

Name 5 things John Gardner says "you learn in maturity"

What is the "first thing we mean" when we use the word "meaning"?

"Happiness is about (1) \_\_\_\_\_, & (2) \_\_\_\_\_"

"Meaning / meaningfulness is about (1) \_\_\_\_\_, & (2) \_\_\_\_\_"

"Meaningfulness tries to reduce structures, standards, & disciplines with \_\_\_\_\_"

"Meaningfulness is built solely on \_\_\_\_\_."

## The Problem With Meaning

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JAN. 5, 2015



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Not long ago, a friend sent me a speech that the great civic leader John Gardner gave to the Stanford Alumni Association 61 years after he graduated from that college. The speech is chock-full of practical wisdom. I especially liked this passage:

“The things you learn in maturity aren’t simple things such as acquiring information and skills. You learn not to engage in self-destructive behavior. You learn not to burn up energy in anxiety. You discover how to manage your tensions. You learn that self-pity and resentment are among the most toxic of drugs. You find that the world loves talent but pays off on character.

“You come to understand that most people are neither for you nor against you; they are thinking about themselves. You learn that no matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you, a lesson that is at first troubling and then really quite relaxing.”

Gardner goes on in this wise way. And then, at the end, he goes into a peroration about leading a meaningful life. “Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you. ... You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life.”

Gardner puts “meaning” at the apogee of human existence. His speech reminded me how often we’ve heard that word over the past decades. As my Times colleague April Lawson puts it, “meaning” has become the stand-in concept for everything the soul yearns for and seeks. It is one

of the few phrases acceptable in modern parlance to describe a fundamentally spiritual need.

Yet what do we mean when we use the word meaning?

The first thing we mean is that life should be about more than material success. The person leading a meaningful life has found some way of serving others that leads to a feeling of significance.

Second, a meaningful life is more satisfying than a merely happy life. Happiness is about enjoying the present; meaning is about dedicating oneself to the future. Happiness is about receiving; meaningfulness is about giving. Happiness is about upbeat moods and nice experiences. People leading meaningful lives experience a deeper sense of satisfaction.

In this way, meaning is an uplifting state of consciousness. It's what you feel when you're serving things beyond self.

Yet it has to be said, as commonly used today, the word is flabby and vacuous, the product of a culture that has grown inarticulate about inner life.

Let me put it this way: If we look at the people in history who achieved great things — like Nelson Mandela or Albert Schweitzer or Abraham Lincoln — it wasn't because they wanted to bathe luxuriously in their own sense of meaningfulness. They had objective and eternally true standards of justice and injustice. They were indignant when those eternal standards were violated. They subscribed to moral systems — whether secular or religious — that recommended specific ways of being, and had specific structures of what is right and wrong, and had specific disciplines about how you might get better over time.

Meaningfulness tries to replace structures, standards and disciplines with self-regarding emotion. The ultimate authority of meaningful is the warm tingling we get when we feel significant and meaningful. Meaningfulness tries to replace moral systems with the emotional corona that surrounds acts of charity.

It's a paltry substitute. Because meaningfulness is built solely on an emotion, it is contentless and irreducible. Because it is built solely on emotion, it's subjective and relativistic. You get meaning one way. I get meaning another way. Who is any of us to judge another's emotion?

Because it's based solely on sentiment, it is useless. There are no criteria

to determine what kind of meaningfulness is higher. There's no practical manual that would help guide each of us as we move from shallower forms of service to deeper ones. There is no hierarchy of values that would help us select, from among all the things we might do, that activity which is highest and best to do.

Because it's based solely on emotion, it's fleeting. When the sensations of meaningful go away then the cause that once aroused them gets dropped, too. Ennui floods in. Personal crisis follows. There's no reliable ground.

The philosophy of meaningfulness emerges in a culture in which there is no common moral vocabulary or framework. It emerges amid radical pluralism, when people don't want to judge each other. Meaningfulness emerges when the fundamental question is, do we feel good?

Real moral systems are based on a balance of intellectual rigor and aroused moral sentiments. Meaningfulness is pure and self-regarding feeling, the NutraSweet of the inner life.

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