

The Challenge

What Should I Do With My Life?

An Essay

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Preface

One can find a myriad of self-help, career guidance, and ease of life tips online; a host of individuals confidently divulging without inhibition their takes on what can be defined as a healthy and fulfilling life. For those readers who may already have defined their own path in life, such an exposé may be encouraging and reaffirming. For those readers who have little direction though, simply adhering to one single piece of advice or suggestion may feel like a monumental task when they all so frequently fail to follow through with their daily responsibilities. Perhaps then, the most appropriate way in helping those overwhelmed or molassed with the prospect of confronting life would be identifying the challenges and questions in forging a life path, or a life of fulfillment. Below you will find an eclectic assortment of ideas and concepts from which you can develop your own questions and, hopefully, develop meaningful solutions as it pertains to your own life.

Meaning

First and foremost, what can be defined as meaningful? Is a meaningful life one that provides wealth, or is it a pursuit of the

greater good? Is it one that promotes stability and harmony, or perhaps it is a comfort oriented question or a career oriented question?

Most importantly, it is from a place of deep introspection that I encourage you to make time that allows for careful observation of how you approach the aforementioned questions. Is it from a place of optimism or pessimism? Is there a great desire to build for the future, or is there little faith in potential possibilities? Your definitions and answers to these questions will vary from others, but it is incredibly important to find footing in, at the very least, a *potential* vision of your future. In addition, it may yield helpful insights into your personal outlook on life and what problems arise during these periods of introspection.

Questions:

- In your opinion, why do individuals often face such challenges in finding fulfillment? Is it a social problem, a cultural problem, a collective problem, or an individual problem, or a combination of all three?
- Perhaps the question that needs to be asked is not what should I do, but instead how would I like to be fulfilled, or how would I like to serve?

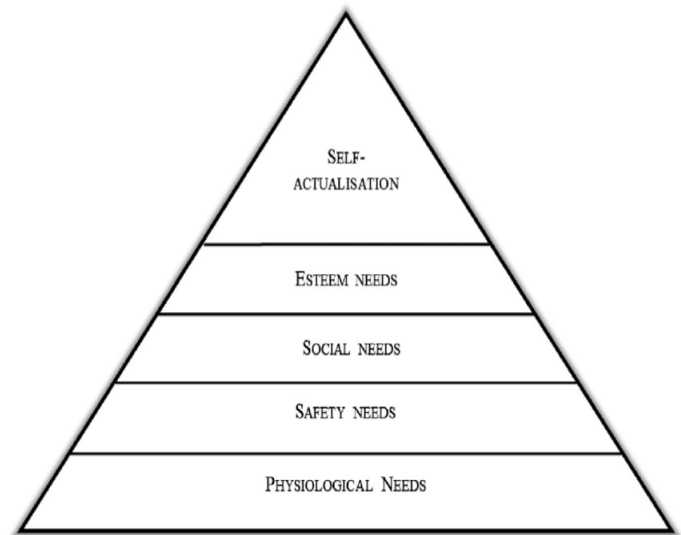
Need Vs Want

Maybe the greatest dilemma facing you is the weighing of wants vs needs, and how

you may be more inclined to invest more time/resources in one than in the other. A new car instead of saving for retirement, season tickets instead of car insurance, or dinner out instead of learning to cook are a couple of examples that may be argued are solely wants, and not needs. However, given context, could this evaluation be different? An old mustang you plan to restore with your grandson someday? A couple of baseball games with a potential big-wig investor interested in your business and/or a week out on the town with an old friend?

Consider a past or potential purchase in your life you may struggle in justifying. Present to yourself a scenario that would make the purchase unequivocally unjustifiable, then, slowly change the scenario to one that is moderately justifiable, and finally absolutely justifiable. Consider this practice for other troubled decisions in your life. The lower the threshold for absolutely justifiable, the more likely it is to be a *need*, the higher the threshold, the more likely it is to be *wanted*.

Maslow Hierarchy of Needs states that each individual human is required to satisfy a predefined hierarchy of needs before the approach to a meaningful life can be considered. This includes basic needs such as food, shelter, security, and social and cultural standing. According to Maslow, only once all these criteria are met can any individual begin their search for higher meaning within life.



Human *desire*, and more specifically the word *desire* itself, is a term that needs to be understood in order to understand individuals motivations for pursuing certain tasks, careers, romantic interest, or consumable items, whether food or leisure. Psychology Today, defines the five components of desire as such: *Automatic Occurrence* - negative mood can be a cue that triggers desires to improve one's current state. *Situational Cues* - our preferences are sensitive to cues like the smell of cookies baking or sight of a bowl of ice cream. *Elaboration* - since people elaborate on their desires, the more likely it becomes that people will generate justifications that allow them to indulge. *Attention Focus* - craving results in attention being drawn preferentially to the desirability of the stimulus (e.g., palatability of high-caloric foods) making it harder to resist the desire. *Opportunity to Act* - the craving will intensify when the opportunity presents itself.

The Realist Vs Romantic

You may have heard of the realist and the romantic. One acts on a very practical view of the world while the other uses the *potential* possibilities as a basis for decision making. Essentially, realist thinking versus romantic thinking are two diverging ways individuals subconsciously approach problems, opportunities, uncertainties, and the all possible prospects within life; that means how they decide whether or not to pursue certain goals and whether or not to take on certain risks. The realist thinker defines the world, in well, realist terms. This means not applying to a job application because they don't meet *all* the qualifications. This means making decisions solely on the amount of risk, rather than weighing it equally against what could go right. Needless to say, the romantic thinker is one that frames the world as a place of abounding possibilities with little evaluation of the risks. They may not meet all the qualifications for a prestigious scholarship, but they apply anyway. They may dream of opening a specialty boutique cafe with little consideration for the financial risks.

Contrary to the realist, the romantic see's the possibility of success beyond reason as motive enough, and to them, that the possibility of failure does not detract them from trying. However, these two individuals are pitted at extreme ends of the spectrum.

It would be most practical to levy each way of thinking equally when making decisions or pursuing something which seems out of

reach. Sometimes the chance presents itself, other times that energy would be better spent elsewhere.

Blockades

The challenge in answering a question such as *What Should I Do With My Life* is that the conflicted individual to whom it is presented will often associate it with feelings such as emptiness, misdirection, un-fulfillment, lack of attainment, confusion, contempt and many other feelings they may have experienced at other moments/times when they tried to answer it but failed. All are feelings that have been observed in people searching for meaning within their lives. The question is, what mechanism can be set that allow them to continue this pursuit barring emotional and mental collapse?

When asking the question *what should I do with my life* an individual needs to undergo an honest evaluation of their understanding and perspective about the past, current, and future state of the world.

Understanding this may yield a picture of how they may perceive themselves within society and the steps they can take in alleviating anxieties that lead to a perpetual state of *not-doing*.

Internal & External Stressors

External social pressures are overwhelmingly processed internally. This leads individuals to classify and "groupify" themselves in ways that are often not very

productive and often self-defeating. This could be in relation to money, a profession, or even social status and social capital within a community. Below you will find a few examples of how external social pressures may affect the well-being of the individual and how they make decisions. Example:

1. 'A general pediatrician in Western society holds a large amount of social capital and socio-economic standing relative to the general population. However, a general physician does not hold as much prestige relative to their more specialized medical cohort, say a neurosurgeon. Despite the pediatricians' high standing within the context of general society, they too can have feelings of dwindling fulfillment and feelings of inferiority within the medical community they themselves occupy.'
2. 'Within western society, there is an expectation that you respect time lines, deadlines, and unsaid supposed-to-isms that dictate people's lives at home and in the professional world. Now, consider the thinking processes of young teens and young adults. When asked to plan for their futures by counselors and advisors, they are often overwhelmed trying to answer questions they simply *don't know how to answer*. Much of this early

year decision making is impulsive, impractical, and without basis. Ironically enough, this period of young adulthood seems to have the least capacity for making these types of decisions, yet they are frequently asked to do so. When later asked about their future plans by peers, they can often feel inadequate if they don't have an answer of at least equal standing to their classmates and friends, which in turn leads to anxiety and self doubt.

Dismissal of Self



Perhaps the biggest impediment to potential success is the dismissal of one's interest, aptitudes, or skills. What-about-isms are rampant when the prospect of embarking on a new path or new journey arises. What about this, what about that, is it worth, do I have the skills? People both consciously and subconsciously list all the ways in which they are not qualified to do something. These tendencies to highlight all possible roadblocks does well in stymying any possible initiative said individual would have taken if they occupied a more positive outlook. Ask yourself, have I been engaging in self-sabotage, and if so, for what reason?

There is a need to identify the root of prolonged and perpetual states of inaction. Even when individuals seemingly succeed, a well-known phenomenon known as imposter syndrome follows them throughout their respective careers.

Small Steps Forward



Even with the ideas presented above, big ideas about self-help need to be reduced to their most basic form in order to be manageable. Start small, really small. Create a habit that reinforces positive feelings of accomplishment, e.g.:

1. Blinking three times when you wake up, and continuing to do it on a consistent daily basis, may help in building an individual's confidence in being able to complete tasks they intend to.
2. Writing in a morning journal (go to <http://www.thejuanitacenter.com/articles.html>).
3. Meditating.
4. Simply saying good morning to your significant other.

Actions such as these can be repeated to build more confidence in one's ability to do something consistently and without fail. Ideally, this is done in a way that gradually builds a safe-space where one can fail and try again with little effort and little

consequence. The primary objective is to build confidence. Eventually, these practices can be built upon to create a seamless merging into applications in the social and professional world.



Glossary:

What-about-isms: Frequent excuses or statements that often begin with the phrase, *What about...*

Supposed-to-isms: Ideas and social customs that often dictate the decisions we make and paths we follow.

Imposter syndrome: an individual doubts their accomplishments or talents and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud".

About the author: Davin has been an exchange student, worked and volunteered throughout East Asia, and graduated with distinction from Washington State University with a degree in Asian Studies. His interests include foreign policy, international relations, and language. He speaks conversational Japanese and basic Mandarin.