This chapter explains the meaning of meaning-making for the quarterlife generation. It describes what is called the meaning-quest—consisting of nine core meaning-making questions—and offers two examples of the pedagogy that the authors use in working with students.

Education for Making Meaning

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Higher education is more than career preparation and learning how to take, and pass, exams. While both of these objectives are important, we believe that it is equally important for college students to make an enduring meaning in their lives and to learn how to pursue worthy purposes. It was Viktor Frankl (1959/2006) who said that “for the first time in human history most of us have the means to live but no meaning to live for” (p. 140). Our chapter will explain the meaning of meaning-making and will briefly describe our approach to teaching for meaning. Our teaching–learning pedagogy emphasizes the importance of storytelling and, also, what we call “moral conversation” (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008; Nash & Viray, 2013).

We base our meaning-making curriculum on what we call the “meaning-quest.” This quest consists of nine core meaning-making questions that students bring to our classes each semester. Our overall objective in meaning-making teaching is to help students to integrate the self, subject matter, vocational training, moral development, religio-spiritual inclinations, and interpersonal relationships into a holistic learning experience that will prepare them for life beyond their formal education.

Why We Do What We Do as Meaning-Making Mentors

As university educators, we witness firsthand every day the need for students of all ages, both traditional and nontraditional, to have something coherent to believe in, some centering values and goals to strive for. They, like us, need strong background beliefs and ideals to shore them up during these times when religious and political wars plague entire societies; when the natural environment continues to deteriorate; and when the fluctuations of the global economy result in recession, deflation, and in the inequitable distribution of scarce resources.
On a more personal level, the American College Health Association (2012) reports that in a sample of 76,000 students, 86% felt overwhelmed, 82% felt emotionally exhausted, 62% felt very sad, 58% felt very lonely, 52% felt enormous stress, 51% felt overwhelming anxiety, 47% felt hopeless and purposeless, and the rest felt dysfunctionally depressed. In our own teaching experience, we have found that students come to our courses on meaning-making with the need to make sense of the turmoil that results when they realize that they will graduate (if they do at all) with tens of thousands of dollars in loans to pay off; when their friendships go awry; when their work grows tedious and unsatisfying; when they become disillusioned by a sense of unfulfillment; when, on those dreaded occasions, they hear that someone they love suffers from the ravages of a metastatic malignancy; when they face life-altering decisions; or when they learn that the person who means the most to them in the whole world no longer loves them.

Education for making meaning and finding purpose holds the promise of giving a plugged-in undergraduate and graduate population permission to stop and pause in the middle of going through the motions. Education for making meaning enables students to talk about the deeper existential questions and universal life issues openly and honestly, and face-to-face, with significant others on campus. Meaning-making conversation forces students to take a giant step away from one of the leading addictions acknowledged worldwide (Cash, Rae, Steel, & Winkler, 2012). This includes electronic gaming, Facebook, smartphones, instant messaging, tweeting, e-mail, and all the other terminally numbing social media that control students’ lives. Education for meaning-making helps students to understand the folly of living their lives obsessed with a goal-driven, get-rich-and-successful, “till then” future. Philip Larkin (quoted in Baggini, 2004) describes this condition in his poem Next, Please:

> Always too eager for the future, we
> Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
> Something is always approaching, every day
> Till then, we say… (p. 35)

### The Meaning of Meaning-Making

If you have your why? for life, then you can get along with almost any how?  
Frederich Nietzsche (2009, p. 19)

We often spend an entire class period at the beginning of our courses digging deeply into Nietzsche’s quotation above. For us, philosophy is a practical, lifelong activity that can help all of us to create “whys” for living in order to be prepared for the “hows” that so often challenge and disrupt our
lives. Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) says that meaning involves the “search for a sense of connection, pattern, order, and significance . . . it is a way to understand our experience that makes sense of both the expected and unexpected . . .” (p. 10). Meaning is what sustains us during those hard, perplexing times when everything seems to be up in the air, and there are no certain answers anywhere to the most confounding questions that plague all of us throughout our lives. Moreover, Roy Baumeister (1991) claims that all of us, without exception, strive to make sense of our lives in four basic ways: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. These are the four needs for meaning—an “existential shopping list” (pp. 29–57).

We appreciate what Alan Watts (2009) said in a video-recorded interview about the meaning of life being a process, not a product:

> In music, one doesn’t make the end of a composition the point of the composition. If that were so, then the best conductors would be those who played the fastest! . . . People would go to a concert just to hear one crashing chord because that’s the end! (0:35–1:03)

We believe that in higher education today too many students are pushed through a factory-driven education model revving up for the elusive and ultimate career success at the end. But, as Watts said, the end of a symphony is not the primary objective for the conductor. The focus is on the music that is being played all the way through. So, too, with meaning-making.

We believe in meaning-making as an educational dynamic that is organic, interactive, and always interdisciplinary. We teach all of our courses in this way—whatever their content might be. We think of meaning-making as a process. Purpose-finding is a product, but meaning-making is fluid and evolving. Purpose-finding is more overarching and unchanging. In our meaning-making teaching, we believe in the value of tentative responses, rather than final answers, to the deepest questions and much mutual sharing of stories, passions, and beliefs. Throughout the years we have been teaching, we have heard our students acknowledging openly that they ceased being natural wonderers and philosophers after graduating from kindergarten. They then proceeded to become intellectually, and emotionally, anesthetized, as they march along the educational treadmill from elementary to graduate school.

In contrast, we want meaning-making to be an opportunity for all of us in higher education to grow in wisdom, especially when times get hard. We want to help our students find the paradoxes and ironies, as well as the depth, in everyday life and in the academic content they are studying. Above all, however, we want our students to pause throughout their college experience in order to talk with empathic others about what really counts in their pursuit of a life well lived. We frequently take a planned “time-out” during our lectures, seminar conversations, group projects,
mindfulness activities, or whatever else, to ask: “What is the short- and long-term meaning of what you are doing right here, right now? What do you want it to be?”

The Meaning-Making Quest for the Quarterlife Generation

Just who, and what, constitute the quarterlife generation (Robbins, 2004)? Robbins asserts that the quarterlife period (roughly between the ages of 18 and 30) is frequently a tumultuous time for most of our students, because it triggers an overwhelming anxiety about the past, present, and future. Many of our quarterlife students are plagued with worry about failure—living up to others’ expectations, letting go of the comfortable securities of childhood, coming to terms with the growing tension between freedom and responsibility, and constantly comparing themselves to peers and coming up short. For so many quarterlifers, their existence seems vapid and empty.

As debilitating as is the quarterlifer’s lament of meaninglessness, many quarterlifers are surprisingly articulate about the conditions that are disturbing their equilibrium. Unfortunately, however, they do not seem to recognize that these conditions are the very source of their malaise—often a result of their unrealistic expectation that someday they will be rich and famous (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Most quarterlifers we know wonder out loud why, increasingly, they experience so many of their successes as failures. We have found that, for these particular students, who tend to live their daily lives at the perfectionist, career-driven, achievement-obsessed extremes, normal fears can often lead to crushing anxiety or to debilitating depression. While medication and talk therapy can help to allay these more severe psychological symptoms, a sense of meaninglessness lingers among many quarterlifers... often throughout their lifetimes.

In what follows, we offer a set of meaning-making questions. Each question can be thought of as a challenge that students must deal with every day. No matter a student’s age, stage, vector, phase, or cycle of development, these questions get recirculated over and over again. While it is true that students of all ages experience the sets of questions differently, depending on the particular life-narrative they and we are living in at any given time, the questions still make demands on us. They are never resolved once and for all—until that magic time comes when we will live happily and challenge free ever after.

We prefer not to think of the quarterlife (or mid-life or later-life) experience as a crisis but rather as a series of exciting, real-life possibilities for students to make meaning. While it is true that some students do live their quarterlife years in a narrative of panic, stress, and insecurity, others live in very different narratives of meaning. Here are several big and little meaning questions that come up again and again among our quarterlifers,
in our classes, in our offices, or over coffee at various times in a variety of locations, regardless of the particular narratives they might be inhabiting (see Nash & Jang, 2013):

1. **How do I realize my hopes and dreams?** What is it that I want to do with my life? How do I find the intersection between my talent and my passion? What is the balance between achievement and fulfillment?

2. **Who am I as a moral and ethical person?** Just who is it I’m striving to become as a moral being, and is this possible given all the craziness and contradictions in my life? What does it mean to live a “good life”? Aren’t all values, morals, and ethics relative anyway?

3. **Can I be both religious and spiritual at the same time?** What is the right religion for me? Is there any other way to make a meaning that endures without spirituality? Will I be able to make it in the world without experiencing the consolations of organized religion along with its supportive communities?

4. **How can I construct durable, loving, and reciprocal core relationships?** Why is it so hard to live alone but also so hard to sustain a relationship? Is there really such a person as a “soulmate”? Why can’t I find close, enduring friends who stay the course without drifting away? Who will be my true friends, will I ever fit in, and how will I know who I can trust?

5. **How do my and others’ various identities help me to define who I am?** Who am I in relation to my skin color, social class, sexual orientation, religious background, and gender? Why can’t I like who I am, whoever that might be? Why does it sometimes seem that people are so quick to put others in an identity box?

6. **How do I know that what I am studying is right for me both now and beyond college?** Is college really necessary for my future success? Why do I have to take so many required courses that don’t relate to what I enjoy, aspire to, or find useful? How can I avoid the lure of “credential enslavement”?

7. **How can I transform a financially stable job/career into a soul-satisfying vocation?** Will I always have to choose between doing what I love and making lots of money? Is it possible to find a career that is congruent with my personal values? Why is it that I feel I have so much potential, but am afraid to actualize it? How will I ever be able to learn all the skills I need to be financially savvy?

8. **How can I fulfill my civic responsibility to improve the world locally, nationally, and internationally?** How do I pick my social causes, and is this even important? Is active civic engagement even possible for me given all the demands on my time both now and in the future? How will my volunteer activities enhance my resume for future endeavors?
9. *How can I achieve and maintain overall wellness and balance in my life?* How can I practice self-compassion when the multiple demands on my life are so intense? Is multitasking the healthiest way to live a life? Is it really possible for someone to be psychologically, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially healthy, all at the same time? Or are “self-care compromise” and “compassion fatigue” the realities that I will face for the rest of my life?

**Our Meaning-Making Pedagogy**

In the following sections, we offer a discussion of storytelling and moral conversations—key elements of meaning-making.

**Storytelling.** Effective educators understand that helping students to make meaning is directly related to the ability to tell their own personal stories of meaning-making. Even better, good educators, no matter what they teach, are not afraid to evoke such personal stories from their students. Tell a story of personal meaning as you teach and advise, and you have captured your students’ attention. Draw out your students’ personal stories of meaning, and you have won them over for life. We appreciate the words of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) on stories:

> Teaching is storytelling. It is the place where lives can meet...Stories create intimate conversations across boundaries. Stories disturb and challenge. I use stories to create deeper connections with my students, to reveal the universal human themes that we share, and to bridge the realms of thinking and feeling... (pp. 111–112)

We believe that stories confer survival benefits on all of us. Stories make us human. They give our lives focus. They get us up in the morning and off to work. They help us to solve problems and to survive with dignity, style, and grace. We live in our stories about what we narrate to be the “real world.” For some of us, our story of life is a win–lose athletic contest. For others, life is a love affair. For others, life is a cosmic or spiritual quest. For some, life is a business venture. For others, life is one long, unmitigated catastrophe. All these stories color how we see and experience the world. However different, each of us inhabits a particular narrative at all times. And this narrative understanding affects others, just as their narratives affect us.

We try very hard to listen to our students’ stories in response to some, or all, of the meaning questions above. How, for example, can we truly understand how a student will respond to a challenging reading or writing assignment, a piece of difficult advice, or a well-intentioned criticism or recommendation, without first understanding the story that a student might be living in at any given time? Why, then, not ask students to tell their
stories, along with testing them for subject-matter mastery? In fact, why can't professors tell their own stories about why their disciplines are important to them?

Even better, why not teach students to write their way into meaning in a narrative style that incorporates, but sometimes transcends, the usual research formulas, rubrics, or templates? We call this type of writing methodology Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing (Nash, 2004; Nash & Viray, 2013). SPN writing takes personal risks. It begins with the self-confidence that the author has a personal story worth telling and a lesson worth conveying. The author’s voice is personal, clear, fallible, and honest. It is a thoughtful, first-person attempt to make a point, or teach a lesson, by drawing on the author’s own life experiences to provide both context and content for the course material.

**Moral Conversation.** Conversation (from the Latin word, *conversare*, “to live together in order to learn about oneself and others”) is an invaluable prerequisite for making meaning throughout the college years. We live in conversation with others because we enjoy it. Faculty, staff, and students enjoy it. We caress each other with the words we choose. We can also hurt each other with the words we use. We can open spaces, or we can restrict them, in our conversations both in and out of the classroom, the residence hall, and the office. We can make our learning spaces safe and comfortable, or we can make them threatening and coercive. We can spend all our time debating, pontificating, telling, critiquing, and complaining. Or we can spend much of our time in our learning spaces connecting with one another, drawing out one another, and educating—through honest give-and-take conversation—about what is inspiring in the search for meaning in the lessons and events of the day.

In our own teaching, the classroom sparkles most during those times when we are really conversing with one another. There is an honest, deeply respectful interchange about the things we agree and disagree on. In this sense, when moral conversation is working well, we are all educators. We talk together. We learn from one another. We make meaning together. It never gets tired or old. We exist in solidarity with one another, both in the classroom and in the workplace. No matter how high-pressured or technical our work, conversation is possible, even necessary.

Why do we call this type of interchange moral conversation? We base all our work in our meaning-making classroom on what we call the “Platinum Rule of Teaching”: converse with others, as they would like to be conversed with. Moral conversation has no prior agendas—no special intellectual, philosophical, or political ideals to impose. Instead, moral conversation is a reciprocal process: it encourages us to get to know our students individually and to treat them as they would like to be treated. What we have learned through the years is that the most long-lasting education is about making meaning. But in order to start, sustain, and finish a
productive conversation on meaning-making, all of us need to work together. We need to learn together. We need to learn how to enjoy one another. We stand to gain through our collaboration, because we are all equals in the effort to find, and create, a sustaining meaning in life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the great pedagogical rewards for us and for our students in engaging in moral conversation and in helping one another to construct vital, authentic stories of meaning is the discovery of commonality, no matter what our surface differences might be. We are reminded again and again of a quote often attributed to the poet Terence, whose simple wisdom is profound: “Nothing human is alien to me.” When our pedagogy is working well, all of us are able to come together to create meanings, both individually and collectively, personally and professionally, philosophically and spiritually. We are able to retain our individual uniquenesses while learning to become communitarians, in search of meaning and purpose.

References


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