

PARADOXICAL MEANINGS OF LIFE

by J'aime ona Pangaia

However it is that we've come to perceive the answer to that age old query, "What is the meaning of life?" we arrive at it in good part through the veil of our culture and specifically, our subjective experience of culture.

To one person, the answer may be that the meaning of life is defined through his or her religion. To fulfill one's purpose is to live in such a way that you go to heaven, or become enlightened, or love or serve the most number of people right here on earth. It could be that life feels most successful and accomplished when one is on track towards financial success, having a nice home, a suitable wardrobe and car that reflects your status and enough things to play with. For some people, no matter what else you accomplish, the ultimate purpose of life includes a biological imperative: we're here to create another, build and enjoy a family, to propel the humankind successfully forward through our family lineage.

For others, the meaning is defined by how close to immortality you come, perhaps by virtue of your social contributions. These would be the contributions that enable you and your values to live on in the hearts and minds of the most people over the greatest amount of time—Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven, Ghandi, Albert Einstein.

When one has an assumption that life is made worthwhile by virtue of accomplishing some culturally-defined task, then whatever experience doesn't fulfill that task can come to be seen as a waste of life. How many times have you heard your inner critic telling you that you were wasting your life? And there's that old adage: "Time is money." Here's the notion that life can be misspent when one doesn't purchase the best possible outcomes with life's limited resource: time. This is a fear that runs deep down in many people's hearts.

Just as our physical bodies are composed of many different kinds of organs and parts that fulfill the various needs that our bodies have as a whole, so too is our psyche composed of many parts that exist to express or fulfill our different psychological needs. Many of these needs exist in opposition to each other, like our simultaneous needs for connection and for boundaries. In the development of our ego (or, the "I am" level where will and choice are exercised from) we grew up identifying with some of these inner parts, and dis-identifying ourselves from others. This identifying and alienating works in many ways but, sooner or later, we will experience how it doesn't work. A while back, I heard my own inner critic telling me that I hadn't been spending my life correctly. Like it or not, the inner critic is always a courier bearing the message that we've become too identified with one aspect of our psyche to the exclusion of its opposite. My inner critic had been worried because it was positive that my life wasn't adding up to enlightenment, sufficient material wealth and social currency and I've had no children. It was concerned that I wasn't doing enough.

On the one hand I recognized an internal set of values around making my contributions to society, and on the other hand, I held a value in just being ordinary—a regular person—and in allowing myself to just "be". Because my inner critic got fearful that I was wasting my life by not guaranteeing my place in old age, history, or a perfect afterlife, my inner critic was speaking on behalf of a part of me I had been disowning a bit: that special-doer' self. I decided to reflect

on the concerns of this critical inner voice, to hear and examine what those values were that I wasn't accomplishing.

I recognized that 'special/doer' self system in a statement I've often made. "How extraordinary it is, in all the span of known human history, to be a woman, educated (literate especially) and intelligent, who owns her own property, without needing to be married or beholden to her father, without the responsibilities of children (and even to have the real choice not to have children), to be healthy and physically able—how rare in all of history this is. And even though this is true in my own time and place, many, many women are not so free. THEREFORE, this part of me sonorously intoned, I have a duty to all those other women, to all those other female lives, to use these special potentials and conditions I've been blessed with, to maximize the benefits of these conditions, not only for my own well being, but for all women! For the race!!! The species!!! For all life!!!

Of course, I snickered as I thought this, because right on cue, the other parts of me swung into position with this wry, critical observation: "How inflated. How utterly grandiose."

Unlike my life of a number of years ago when I had been a complete workaholic, my 'ordinary/being' self now had a place in my life. I'd been content to engage myself in the smaller things—keep my home comfortable, enjoy my garden, go to the market, read, watch movies, have friends over for a dinner. When I lived from this part of me, I would be happy to just go for walks, stretch, and get plenty of rest. This has been what drove my 'special/doer self' crazy. "It's all meaningless activity," it harped. "It's a total waste. I'm not getting anywhere. There's no drive. No significant, memorable contributions. No nothing! What a bore! Life is almost over and you want to play and relax?!" From a neutral place of awareness, I could feel how the "special/doer self" in particular suffers from mortality. This is also a side that perceives time as a flow, a uni-directional and constant movement from beginning to end, from birth to death. To the 'special/doer' side, living from that "ordinary/being" perspective feels like a big waste of time; it's stagnation. Life is seen as a growth process; from inspiration to creation, from little to big, from seed to plant to flower. One needs to grow to a purpose: to flower, to attain.

This part of me didn't want the end to come before the flowering. In fact, from there, I felt that life would be ending all too soon. This is the side of me that has the generative drive, a productive urge: a child, a book, a painting, a contribution, a product, a by-product of my existence that lives on beyond me, that proves I was here and that I did something with my life. This part wants to carve my initials into the rock of ages. All of this is how this one part of me defined the "meaning of life," and by openly and neutrally listening to it, I found that I could honor its perspective without judging it.

The 'ordinary/being self', on the other hand, lives in the moments. It is like meditation, whether in motion or stillness. Meaning is an experience one has by being present in the moment. Reading and learning is not a method to get somewhere else, it is an opportunity to be present with another ones' views or experiences. When I live 'in the moment', my experience deepens and expands,

becomes richer, more complex and full. From here, I didn't see my attributes or conditions as being unusual or more historically pertinent than other periods. Every life has always had its own unique set of conditions to experience. What is most important is how fully alive in the moment I could be, whatever my circumstances.

From this place in myself, fulfillment comes from enjoying "what is." Every moment is the destination, the accomplishment. Whether one "flowers" or not, one exists. Existence itself is meaningful and worthy. The flower can never exist without the seeds, the roots, stem, leaves, bud and—every such moment—has merit and must be experienced as it occurs. When I'm operating from this 'being-part', I, as this "flowering plant", happen all at once. Time does not begin, move or end. It's all a present moment. Time is not a singular direction; it's an immortal event. The 'ordinary/being self' suffers when I operate from a strictly linear movement of time because it's then that the multi-dimensional, all pervasive moment disappears. In linear time, the ordinary, present, being-self just evaporates from consciousness. By I honoring equally the validity of these inner opposing selves, my inner critic quieted down. In that moment, the inner critic didn't have to deliver the message any more that there is a stifled self in me. I could non-judgmentally notice both sides and be capable of acting on either or some version of both.

This kind of awareness process establishes a precarious and paradoxical sense of calm and dynamism in me, a kind of inner weightlessness. It's not unlike the physical sensation I had as a child on a swing. Back and forth, I'd wholeheartedly lean into the air, higher and higher, enjoying in particular those moments when I'd reach the height of one direction and I had not yet been pulled back down by gravity. I'd have that moment where I was perfectly balanced between going up and going down.

I have to be able to recognize the validity of both my 'ordinary/being' and my 'special/doer' to even have the opportunity to experience those in-between moments of clarity. Clarity comes from fully appreciating the contrast and the mutually exclusive needs these opposites represent. Then begins the struggle to stay awake to these yin yang realities, the struggle to exercise free will. Free will arrives when we have real choice, knowing and honoring paradox, feeling and choosing our way of being in this particular situation, and staying connected with the inner consequences.



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