

# The Meaning of Life

Does Money Buy Meaning or Happiness?

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## Does Money Buy Meaning or Happiness?

“Life is what you make it.” Sounds so simple, yet it’s something we struggle with on a regular basis. What are we really trying to ‘make’? Are we trying to ‘make’ happiness? Purpose? Or could it be we are trying to ‘make meaning’?

While facilitating a workshop one day I asked if anyone had any questions before we moved on. One smart aleck participant said, “Yeah, what’s the meaning of life?” Without hesitation and without thought, I replied, “Choices!”

I have no idea where that answer came from or why it did, but it did. And it has stuck with me ever since. “The meaning of life is...choices.” Think about it: in everything we do, there is typically a choice involved in our decision to act.

When deciding to write about the meaning of life, at first I thought myself a fool. Why would I choose such a topic? If you type “meaning of life” into a Google search, it yields a mere 54,500,000 results. Certainly this topic has already been covered in its entirety. And, if you Google search similar topics such as “what happy people know” and “life purpose,” you get 135,000,000 and 69,700,000 results respectively. So why write about a topic that has already been covered so thoroughly and there is no possible way to cover it in one article, one book, or even in one lifetime? Since the beginning of time we have been searching for our meaning, our purpose and our happiness. We have this innate desire to control our lives and our happiness. This article explores these areas and then takes it one step further, focusing specifically on the affluent population and the difficulty these individuals experience in sorting out their meaning from their money. It addresses the affluent person who has been culturally conditioned to embrace wealth as a measure of happiness and a source of fulfillment for his/her meaning of life.

There is the age old stigma that wealth can bring or buy happiness. But, we hear it time and time again: money doesn’t buy happiness. The lack thereof may create unhappiness, but the presence of wealth does not necessarily have the opposite effect. Wealth does not create happiness nor does it provide the meaning of life. It may provide opportunities, but that does not guarantee happiness or meaning.

We have become culturally conditioned to believe that “more is better” and it is challenging for some people to distinguish the difference between needs and wants. While the less affluent are forced to make distinctions between needs and wants, the wealthy have the luxury

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of viewing this discerning task as unnecessary. Maybe this alone is why mainstream society envies the rich; they don't have to decide between buying diapers or buying the next Xbox game. Mainstream society, instead, lives off of the hope that a windfall of money will bring them happiness, whereas the truly wealthy have to find other means of creating happiness.

Assumedly, the wealthy have the freedom to buy what they want, where they want and when they want. Who wouldn't desire that type of freedom? In the book, *Affluenza*, Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss discuss how buying serves a purpose of creating and fulfilling our identity:

...our actions are driven by a desire for "self-completion". Today, almost all buying is to some degree an attempt to create or renew a concept of self. We complete ourselves symbolically by acquiring things that compensate for our perceived shortcomings. A vast marketing infrastructure has developed to help us manufacture ideal selves and to supply the goods to fill the gap between the actual and the ideal. The marketers understand much better than we do how we want to create an ideal self....Because [marketing] acts as the interface between the self and the world, clothing is perfect for providing the bridge between who we actually are and who we want to be seen to be. Cars and houses do the same, because people look at us "through" our cars and houses.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, if the wealthy can afford to buy more prestigious, sought after brands, people will see them as more prestigious and more sought after. Who doesn't want to be sought after? After all, we all have the same need for affiliation, the need to be needed, and the need to belong. "Yet evidence points to the conclusion that the more materialistic we become the more we try to cope with our insecurities through consuming, and the less contented we are. It also suggests that more materialism means poorer relationships."<sup>1</sup>

Of all the luxury items available for purchase, at even the most extravagant prices, there are three things that money cannot buy: self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence. These are intrinsic factors that can only be created and developed from within. They must be pursued internally, not purchased externally.

Even "retail therapy" cannot build or sustain self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence. "Such a sad paradox: the more we've attained, the emptier we've become."<sup>2</sup> If there is one thing from the external world that can help build these intrinsic factors, it is having the right relationships with key family members and friends; relationships that provide the right amounts of emotional support at the right times and built upon trust. Trust, as defined by Charles Feltman in the *Thin Book of Trust*, means Reliability, Sincerity, Care and Competency.<sup>3</sup> When people do what they say they're going to do, they are authentic,

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Denniss, Richard. 2005. *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough*. McPherson's Printing Group. Victoria, Australia. pp.13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, Dan. 2003. *What Happy People Know*. Rodale Inc. USA. p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Feltman, Charles. 2009. *The Thin Book of Trust*. Thin Book Publishing Co. Bend, OR. pp.13-14.

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they care and they are knowledgeable of what constitutes a healthy relationship; trust has nothing to do with wealth, what you own, or what you wear.

Gretchen Rubin created a twelve month happiness project that is captured in her book, *The Happiness Project*. In her book, she states that the one thing that did not surprise her was that the most direct boosts to her happiness came from the steps she devoted to social bonds. “It was my efforts to strengthen those relationships [with family and friends] that yielded the most gratifying results. What’s more, I noticed that my happiness made it easier for me to be patient, cheerful, kind, generous, and all the other qualities I was trying to cultivate. I found it easier to keep my resolutions, laugh off my annoyances, and have enough energy for fun.”<sup>4</sup>

Society, media and marketers condition us to connect happiness and the meaning of life with external factors such as what kind of car we drive and what we are able to acquire. It does not condition us to connect the meaning of life to healthy relationships. Society also teaches us that the meaning of life is happiness. If we assume that the meaning of life is happiness, it provides a probable explanation for why we have this never ending-pursuit to find our happiness – if we find our happiness, we find our life’s meaning.

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC), “Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, money is not the answer, happiness is. “Happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure nor this thing nor that, but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Dan Baker, author of *What Happy People Know*, “If you don’t think happiness is critically important, perhaps it’s because you have a narrow definition of it, as many people do, thinking that it just means being in a good mood most of the time or experiencing the emotions of joy. But happiness is neither a mood nor an emotion. Mood is a biochemical condition, and emotions are just transitory feelings. Happiness is a way of life – an overriding outlook composed of qualities such as optimism, courage, love and fulfillment. It’s not just tiptoeing through the tulips of la-la land, and it’s not something that changes every time your situation changes. It is nothing less than cherishing every day.”<sup>7</sup>

If you are a person of wealth, you may find it more common than not that people assume that just because you have money, you are happy; that your means provide the magic potion to cherish every day. And more importantly, they also have the misperception that if you gave them your money, they too would be happy. “The fact is that wealthy people are

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<sup>3</sup> Feltman, Charles. 2009. *The Thin Book of Trust*. Thin Book Publishing Co. Bend, OR. pp.13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Rubin, Gretchen. 2009/2011. *The Happiness Project*. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto, Ontario, Canada. p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, section 7.

<sup>6</sup> Yeats, William Butler. Poet. 1865-1939. Extracted March 9, 2012 from *Brainy Quotes*, William Butler Yeats Quotes. [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william\\_butler\\_yeats\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william_butler_yeats_2.html).

<sup>7</sup> Baker, Dan. 2003. *What Happy People Know*. Rodale Inc. USA. pp.4-5.

unhappy just as commonly as people without money. That's one important thing that happy people know: Money doesn't bring happiness."<sup>7</sup>

This notion is supported by David Myers' "American Paradox". According to Myers in *Wealth, Well-being, and the American Dream*, wealth does not make us happier:

So, believing that a little more money would make us a little happier and that it's very important to be very well off, are we indeed now – after four decades of rising affluence – happier?

We are not. Since 1957, the number of Americans who say they are "very happy" has declined from 35 to 32 percent. Meanwhile, the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate has nearly tripled, the violent crime rate has nearly quadrupled (even after the recent decline), and more people than ever (especially teens and young adults) are depressed.

I call this soaring wealth and shrinking spirit "the American Paradox." More than ever, we have big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We excel at making a living but often fail at making a life. We celebrate our prosperity but yearn for purpose. We cherish our freedoms but long for connection. In an age of plenty, we feel spiritual hunger.<sup>8</sup>

A similar paradox was extracted from a 1999 Internet chain mailing:

*The Paradox of Our Time in History is that  
we spend more, but have less;  
we buy more, but enjoy it less.  
We have bigger houses and smaller families;  
more conveniences, but less time;  
more medicine, but less wellness.  
We read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom.  
We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.  
These are the times of tall men, and short character;  
steep profits, and shallow relationships.  
These are the days of two incomes, but more divorce;  
of fancier houses, but broken homes.  
We've learned how to make a living, but not a life;  
we've added years to life, not life to years;  
we've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Baker, Dan. 2003. *What Happy People Know*. Rodale Inc. USA. pp.4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Myers, David. 2007. *Wealth, Well-being, and the New American Dream*. David G. Myers, Hope College, Holland, Michigan. <http://www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pagelD=49>. Excerpts from his latest book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (Yale University Press, 2000), can be read at [www.davidmyers.org](http://www.davidmyers.org).

<sup>9</sup> Paradox was excerpted from a 1999 Internet chain mailing. Unknown source.

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These paradoxes paint a bleak picture. We are spiritually hungry, have a polluted soul, money is not the answer to happiness and both money and happiness don't solve the mystery of "what is the meaning of life." So how do we overcome these paradoxes and find our life's meaning?

The meaning of life can be found in the choices that are made along the way that make you proud. Proud of who you are and who you have become. Proud of your daily behaviors and actions. Proud of the legacy you are creating. Proud of the examples that you are setting for future generations. Proud of how you are living in alignment with your values and your family's values. Proud that you know who you are, separate from your wealth. And that you are making conscious choices about your needs that you are trying to fulfill.

The meaning of life is also found in close, healthy relationships. Relationships where people love you for who you are, not for what you wear, what you drive, where you live or how much you have. They love you for you, and it is an easy, healthy relationship because they love you as much as you love yourself.

A new American dream is taking shape. Having secured our human rights and achieved affluence, we now long for connection and purpose. We seek better balance between our needs for independence and attachment, liberty and civility, me-thinking and we-thinking. Such transformation in consciousness has happened before, and it could happen again.<sup>8</sup>

Life is about experiences without regrets. It's about creating meaningful, positive relationships. It is also about creating your own path.

From composer, musician, and philanthropist, Peter Buffett, comes a warm, wise and inspirational book [*Life is What you Make It*] that asks, "Which will you choose: the path of least resistance or the path of potentially greatest satisfaction?" You may think that with a last name like his, Buffett has enjoyed a life of endless privilege. But the son of billionaire investor, Warren Buffett, says that the only real inheritance handed down from his parents was a philosophy: forge your own path in life. It is a creed that has allowed him to follow his own passions, establish his own identity, and reap his own successes....We confuse privilege with material accumulation, character with external validation. Yet, by focusing more on substance and less on reward, we can open doors of opportunity and strive toward a greater sense of fulfillment.<sup>10</sup>

Buffet provides great advice: focus more on substance and less on reward. Although this is great advice, learning how to accomplish this could prove to be challenging to some. Many things sound good "in theory" but how many of us support theory with action? Dieting, for

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<sup>8</sup> Myers, David. 2007. *Wealth, Well-being, and the New American Dream*. David G. Myers, Hope College, Holland, Michigan. <http://www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pageID=49>. Excerpts from his latest book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (Yale University Press, 2000), can be read at [www.davidmyers.org](http://www.davidmyers.org).

<sup>10</sup> Cronin, Paul. 2012. *The Next Transition Blog*. *If money doesn't make you happy, then you probably aren't spending it right*. Extracted May 16, 2012. [http://www.successfultransitionplanning.com/blog/transition-planning-exit-plan/bid/103789/If-money-doesn-t-make-you-happy-then-Baby-Boomers?goback=%2Egde\\_3768207\\_member\\_105278550](http://www.successfultransitionplanning.com/blog/transition-planning-exit-plan/bid/103789/If-money-doesn-t-make-you-happy-then-Baby-Boomers?goback=%2Egde_3768207_member_105278550).

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instance, is simple in theory: “eat less and exercise more”. But, how many people actually follow through with their diets on a daily basis, for the long haul? To assist with follow through, it's helpful to have specific actions that can be followed. Regarding Buffet's advice, “focus more on substance and less on reward”, three Harvard researchers, under the title: “*If money doesn't make you happy, then you probably aren't spending it right*”, identified eight actionable ways to yield more happiness from our spending:

1. Buy experiences, instead of things, because they offer long memories to savor.
2. Use our incomes to help others instead of ourselves, because anything we do to improve our connections to others tends to improve our happiness as well.
3. Buy many small pleasures instead of a few big ones, slow down to smell the roses.
4. Buy less overpriced insurance, because we adjust much better to shocks than we suppose.
5. Pay now, consume later. Anticipating a future purchase will give us anticipatory joy, which is a sort of “free happiness”. Impatient purchases give us fleeting benefits and long term debt.
6. Be attentive to the details of a purchase, since they may disproportionately affect the happiness of the experience.
7. Beware of too much comparison shopping, since it can focus our attention on unimportant distinctions.
8. Listen to others about what can bring happiness. They can add new and useful perspectives.

So, how do you find happiness, and do you spend money to do so?<sup>11</sup>

In a conversation with life coach Georgia Fieste, she stated, “Life will always be out of balance. It is our choices that help us to live life with purpose and intention. People need to live into their power; they need to live into who they are.”<sup>12</sup>

One of my favorite quotes comes from Hunter S. Thompson: “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming ‘Wow! What a Ride!’”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt of Peter Buffet's *Life is What you Make it*. Extracted March 8, 2012 from *Resources For Your 2012 Resolutions*. <http://www.literaryduckblog.org/2011/12/resources-for-your-2012-resolutions/>.

<sup>12</sup> Feiste, Georgia. *Life Coach. You can Live a Life of Purpose and Passion*. <http://collaborativetransitions.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, Hunter S. American Journalist and Author. 1937-2005. Quote extracted March 8, 2012 from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/47188>. Information on Hunter S. Thompson can be found at [http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5237.Hunter\\_S\\_Thompson](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5237.Hunter_S_Thompson).

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What “ride” are you on? And what “ride” are you creating for your children? It is natural for kids to try to “keep up with their parents”. They feel the pressure to perform at a similar or higher level. Kids want to make their parents proud. If the family focuses on wealth, kids often feel that there is no chance of competing or making their parents proud in this area; they are defeated before they even have a chance to start. Therefore, why should they even try? The path of least resistance is to live off the wealth and proclaim happiness. It would be extremely difficult for your kids to outperform you or the family financially.

Take a different perspective. It is good to teach children core values and how to preserve the family wealth. It is just as important to teach children how to use these core values to forge their own path in life; to help them live a life of purpose and discover their own meaning of life. For parents and children alike, this path is a choice! And it may require that all of us take the path of potentially greatest satisfaction, not the path of least resistance. Help your children learn how to make wise choices. Resist the natural temptation to make everything the path of least resistance. Make your own wise choices and model how to find the path of greatest satisfaction.

I will leave you with a poem by William Blank, “*Soon you will understand the meaning of life.*”

*You will have the experience of choosing  
or selecting.*

*More than one viable option  
will lie before you.*

*You will experience weighing  
the advantages  
and disadvantages  
of each,  
as best you can.*

*You will perceive yourself  
picking one  
and letting go of the other.*

*Some experiences of deciding  
will be very difficult;  
others  
scarcely worth noting.*

*Your decisions will have consequences.*

*The consequences of a choice  
may be significant  
or trivial.*

*The ultimate consequences of a choice  
may be very different  
from their first appearance. <sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup>Blank, William. Extracted March 8, 2012 from <http://www.themeaningoflife.org/7Decide.htm>.  
Also see [Bill@themeaningoflife.org](mailto:Bill@themeaningoflife.org).

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