

The Meaning of Education or Why Do We Do What We Do?†

Caleb Rosado*

Far too often the function of articles in a professional journal such as this one is to provide answers to our burning concerns regarding education, our profession. I will take a different methodology in this article. I am not going to give answers, but just raise questions. Call it the Socratic method or the way Jesus taught, but often we accomplish more by raising questions than simply providing answers. Questions force us to think, answers merely leave us in a take-it-or-leave-it mode.

The focus of this article is on the human quest for meaning—for purpose, for significance, for worth—perhaps the most persistent pursuit in the drama of human life. The rapid changes in our society at the speed of nanoseconds, the social earthquakes that undermine the very ground of our security, the pursuit for purpose beyond the palpable, are pushing the parameters of our thinking that cause us to question who we are, why are we here, and why we do what we do. This is the realm of meaning.

What Is Meaning?

Let me give right at the outset my definition of meaning. It is very simple, yet on reflection quite profound. *Meaning is the Why behind the What.* Most people know the *what*—what they do, what they experience, what happens to them, what they see, sense, sacrifice, and savour. But why? What is the meaning to these different "whats"? Where lies the understanding that enables us to make some semblance of sense to our very being and existence? Here lies the realm of meaning, the why behind the what.

Meaning is the spiritual "glue" that bonds and holds together the four dimensions of life—the physical, the social, the mental, and the spiritual—giving it a sense of worthwhile purpose, value, and significance. "Meaning in life is the spiritual fuel that drives the human machine. Without it we are indifferent and bored; there is no ambition to work, we are inspired by no concern or sense of significance, and our powers are unstirred and so lie idle. Without 'meaning' we are undirected and a vulnerable prey to all manner of despair and anxiety, unable to stand firm against any new winds of adversity" (Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1966). Without meaning we become *unglued*, life falls apart into bits and pieces, we descend into the abyss of nothingness. Here lies the source of burnout a malady that plagues many in education.

Burnout:

Burnout occurs when people have lost their sense of purpose to what they do. They began their careers with great hopes, great expectations, great dreams of changing the world, or at least making a difference in society, the world around them, or the lives with whom they daily come in contact. For some the dreams were small; for others the dreams were much bigger. But for both there was a sense of purpose to what they did, there was value to their work, there was significance to their lives. They had meaning in their lives and careers—they understood the *why* to what they did. There was joy in getting up in the morning and going to work. At the end of the day, though tired, there was a sense of satisfaction with things accomplished. Yet not *total* satisfaction, since there was much still to be done. But the prevailing challenges only made the work that much more meaningful, purposeful, and significant. Their lives had a sense of buoyancy,

a quickness to their step, an alertness to their mind, and an unending well of ideas and plans that made each day something to look forward to with great anticipation.

But then it happens. When? No one really knows as it is different for each person. But the flame of dreams and ideas begins to flicker. Maybe due to some insensitive colleague, family member or administrator, who dampened the dream one too many times. Maybe it was illness or some physical setback, or some circumstance such as a severance of attachments in one's life, but the results were the same. The seeds of doubt were planted; the spiritual watering of the life and of the ideas slowly ceased. And then one day, one wakes up out of gas, out of spiritual fuel, with no desire to getting out of bed and facing life. "Oh, what's the use. No one really gives a damn anyway." The gage of spiritual fuel is on empty, and life has come to a grinding halt. *Burnout is a state of purposelessness in life that results from the extinction of one's spiritual fuel, giving rise to a loss of motivation, meaning and significance to what one does.* The effects can be temporary or long-term, depending on the remedies taken.

It is here where people have to take spiritual inventory to what they do. They need to question their existence, their actions, their attachments, not necessarily their dreams. What can turn people around are many things: a period of reassessment, a vacation, a change of lifestyle, a change of careers, a change of significant others, a recovery or discovery of spirituality—that state of interconnectedness to the Other resulting in a life of worthwhile purpose. Whatever it takes, the result is a recovery of meaning in the life—the why behind the what. This is because meaning gives our actions and life's experiences full worth, significance, and value. Without these ingredients, life and our work become boring, blue, and blah. Part of the reason for this is as one of my students at Humboldt State University once declared in an analytical paper. "People seem to find their identities in things that are much more fragile than they would like to believe. Their ideas of self are tied up to things like careers, social status, wealth and their power to influence others. When these things are taken away, people often lose their sense of meaning and purpose in life" (Jaime Perry). The result is burnout—that state of spiritual exhaustion, where life or what one does no longer has any meaning or purpose. It is at such moments when true character—the stuff we are made of—is revealed. Character is *the moral imprinting of the soul*—mind, will, and emotions—with personal integrity and consistency in word and deed, means and ends, beliefs and behaviours. It is developed through the *power of choice* in the wise decisions we daily make.

What is the Meaning of What You Do?

Why do we do what we do? This question lies more in the realm of Social Psychology, the discipline that seeks to answer the question; "Why do people do what they do?" Yet it is a question that we have to address, for behind it lies a life of worthwhile purpose.

Internationally renowned psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, who died in 1997, in his most important work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, describes the human drive not just to stay alive, but to derive a sense of meaningful existence and purpose behind living. The book is his autobiographical account of his enduring years of unspeakable horror in Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps. He describes not just the horror of what he and other people went through, but how through a drive to discover meaning to his experience he was able to maintain sanity and a sense of purpose to his life. The result was his theory of logotherapy. at the core of which is the belief that humankind's primary motivational force is his search for meaning. For Freud it was sex, for Adler it was the drive for recognition, but for Frankl it was a meaningful existence. I side with Frankl,

because better than the other two, our perennial quest for meaning best answers the question, why are we here? And thus, Friedrich Nietzsche was correct when he declared: “If a person has a *why* to live, he can handle almost any *what!*”

Let me frame this with a story. One afternoon a man came home from work to find total mayhem in his house. His three children were outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud, with empty food boxes and wrappers strewn all around the front yard. The door of his wife's car was open, as was the front door to the house. Proceeding into the entry, he found an even bigger mess. A lamp had been knocked over, and the throw rug was wadded against one wall. In the front room the TV was loudly blaring a cartoon channel, and the family room was strewn with toys and various items of clothing. In the kitchen, dishes filled the sink, breakfast food was spilled on the counter, dog food was spilled on the floor, a broken glass lay under the table, and a small pile of sand was spread by the back door. He quickly headed up the stairs, stepping over toys and more piles of clothes, looking for his wife. He was worried she may be ill, or that something serious had happened. He found her lounging in the bedroom, still curled in the bed in her pajamas, reading a novel. She looked up at him, smiled, and asked how his day went.

He looked at her bewildered and asked, "What happened here today?"

She again smiled and answered, "You know every day when you come home from work and ask me what in the world did I do today?"

"Yes?" was his incredulous reply.

She answered, "Well, today *I didn't do it!*"

What does it mean as a mother to get up *every morning* and attend to the needs of your family? What is its significance and purpose? What does such action mean to the husband? How much is it valued? What is the significance to the wife and mother when it is not? How does this affect her sense of self, self-worth, dignity, and appreciation? What does it say about her values? What about his? These are all questions of meaning—the *why* behind the *what*.

We know *what* she does, but *why* does she do it? Does the husband even know *what* she does? This is the assumption behind his question, "What happened here today?" He is clueless. No wonder she resorts to such drastic measures to dramatize the point of what she actually does from 8 to 5 on a daily basis.

I suggest that because such action is not understood by either spouse, but especially husbands, that this is one of the reasons why marriages decline and often fall apart after children enter the relationship. It is in the realm of meaning where we find the spiritual glue that holds a marriage together.

What does it mean to get up every morning and go to work? We know what we do. We get up, put on all of our props, get in our car or public transportation, struggle with all the congestion, and every morning arrive on time. What is the meaning of all this? Why do we do it? What would happen if we stopped doing it? What difference would it make? to us? to others around us? Why? Can you answer these questions? Do they disturb you? Good! I hope they make you squirm! *Do you know why you exist in this world? In the job that you occupy? In the family that you are a part of? If not, then you are taking up valuable space and resources? Get a life! And in getting it, get real!*

Let me take it deeper to shift you out of neutral. What does it mean to take off your clothes every night and get in bed *naked* with another human being—your spouse, your partner? Do you understand the significance of that? What is the purpose behind it? How does this impact your relationship with this other person? Are you naked of body, but not of soul (your mind, will, and emotions), not of spirit (your heart), not of the social

dimension (your voice. Has it been silenced)? Do you have the foggiest idea of what I am talking about?

What is the meaning of the right to vote? Do you care? What is the *why* or meaning to your life? Do you right now know *why* you do *what* you do as an educator? Let me illustrate this with a story.

An American investment banker was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The Mexican replied, "Only a little while."

The American then asked, "Why didn't you stay out longer and catch more fish?"

The Mexican said, "With this I have more than enough to support my family's needs."

The American then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos, I have a full and busy life."

The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing; and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat: With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats. Eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor; eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then Los Angeles and eventually New York where you will run your ever-expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But, how long will this all take?"

To which the American replied, "15 to 20 years."

"But what then?" asked the Mexican.

The American laughed and said that's the best part. "When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions."

"Millions?...Then what?"

The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

The point of this anecdote is that if you do not understand the *why* behind what you do, the *what* will grind you into nothing! Thus, while we must open our arms to change, we must never let go of our values.

The Meaning of Education:

What is the meaning of education? Why are you a teacher? What is education anyway? What does it mean to educate another human being, especially a child? All these are important questions. The word "educate" comes from the Latin *educare*, meaning "to lead out," "to bring out." To educate means to bring out of the child, the student, that spirit of learning and wonder, the desire to know, that thirsts for knowledge. We must do this before it gets crushed by teachers who have lost a sense of meaning to their existence and have stopped being teachers, because they have ceased being students.

Inspiring teachers are students first, teachers second. Any teacher that ceases being a student before long also ceases being a teacher and becomes a tyrant in the classroom.

What is education? True education is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, moral (spiritual), and social faculties, the four dimensions of life, for a life of dedicated service. If this is true education, then what does it mean to educate another human being? Is not education the process of awakening in another human being a thirst for knowledge and a desire to develop all of one's capacities? And if this is so, then why do we do it? One possible response is in order to create in another human being the desire to be a whole, meaningful person.

Take, for example, the need for literacy, the process whereby we enable people to learn how to read. Why? What is so important about knowing how to read? Why should we care? Do you care?

Alvin Toffler, the renowned futurist, says: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot *learn, unlearn, and relearn.*" Benjamin Barber adds, "I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don't I divide the world into *learners and non-learners.*"

Sociologist Rodney Stark declares that "Education is the cheapest, most rapid, and most reliable path to economic advancement under present conditions."

Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, was the one who declared the famous lines: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Or as my former roommate from college, Samuel Betances, often declares: "Everything from the neck down is minimum wage. Therefore, we have to develop everything from the neck up."

So, why is literacy important? What is the meaning, purpose, significance of engaging in such efforts? If education is the *door* to economic, social, and personal advancement, then literacy—the ability to read—may very well be the *KEY* to that door!

There are different size doors to different size rooms. And thus, there are different size keys to those different doors. Teachers stand as the gatekeepers to the doors of education, and ultimately to the doors personal advancement and of the well-being of society and the nation. Teachers early in a student's life hold the power! As a teacher you can lock some kids out, and you can allow others to get in. Whom do you decide? It depends on how you see yourself. In 1841 Fredric List declared: "It is a rule of common prudence, when one reaches the pinnacle of greatness, to pull up the ladder by which one reached the summit, in order to deprive others of the means to rise." And Leonard Harman Robbins adds:

How a minority
Reaching majority,
Seizing authority,
Hates a minority!

We have far too many people who will sell their own out for the sake of gain. One of the most eye-opening proverbs I have ever read is this one in the form of an allegory: "When the axe entered the forest, one of the trees was overheard saying, 'The handle was one of us!'"

Ultimately, it all depends on the meaning of your life. What is the purpose of your living? If there is no purpose, then why should you care about anyone else? And this is the reason why in most institutions, whether schools, corporate offices, churches or government agencies, many persons just function by rote, on automatic pilot, with no

sense of enthusiasm or creativity for their jobs. Seldom do people inconvenience themselves for anybody else. The operative attitude is: "Hey, don't ask me, I just work here." In other words, "Don't bother me, I am just surviving till 3:00 o 5:00" depending on where you work. This is language of people who have lost their purpose for working, the burned out ones. They just punch in the clock; no excitement, no enthusiasm, no creativity, they are just burping along with boredom as a result of burnout.

Question. What spiritual glue holds your life together, giving you a sense of worthwhile purpose to your very being? Do you attend conferences because of a strong desire to learn, or just because it affords you a day off, a day away from the routine? At conferences participants often attend workshops. Next time you take one do something disturbing. Ask the facilitators one question. "*Why are you doing this?*" They may know *what* they are doing—at least let's hope so. Now ask them why are they doing it. And don't accept superficial responses. Your time is far too valuable for that.

Empowerment:

All of us must understand the reasons why we are here in this world as educators. It is to enable people, by means of a self-critical awareness of their own biases and ineptness, in connection with allied support, to be strengthened to achieve and deploy their maximum potential. This is my definition of empowerment. Empowerment is more than just doing for people. It is helping people to be self-critical of their own biases and ineptness. All the available opportunities in the world, will be of no help to me, if I do not seize them, and take advantage for myself, doing for myself what no one else can do, no matter what they do. For ultimately, I am the one who has to take the initiative.

So, how do we bring about change in children? Carl Jung said it best: "If there is anything we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in ourselves."

This is the legacy we pass on to our children, a sense of meaning and worthwhile purpose for living. What meaning of life are we leaving to our children? Let me close with a story.

World War II produced many heroes. One such man was Butch O'Hare. He was a fighter pilot assigned to an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific. One day his entire squadron was sent on a mission.

After he was airborne, he looked at his fuel gauge and realized that someone had forgotten to top off his fuel tank. He would not have enough fuel to complete his mission and get back to his ship. His flight leader told him to return to the carrier. Reluctantly he dropped out of formation and headed back to the fleet.

As he was returning to the mother ship, he saw something that turned his blood cold. A squadron of Japanese Zeroes were speeding their way toward the American fleet. The American fighters were gone on a sortie and the fleet was all but defenseless. He couldn't reach his squadron and bring them back in time to save the fleet. Nor, could he warn the fleet of the approaching danger.

There was only one thing to do. He must somehow divert them from the fleet. Laying aside all thoughts of personal safety, he dove into the formation of Japanese planes. Wing-mounted 50 calibers blazed as he charged in, attacking one surprised enemy plane and then another.

Butch wove in and out of the now broken formation and fired at as many planes as possible until finally all his ammunition was spent. Undaunted, he continued the assault. He dove at the Zeroes, trying to at least clip off a wing or tail, in hopes of damaging as many enemy planes as possible and rendering them unfit to fly. He was desperate to do anything he could to keep them from reaching the American ships.

Finally, the exasperated Japanese squadron took off in another direction. Deeply relieved, Butch O'Hare and his tattered fighter limped back to the carrier. Upon arrival he reported in and related the event surrounding his return. The film from the camera mounted on his plane told the tale. It showed the extent of Butch's daring attempt to protect his fleet. He was recognized as a hero and given one of the nation's highest military honors. And today, O'Hare Airport in Chicago is named in tribute to the courage of this great man.

Now let me share with you another story.

Some years earlier there was a man in Chicago called Easy Eddie. At that time, Al Capone virtually owned the city. Capone wasn't famous for anything heroic. His exploits were anything but praiseworthy. He was however, notorious for enmeshing the city of Chicago in everything from bootlegged booze and prostitution to order. Easy Eddie was Capone's lawyer and for a good reason. He was very good! In fact, his skill at legal maneuvering kept Big Al out of jail for a long time.

To show his appreciation, Capone paid him very well. Not only was the money big; Eddie got special dividends. For instance, he and his family occupied a fenced in mansion with live-in help and all of the conveniences of the day. The estate was so large that it filled an entire Chicago city block. Yes, Eddie lived the high life of the Chicago mob and gave little consideration to the atrocity that went on around him.

Eddy did have one soft spot, however. He had a son that he loved dearly. Eddy saw to it that his young son had the best of everything; clothes, cars, and a good education. Nothing was withheld. Price was no object. And, despite his involvement with organized crime, Eddie even tried to teach him right from wrong. Yes, Eddie tried to teach his son to rise above his own sordid life. He wanted him to be a better man than he was. Yet, with all his wealth and influence, there were two things that Eddie couldn't give his son. Two things that Eddie sacrificed to the Capone mob that he could not pass on to his beloved son . . . a good name and a good example.

One day, Easy Eddie reached a difficult decision. Offering his son a good name was far more important than all the riches he could lavish on him. He had to rectify all the wrong that he had done. He would go to the authorities and tell the truth about Scar-face Al Capone. He would try to clean up his tarnished name and offer his son some semblance of integrity. To do this he must testify against The

Mob, and he knew that the cost would be great. But more than anything, he wanted to be an example to his son.

He wanted to do his best to make restoration and hopefully have a good name to leave his son. So, he testified. Within the year, Easy Eddie's life ended in a blaze of gunfire on a lonely Chicago street. He had given his son the greatest gift he had to offer at the greatest price he would ever pay.

Now I know what you're thinking.

What do these two stories have to do with one another?

Well you see, Butch O'Hare was Easy Eddie's son.

Why are you here, on this earth? That is a question only you individually can answer! But in seeking to answer this question, do not forget the words of Sir Lawrence Olivier, who, as the voice of Akash in Dave Clark's rock opera *Time*, declares: "If you truly want to change your world, my friend, you must change your thinking."

References:

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*Caleb Rosado (Ph.D. Northwestern) is Chair of the Department of Urban Studies, Leadership and Development at the Campolo School for Social Change at Eastern University | Philadelphia. He is also president of ROSADO CONSULTING for Change in Human Systems, a consulting firm that specializes in human systems alignment. Email: calebrosado@earthlink.net Website: www.rosado.net.