation and anomie, and a failure of spirituality and sense of disconnectedness. Getting a "well balanced" Settler - in the centre of the box - with a sense of connectedness and place in the world was the mechanism with which to create a "meaningful life".

¹ Rose, C. (2011) What makes people tick. Matador

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Traditional religions, and a feeling for something beyond the here and now, embody this state of being as being desirable - and thus meaningful, and often expressed as "spiritual".

This isn't far off Universalism - but it is very different to the Pioneer version!

Prospectors can be consciously aware that they have a meaningful life, but it looks very different from the moral and spiritual psyche of the Settler. The Prospector version of meaningful will be created primarily through their displays of achievement.

That might be the highly competitive Richard Branson taking "normal people" (with £120K to spend) to the edge of space. It might be the guy whose vision and passion created the VISA system that drives every major credit card in the world and changed the world's ability to acquire and display symbols of value.

These are the people who push the edges of the box. They don't want to be normal - they want to be "excellent"; they don't want to be good - they want to be "great". Being and feeling excellent or great gives them the sense of having a meaningful life - not a normal life.

Neither of these versions of a meaningful life are usually talked about as being "really meaningful". In fact, they are frequently either disregarded as invalid or denigrated as "lower forms of meaningful" or shallow - i.e. somehow not as meaningful as the Pioneer version of meaningful.

As we have said over many years, Pioneers do have many admirable attributes and, by bravely leaping out of the box, they can show the other groups that life is even bigger, more exciting and, frankly, scarier than the pundits and experts talk about. But they also have a darker side that they constantly need to monitor.

This is the subconscious tendency to steamroller others in discussions and activities and, more than they like to admit, sometimes to become a bit smug and unaccepting of others' versions of meaning, and meaningfulness.

Of all the Pioneer Values Modes, Concerned Ethicals are classically the ones who express a wish and desire to be more Benevolent and Universal as the path to a meaningful life. Their subconscious smugness frequently leads them to advocate theirs as the *only* way to a meaningful life.

This assertion leads to many discussions (about meaningful life) becoming diffuse and unfocused, since they are often conducted with people who share different perspectives – perspectives that the Concerned Ethicals simply do not see or will not accept.

For all groups, this perspective blindness – the subconscious assertion that I'm "right" and if you don't agree with me then you're "wrong" - is the root of most evils, great and small.

As individuals, it is perfectly within our power to take control of this by exercising, first, some awareness of ourselves and, second, actually listening to what others are trying to say rather than what it suits our selfish psychological framework to think they say.

Oddly enough, there is no mystery to this. As a social animal, all but a few of us are born with this skill. We even have a name for it – empathy. In common parlance it's expressed by the notion of "walking a mile in the other man's shoes".

Maslow's hierarchy helps us to understand how this is possible. It's an order of needs (a.k.a. Values) not of people. Further up the needs hierarchy does not equate to "better", or indeed "worse" people, just different. How often have we read news items about terrible things being done with a genuine desire to "do good"?

When we talk of someone's position in the hierarchy, such as when we classify someone as a Prospector (esteem driven), what we are really doing is talking about their dominant motivation. By no means is this their only motivation – and this is what the hierarchy should remind us of – and why the hierarchy is a valuable model to keep in mind.

We all have all of the Maslowian needs going on within us all the time. A Pioneer needs to

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“belong”, just as does a Settler– but it doesn’t consume the Pioneer in the way it does a Settler. Similarly, a Settler needs to feel “fulfilled”, just as does a Pioneer – again, though, not in such a consuming way. The Pioneer’s belonging need is shaped by their dominant desire to understand the wider world, while the Settler’s belonging need is much more direct and raw.

Given this, simply by being mindful we can temporarily allow ourselves to act (think) as if driven by any of the needs – even if that need is completely at odds to our dominant one. We all know what each of the needs feels like. We just have to ask for the temporary resignation of our dominant need (with the promise that we’ll let it back in control any time soon)².

When we allow ourselves to do this, it becomes relatively easy to answer the initial question and see that everyone is capable of experiencing meaningfulness, whatever their values. It also helps us to gain some insight into just what that actually means in the distinct context of the individual’s specific values orientation.

Having the language of values cuts through the unspoken and subconscious crap (the stuff we are all guilty of making up) and allows us to see that there is more than one version of a meaningful life - and the various versions can be traced directly back to the values system of every individual ever born.

Written by Pat Dade and Les Higgins – co-founders of Cultural Dynamics

² This is a crucially important point. Empathy is a voluntary abdication of the dominant need - it cannot realistically be demanded. Its efficacy depends utterly on the promise that the dominant need (normal life!) will be resumed. Any demand that does not allow reassertion of the

dominant need represents an inordinate (fearful) challenge to the individual psyche and will almost invariably lead to rejection of the proposition (usually subconscious, immediate and vociferous).