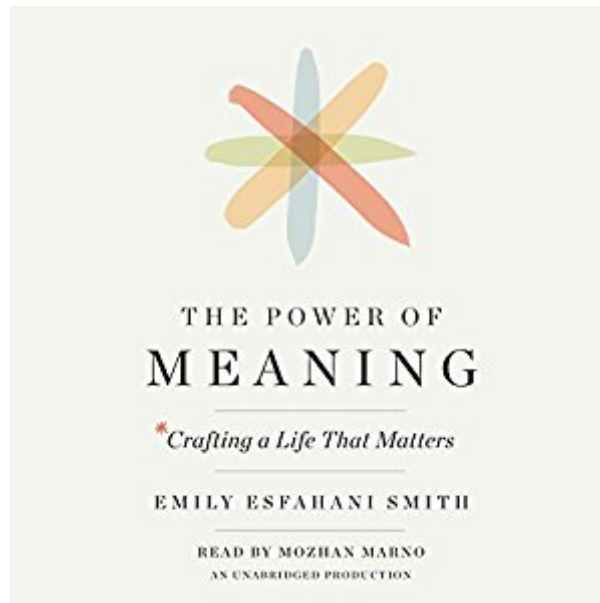




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# The Power Of Meaning: Crafting A Life That Matters



## Synopsis

This wise, stirring book argues that the search for meaning can immeasurably deepen our lives and is far more fulfilling than the pursuit of personal happiness. There is a myth in our culture that the search for meaning is some esoteric pursuit - that you have to travel to a distant monastery or page through dusty volumes to figure out life's great secret. The truth is, there are untapped sources of meaning all around us - right here, right now. Drawing on the latest research in positive psychology; on insights from George Eliot, Viktor Frankl, Aristotle, the Buddha, and other great minds; and on interviews with seekers of meaning, Emily Esfahani Smith lays out the four pillars upon which meaning rests. **Belonging:** We all need to find our tribe and forge relationships in which we feel understood, recognized, and valued - to know we matter to others. **Purpose:** We all need a far-reaching goal that motivates us, serves as the organizing principle of our lives, and drives us to make a contribution to the world. **Storytelling:** We are all storytellers, taking our disparate experiences and assembling them into a coherent narrative that allows us to make sense of ourselves and the world. **Transcendence:** During a transcendent or mystical experience, we feel we have risen above the everyday world and are connected to something vast and meaningful. To bring those concepts to life, Smith visits a tight-knit fishing village on the Chesapeake Bay, stargazes in West Texas, attends a dinner where young people gather to share their experiences of untimely loss, and more. And she explores how we might begin to build a culture of meaning in our schools, our workplaces, and our communities. Inspiring and story-driven, *The Power of Meaning* will strike a profound chord in anyone seeking a richer, more satisfying life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

John Stuart Mill's words provide a perfect summary of the message of this book (p 16), "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end." In the introduction, the author shares her experiences with Sufism, her "parents ran a Sufi meeting house," then proceeds with the chapter that was the most fascinating to me as the parent of an introverted, deep thinking senior in high school, *The Meaning Crisis*, chock full of philosophical ideas and a discussion of suicide. One of the most disturbing facts in the book (and one I used in an article entitled *Let's Unstigmatize Thoughts of Suicide*) that comes from the CDC (p 22), "Each year, forty thousand Americans take their lives, and worldwide, that number is closer to a million." I'd imagined that the higher rate of suicide in developed than undeveloped countries had something to do with Maslow's Hierarchy, but Ms. Smith suggests the possibility that (p 23), "it is particularly distressing to be unhappy in a country where so many others are happy." She follows this with four chapters corresponding to the pillars that support her message: *Belonging* (p 49), "We all need to feel that we belong..." *Purpose* (p 90), "a purpose-driven person is ultimately concerned...with making the world a better place." *Storytelling* (p 104), "our storytelling impulse emerges from a deep-seated need all humans share: the need to make sense of the world." *Transcendence* (p 133), "first, our sense of self washes away along with all, its petty concerns and desires. We then feel deeply connected to other people and everything else that exists in the world." At that point in the book, I expect the conclusion or epilogue, but it's not to be. She includes a chapter entitled *Growth*, in which she puts forth (p 162), "The idea that we can grow to lead deeper and more meaningful lives through adversity." It supports Nietzsche's contention (p 162), "What does not kill me makes me stronger," with examples in support of it about persons who have gained strength from dealing with difficult circumstances, and a second additional chapter, *Cultures of Meaning* (p 192), "All across the country...people are using the pillars as a means to transform the institution in which we live and work, creating communities that value and build connections, celebrate purpose, provide opportunities for storytelling and leave space for mystery," which I think should have been the conclusion. Instead, Ms. Smith concludes with a discussion of death (p 217), "Contemplating death can actually help us, if we have the proper mindset, to lead more meaningful lives and to be at peace when our final moment on earth arrives," using research on those contemplating physician-assisted suicide to support the statement. Best of the book: excellent research, anecdotes, interviews and other information in support of the idea that living a life in service of others, "*Crafting a Life That Matters*," helps bring meaning to humans and

leads to happiness. Most chapters and arguments are very strong, like Chapters 1-5 and 7 (which seems like it should have been the Conclusion), the others, less so. Even though the story starts strong and finishes less so, it is definitely worth the read to remind us all that our society's materialistic, social media-heavy, happiness-seeking culture is the wrong path to happiness. On similar subjects: 10% Happier by Dan Harris, Coming Home by Dicken Bettinger and Natasha Swerdloff, and Listening is an Act of Love by Dave Isay.

I really wanted to love this book, but I can only muster up a like. I was hoping for a modern update to Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, indeed, the author Emily Esfahan Smith, cites Frankl's work. She even uses the book as a part of her examination of the power of meaning. In reading this book, I gathered that this was meant to be one of the many books that came out which ape Malcolm Gladwell's mode of storytelling: examining a subject closely through econometric to tell a story. Many books have resulted from using Gladwell's method and many successful books have resulted, even though the success of the storytelling has been uneven. Not everyone can be Malcolm Gladwell. This is yet another one that is disappointing. Emily Esfahan Smith is a very talented writer; I have read her work in The Atlantic. She has a voice that captured my attention. So it is that I was greatly disappointed in her treatment of meaning here. She first created four main pillars that underlie the idea of meaning, these pillars, according to her, makes the idea of meaning powerful: Belonging, Purpose, Storytelling, and Transcendence. Those comprise of chapters 2-5 of the book. Chapter 1: The Meaning Crisis, where she convinces us that the topic is important was well written and makes a very strong case. It made her case and drew me in. I was dubious about the value of Belonging and Storytelling as being central to her argument, but she made a good case for belonging, but not so much for storytelling, but I knew that would be a difficult one to justify because it was a weak pillar to start with. I was very surprised and disappointed with the purpose chapter, I felt that would be a central theme to the entire book and I felt that the cases cited and the generally the tone and attack that she took with the chapter was tepid at best. In general, the chapters on purpose, storytelling, and transcendence felt rushed and not very well thought out. The transcendence chapter, I felt, would be a very important chapter. I thought that her own personal background in the Sufi tradition would lead her to expanding and shedding light on transcendence throughout many non-Christian spiritual practices, yet, she chose to focus on Christian transcendence as cases and examples. I believe that in order for her to make her point about the universality of the power of meaning, she needed to create an ethos of universality and demonstrate that the subject of which

she is expounding on is indeed, itself universal. I believe she succeeded in a very limited manner. I wouldn't say she failed, just did not succeed in as large a manner as I would have expected. I thought the cases she explored in support of her are not well written, they sounded kind of forced. Even though her emphasis is on storytelling, she failed at storytelling. The attraction of this kind of case study journalism is to give heft to the argument with legitimate scholarly econometrics but then also engage the reader by linking the cold sterile numbers with human passion and emotional response. She failed in that regard. The next two chapters: Growth and the Culture of Meaning were disparate in terms of effectiveness. Growth chapter, while not as weak as the weaker chapters in the book was still unsettling in its lack of passion. She used the ideas from Frankl, the ideas on grit and resilience from Angela Duckworth, and the growth mindset from Carol Dweck to add intellectual depth to the growth chapter, but did not specifically talk about Duckworth and Dweck's idea, it seems that she assumed that everyone are already well versed in their works. I was and was able to glean a bit of what she was referring to in advance of her citation of both Duckworth and Dweck, but it is too bad that she did not give the readers a bit more information before making her final point. The last two chapters, the Culture of Meaning and the conclusion were the strongest chapters, outside of The Meaning Crisis chapter. The Culture of Meaning chapter was seemingly Smith at her most free and maximum engagement. She made her points in a very lucid manner, her storytelling was excellent, perhaps because the story about her brush with Story Corp was a better story and her own personal engagement in the process lit a fuse in her. That led naturally to her conclusion, which was stronger than the rest of the book. I think this was a missed opportunity to make a point about meaning, purpose, transcendence, and what it all means to us in our society today, and how this all could help guide us through the miasma which is our cultural maze. If I were dismissive and cruel, I would call it a Cliff's Notes updating of Frankl with a lot of economic studies cited, that was my first reaction. But after much thought and re-reading, I felt that this was a good try at revisiting the same landscape, and a valiant effort at using all the modern day psychology and econometric studies to take an updated look at meaning, a rather ambitious undertaking. I think she fell short, which is not an altogether unexpected result, but a disappointing one nevertheless. I think a better plan of attack and more motivated storytelling could have made the difference.

Really good book, particularly the first half

You won't find anything that you don't already know, but she presents a new way of thinking about

how we find fulfillment every day.

Great book based on so much research. This book was very helpful to me and would be to others as they seek a life of meaning!

For such a thoughtful set of topics, this book is very easy to read. Well-researched.

This is a wonderful, clear eyed look at the crisis of those who search for happiness and never realize that a fulfilled life comes from finding a passion, honing your skills and using that passion and purpose to help others find and realize their mission. I loved the storytelling from real life experiences. It hit home for me, and I completely recommend it to people seeking a new path, or anyone who just have a feeling that there must be something more. Take heart--there is a way to discover your true meaning in life.

An excellent bookFind it follows a bit of Victor Frankl at pointsbut that's O.k.(how can you go wrong with that?)It follows a good pattern - for our dealing with other people and our expectation of all people (including ourselves).

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