

Higher Purpose and Search for Meaning

Lt General Arjun Ray, PVSM, VSM (Retd)

Introduction

In a world driven by market economy, consumerism, and greed, it is not surprising that the success of prime ministers, CEOs, and even school principals, are judged by their economic performance. Ethics and employees are not a priority. Money is the sole criteria for rewarding leaders because professedly leadership = profits. So the mindset runs.

The global crash of 2008 was because of greed. The unprecedented scales of corruption in Indian politics, corporations, bureaucracy, even the military, judiciary and media, are also because of greed. This is indeed a matter of grave concern as the social and 'making-meaning' impact of leadership within an organization or a political party, continues to be judged by economic performance.

Strategic Purpose of Business

Business leaders should reflect on the strategic purpose of business. Milton Friedman, the guru of market economy, has done a lot of damage by arguing that, "*the business of business is business.*" He even goes to the extreme by advocating that, "*The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.*" In India, the situation is made worse by our insensitivity to human suffering, along with a warped sense of citizenship that believes that, everything outside an organization's premises, is the responsibility of the government.

Today, the 43 Billionaire Club of India, controls 25 percent of the GDP; yet they contribute less than 1 percent of their wealth for any social or national cause. In the United States, 75 percent of charity and philanthropy comes from private individuals. In India it is about 5.1 percent. With so much wealth available, I believe business must have a social conscience, even if it is to make more money. The strategic purpose of business should be to plough back substantial wealth to improve the quality of life of society. This is the ethical dimension of business.

'Meaning-creation' and economic performance are interlinked; they are not at cross-purposes. When the meaning-element is added, money assumes a new dimension – an ethical and leadership dimension.

Purpose and Meaning

There must be a purpose for human creation, on why we are born, and why we are different from a rat or a cockroach. Human beings could not have been created just to be born, to procreate, to enjoy, to work, and to die. We think, and we have a conscience. There has, therefore, got to be a creative purpose for why man exists.

A key role for all leaders at every level is to pursue a higher purpose, and help others to do likewise and thus give meaning to life.

Everything we do should have a well defined purpose – purpose for the self, purpose of business, purpose of education, and the purpose of life. Our vision our goals, and our roadmaps; they all emerge from the purpose. The purpose is the fountainhead, the source, the beginning of the journey. The purpose is our location on the GPS map of creation.

To doubt whether life has a meaning is a human achievement. An animal will never raise this question. It survives and thrives by its instinctive intelligence alone.

The Purpose of Life – Meaning and Happiness

The purpose of life is to be happy. John Lennon recounts his experience with happiness. *“When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life.*

When I went to school they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down ‘happy.’ They told me I didn’t understand the assignment, and I told them they didn’t understand life.” Irrespective of the paths we may choose, happiness is ultimately the supreme goal.

The purpose of life is to be happy.

The key to happiness lies in finding a higher purpose.

Most people are afraid to answer the question, what is the purpose of my life, because they are apprehensive that it may change their lives completely; and change is something most people fear.

To achieve happiness, human beings are motivated by either pleasure, power, and meaning. When there is a feeling of meaninglessness in life, people resort to meaningless things like crime, drugs, and violence. Will to power and will to pleasure are poor substitutes for will to meaning because they provide only temporary relief.

If life has a meaning, then suffering too must have a meaning.

The key to happiness lies in finding a higher purpose that gives meaning to life. Skeptics, however, argue that there is already so much suffering in their lives. To them I

say that, if life has a meaning, then suffering too must have a meaning. Every person is capable of finding meaning. Although it may sound idealistic, it is possible to promote man to what he should be capable of becoming:

“If we take man as he is, we make him worse. But if we take man as he should be, we make him capable of becoming what he can be.”

- Goethe

The 2010 Hollywood movie *127 Hours* is the true story of a mountain climber Aron Ralston. While trekking in the canyons of Utah, he slips and falls into a crevice, and his right arm is pinned under a boulder. He lies trapped for 127 hours with no food, no water, and no help. Ultimately he amputates his right arm with a Swiss knife, scales a 65 feet high wall, and walks eight miles before being rescued. Aron proved that we can do anything when we choose life. There is no limit to human potential because it is possible for everyone to turn a human tragedy into a personal triumph.

“He who has a strong enough why can bear almost any how.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

Aron Ralston survived because he had a reason to live – a vision of his future son.

“I was at peace with the idea of me dying. But then I saw this vision of this little boy and it shifted me, it gave me hope to get out because this is my future son.”

Aron survived because of his will to live. With a basic Swiss knife he amputated his arm and freed himself. Each one of us possess the tools to transform adversity into something positive and shining. We can do it when the time comes.

**We can do
anything when
we choose life.**

Those who survived in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau were not the young or the strong. They were people who had a future orientation – something to live for, someone to live for. They were people who believed that life is a gift, that life is beautiful. While man is capable of being evil, he is also capable of doing good.

The Robert Benigni's Oscar winning Hollywood movie, *Life is Beautiful*, portrays a vision of life – that life has meaning even under dire circumstances. The movie sends a clear message: life is a beautiful gift despite its dark side. It is what one makes of it.

Suffering has a meaning only under the condition that one cannot remove the cause of suffering. What matters is the attitude one adopts towards a situation that cannot be changed. But superiority goes to the attitude one adopts when you cannot change the situation. Viktor Frankl, the great Austrian psychiatrist and survivor of the Holocaust, offers sound advice:

“When we are no longer able to change a situation; we are challenged to change ourselves.”

How do you give meaning to life by seeking a higher purpose?

Prerequisites of a higher Purpose

Purpose should be for someone other than for yourself

First, it is quite irrelevant what the purpose is as long as it is transcendental. That is to say that, the **purpose should be for someone other than for yourself**, or even those who are close and dear. The purpose is something larger than you. A person who spends 10,000 hours becoming a great pianist is not pursuing a higher purpose. Again, parents who sacrifice everything for their children are not pursuing a higher purpose. They are seeking excellence for themselves, not others. **Second, the purpose must be ethical and creative**, by making a difference in the quality of lives of other people, even people one may not know. **Third**, we must **rid our destructive thoughts and emotions** when embarking on the journey to give meaning to life. Overcoming destructive emotions clears the way towards higher emotions like compassion and love. Unless we are conscious of the negative emotions within us; like anger, lust, arrogance, fears, whatever, they will prevent us from achieving our vision and goals. They are distractive and will invariably consume all of our positive energies.

We can overcome destructive emotions provided we are aware of negative thoughts and emotions as they arise within us. The idea is not to suppress or avoid them. Rather, we should be watchful in a detached manner, and keep on checking back on what the conscience is saying. An analogy is like being conscious of one's breathing cycle.

Four Paths in Search for Meaning

Gurus can only show one path but there are many paths to give meaning to life. No single path will itself lead to a higher purpose; invariably it shall be a combination. There are four paths that one can choose from and work out permutations and combinations.

Rid our destructive thoughts and emotions

The first is **compassion**. Deep down, all human beings and even animals and insects are compassionate. The Dalai Lama puts it across simply:

“If you want others to be happy practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

Compassion goes beyond empathy (knowing that someone is suffering), and sympathy (feeling sorry for the person). Compassion involves taking positive action to alleviate someone’s suffering. It is usual to be compassionate to others. This is a very limited understanding of compassion. For life to be meaningful, compassion should be extended to even those you do not know, to your enemies, and even yourself. You can love others only if you love yourself first. If you have low self-esteem, and self-respect, then you are incapable of loving others. You are also incapable of giving meaning to life.

To be compassionate is to reach out to the marginalized, the suffering, the weak, the infirm, and the exploited.

The second path is through **creativity** in alleviating misery and suffering, for example, a drug to treat AIDS and cancer.

The third path is by **experiencing love**. Love is unconditional. Love is the ability to sacrifice what is precious to you for some cause, some person, or something with no conditions and no expectations for gratitude in return. In giving he gives his happiness, his knowledge, his sadness as well – he makes the other person alive and helps him to find his passion

The fourth pathway is going through a **crucible experience** that is so powerfully emotive that it transforms the individual. Transformation means it gives the person a new identity, a new world view, a new vision. The crucible experience initiates a search for a higher purpose like when Gandhi was thrown out of a train carriage in South Africa. The crucible experience could also be a series of incidents or smaller experiences that are linked together.

However, an experience is quite meaningless unless one is able to reflect upon the experience and change one’s vision and behavior. Everyone on the planet goes through more than one crucible experience; but the vast majority do not benefit because they are unable to reflect upon them.

What CEOs Can Do

Unless employees experience adequate levels of happiness and meaning in their lives, productivity will be severely affected. When employees experience meaning, they ensure higher customer commitment, closer trust, and greater investments.

Judging a CEO's performance by economic results of the company is skewed. A balanced assessment should be arrived at keeping in mind the CEO's performance in the following four areas:

- Whether the intellectual capital of the employees has increased since the last review.
- What has the company contributed towards enhancing the social capital of the community? Have they made a significant difference to the quality of life of people?
- In what way has the company protected and nurtured the environment to be more sustainable?
- Profit Targets.

Conclusion – Life is Beautiful

Each one of us has a leader within, and we are capable of devoting our life for a higher purpose that gives meaning and happiness. Most human beings merely exist; only the few live life because they believe that life is beautiful. With such an attitude, one is well into her journey towards happiness.

We live for others
A reason beyond one self
For something larger than our self

Seeking a higher purpose does not demand a withdrawal from life, a change in lifestyle, or giving up on material pleasures. The inner and the outer lives can co-exist. What we need to practice from time to time is what I may describe as a philosophical retreat.