

# Themes in Personal Development

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*In reading about personal development, there is nothing new under the sun; everything that can be said about it has already been said, in many different ways. Your task is to find something that speaks to you, that resonates with you. These are a few of the common themes that I have found significant.*

## Meaning

Most people would probably agree that meaning is essential; 89% of the people in a poll cited by Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* said that a person needs something for the sake of which to live.

Meaning provides a foundation for life and illuminates it. Meaning gives us a motive for living life, a reason to get up in the morning. Lack of meaning often leads to an inner emptiness, endless futile attempts to fill the emptiness, and, more often than not, depression.

Finding meaning is an intensely personal process, and each person must find a meaning for his or her own life.

In the above-mentioned book Viktor Frankl says that meaning most frequently comes from

- our work or other achievements and accomplishments
- experiencing something or encountering someone
- the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering

The first is the most common source of meaning.

The second way of finding meaning in life is by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth, or beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him or her.

We can also find meaning in life even when faced with a hopeless situation; Frankl gives us an example:

When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves.

Let me cite a clear-cut example: Once, an elderly general practitioner consulted me because of his severe depression. He could not overcome the loss of his wife, who had died two years before and whom he had loved above all else. Now, how could I help him? What should I tell him? Well, I refrained from telling him anything but instead confronted him with the question, "What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you?"

"Oh," he said, "for her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!" Whereupon I replied, "You see, Doctor, such a suffering has been spared her, and it is you who have spared her this suffering—to be sure, at the price that now you have to survive and mourn her."

He said no word but shook my hand and calmly left my office. In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

James Hollis, a Washington D.C. based Jungian psychoanalyst and author of seventeen books, finds meaning as a by-product of serving life and what it asks of him; his mantra (from page 132 of *Living Between Worlds*) is

- **Shut up** – stop whining and complaining. You are undoubtedly better off than most people in the world.
- **Suit up** – work at what is worthy of your commitment; do your homework and get prepared. No excuses.
- **Show up** – do your best and throw yourself into it. You won't be perfect (nobody is), so forgive yourself, as necessary.

He writes:

Perhaps most elusive of all, yet most important a source of internal guidance for each of us, is our continued monitoring of our life experience regarding its experience of meaning. We can serve the drives for power, wealth, status, relational security, oblivion of consciousness, whatever, but we cannot create meaning. Meaning is a by-product of being in right relationship to our souls at critical junctions. If what we are doing is right for us, no matter how perilous the path, we are supported from within; our suffering, our investment, our uncertainty are rewarded with purposefulness.

This cannot be faked, and over time, even the most troubled of journeys seem rich with meaning.

James Hollis, *Living Between Worlds*, Sounds True, 2020, page 108.

You can hear more in *James Hollis: The Goal of Life Is Meaning, Not Happiness*

<https://resources.soundstrue.com/podcast/james-hollisthe-goal-of-life-is-meaning-not-happiness/>

## **Ownership and Responsibility**

When we find ourselves in a situation that we don't particularly care for, it is tempting to blame others in an attempt to make ourselves feel better. It is simple and easy but comes at an extremely high price: we build a prison for ourselves. We are no longer free to change the situation and thereby escape it; by adopting a victim mentality we have given up our powers. The result is often bitterness, constant complaining, and generally being perceived as a pain by other people.

A more productive approach would be to accept responsibility for and ownership of the situation. This can be more threatening because it involves looking inward but it preserves our ability to change the situation.

We usually have some role, however slight, in causing the things that happen to us, but sometimes it is possible that we may have had no role whatsoever. It doesn't matter—it is not helpful to look back and focus on how we got to this point. To get out, to change things, we must take ownership of the situation and say, "Now that I find myself in this situation, what can I do about it?"

Like it or not, you are the only person who can change your life.

## Focus

If you have read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* you may remember when Alice comes to a fork in the road; there is also a Cheshire cat up in the tree.

"Which road do I take?" Alice asks the cat.  
"Where do you want to go?" the cat replies.  
"I don't know," Alice answers.  
"Then," says the cat, "it doesn't matter."

During your lifetime you will have an almost infinite number of decisions to make, and if you don't have a focus, if you don't know where you are going, you will have no basis for making the best decision.



*Black Hole Focus: How Intelligent People Can Create a Powerful Purpose for Their Lives* by Isaiah Hankel is an excellent book about the importance of focus in your life. It is a comprehensive treatment of the importance of focus in getting what you want out of life.

In *The Slight Edge: Turning Simple Disciplines into Massive Success* Jeff Olson shows us how ordinary people have accomplished extraordinary things by, when faced with a decision (no matter how trivial), always making the choice that brings them closer to their ultimate goal. No matter how intelligent or talented the person may be, without focus, without a goal, there would be no basis for determining what the best choice would be.

## Emotional Control

It is common to hear people say things like, "This thing makes me feel this way" or "That thing makes me feel that way", but the truth is that nothing *makes* us feel anything; when something happens in the outside world, we interpret it based on what we believe about it, and it is that interpretation that leads to any feelings we may have, not the actual event itself. This interpretation is instantaneous and usually subconscious, but it nevertheless happens.

For example, consider an airliner waiting to take off; everyone inside is in the same situation, but, based on their personal beliefs about it, there are many different emotional reactions. Some people believe they are about to die and are in a panic. Others believe they are facing another boring flight and continue reading their newspapers. Some may be looking forward to an exciting new experience and watch everything that's going on.

The fact that interpretation lies between an event and our feelings about it makes it possible for us to control how we react to things. Seemingly simplistic sayings like "When you change how you look at things, the things that you look at change" really are true.

This is the central idea behind *Three Minute Therapy: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life* by Michael Edelstein. The psychotherapy based on this idea is called *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*, a short-term form of psychotherapy that helps the subject identify self-defeating thoughts and feelings, challenge the rationality of those feelings, and replace them with healthier, more productive beliefs. Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, has said, "Of all the books that explain Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy in simple, clear, and highly usable form, *Three Minute Therapy* is one of the very best."

## Discipline

A common misconception is that successful people are exceptional people who have it all figured out and are using their know-how to do things that most of us cannot. The truth is that, in most cases, successful people are ordinary people with an uncommon degree of discipline. As they make their way through life and are faced with a decision, they *always* make the choice that will bring them a little closer to their goal.

We will never live in the past or in the future - we only live in the present moment. The only thing that really matters is the decision that we are making right now, in the present moment.

In his book mentioned above, Jeff Olson says that, for many goals, success is quite easy: just set your goal, and then *always* make decisions that will bring you closer to that goal.

If success is so easy, why aren't more people successful? Olson cites some reasons:

- **Impatience** – It may take many small decisions before any result is apparent; some people may be impatient and want instant gratification, giving up before any results are obvious.
- **Procrastination** – Making the correct decision tomorrow is not the same as making the correct decision today, just as investing tomorrow is not the same as investing today. The clock is always ticking; delayed decisions will not lead to the same success as timely decisions.
- **Fear of Failure** – Avoiding failure means avoiding opportunities to learn.
- **Unreasonable Expectations** – If we think our decisions must or should lead to certain results, it may be difficult for us if things do not turn out the way we hoped. We need to be prepared to accept the outcome, regardless of our preferences.

## Persistence

Perhaps Alden Mills says it best in *Be Unstoppable: The Eight Essential Actions to Succeed at Anything*:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

- Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.
- Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.
- Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts.

Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

Colonel Sanders exemplified persistence: <https://medium.com/%40dennisnafte/colonel-sanders-failed-1009-times-before-succeeding-ac5492a5c191> Amy Cuddy tells a very moving story of how persistence helped her get her life back after a serious auto accident: [www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are#t-955671](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are#t-955671)

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is that body of soft skills that enables us to manage our own emotions and influence the emotions of others. An emotionally intelligent person will be pleasant, likable, and work effectively with others.

Howard Hopkins ([www.canadaone.com/ezine/july04/eq\\_interview.html](http://www.canadaone.com/ezine/july04/eq_interview.html)) describes emotional intelligence this way:

Every response you give to another person involves your intellect and your emotions. The intellect composes the message, and the emotions provide animation and grace. Emotion is to the message what music is to the lyric. Without the tune, would anyone ever remember the lyric? The skill to combine intellect and emotion in this

dramatic and powerful fashion is emotional intelligence, and it possesses the power to elevate even the common exchanges of everyday encounters from the base level of me-and-you to the sublimity of I-and-Thou!

Travis Bradbury has written an excellent collection of articles about emotional intelligence available at [www.linkedin.com/in/travisbradberry/detail/recent-activity/posts/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/travisbradberry/detail/recent-activity/posts/), and Adele Lynn explains the elements of emotional intelligence in her book *The EQ Interview: Finding Employees with High Emotional Intelligence*.

### **A real-life example**

Most of us would probably agree that these ideas seem reasonable, and a few of us may even decide to adopt some of them. But, for some people, they can make the difference between life and death.

Nick Vujicic speaks about how he made it despite overwhelming obstacles: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P2nPI6CTlc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P2nPI6CTlc)

This passage is about Charity Dean, who was then the Chief Health Officer of Santa Barbara County in California:

A decade earlier, in the story that played on the loop inside the mind of Charity Dean, she'd cast herself as the victim. She had every reason to do so. Every terrible thing that a man can do to a woman, short of killing her, some man had done to her. After the difficult birth of her third child, she had stopped consuming alcohol in a normal way and started to use it. A drink could make the story she was telling herself feel more satisfying. It's like scratching an itch until it bleeds, it feels so good. That thought had crossed her mind, even as she scratched. There had come a moment when she realized that if she did not stop scratching the itch she would claw herself to death. Something very, very bad had happened to her: the details did not matter. In that moment she had seen the fire, growing exponentially, coming straight for her. In response she'd created an escape fire. Her escape fire was a story.

In this new story she told herself about herself, she was never simply a victim. For whatever had happened she bore some responsibility. Whether she did, or did not, was beside the point: the new story had the very practical effect of shifting the focus from others onto herself, and from things she could not control to things that she could. In this story, she was put on earth for some purpose, and it was her job not just to figure out what that purpose might be but to make sure she did not allow herself to become distracted from its fulfillment. The new story had gained focus after she'd taken the job as a local public health officer. Its theme was bravery, and it compelled her to recognize those moments when she was doing, or failing to do, a thing out of fear. Coupled with her natural interests and abilities, it had turned her into an action hero. She believed that, in the bargain, her narrative had saved her life.

Soon Charity's purpose was clear, and not only to her but to anyone who watched her in action: she was put on earth to fight battles, and wars, against disease.

Michael Lewis, *The Premonition: a Pandemic Story*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2021, page 200.  
The 60 Minutes segment about The Premonition is available at [vimeo.com/570985448/1c3726e0ba](https://vimeo.com/570985448/1c3726e0ba)

A footnote about the origin of the term *escape fire*:

A grass fire with a stiff wind behind it can easily outrun a firefighter. That's what happened in the Mann Gulch fire in Montana back in 1949; 15 smokejumpers had parachuted in to fight the fire and were suddenly facing a thirty-foot-high wall of flames racing toward them. One of the firefighters started another fire on his downwind side. By the time the main fire was about to overtake him the embers of the fire that he had started had cooled down enough that he could run out onto them. The firefighter, Wag Dodge, heard and felt the main fire pass on either side of him and was one of only three firefighters who made it out alive. Dodge was the first firefighter ever to have done such a thing, and it became an accepted strategy, known as an *escape fire*.

Michael Lewis, *The Premonition: a Pandemic Story*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2021, page 170-172.

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