

LIFE PURPOSE OVERVIEW

Behind the current youth crisis seems to be a "purposelessness" among children and young people in our society. School teachers and youth leaders are noticing. Whether we consider moral decline and meaninglessness or the "whatever" responses we get to questions of "Why?", we find little sense of purpose in the thinking of young people. Whether we look at their music, education, families, communities, or societies in general, there is lacking a clear sense of destiny or purpose.

"What do you see as the ultimate purpose of your life?" is a question met these days with by a certain blank stare or incredulity that anyone would even ask such a question. Or it may elicit responses such as: "having fun," "staying alive," or "getting by." At best, young people talk of making money and then helping others, but without reference to an ultimate human purpose or moral compass.

Music groups, especially in the 1980s, sang about there being no right or wrong, only feelings of pleasure and pain. It's almost as if the world has become tired of old arguments about predestination or determinism versus free will; creationism versus evolutionism; and succumbed to theories of chaos. Without any sense of design, destiny, or purpose, and with a growing sense of cosmic depletion and diminishing resources, we are left to compete for what is left, or just to survive.

DEFINITIONS

In this discussion, "purpose" is considered the ultimate design that gives direction and intentionality to our lives. It is significant that neither the literature of education, nor the behavioral sciences, nor research lexicons use the term "purpose." Neither the word nor the meaning is given much attention in the literature. If you are determined to explore this topic in current literature, you must look to words such as "intentionality," "functions," or "goals."

Webster's New Twentieth Century Unabridged Dictionary offers these definitions for the noun, "purpose": "that which a person sets before himself as an object to be reached or accomplished; aim; intention; design" and "end in view; the object for which something exists or is done..." The following synonyms are given: "intention, design, meaning, view, aim, scope, point, resolve."

The Greeks talked about "telos" or the final end. In the human context, this referred to that ideal toward which human beings strive. Aristotle described four causes in the world. These are well illustrated by a shoemaker making shoes: the material cause of the shoes is the raw material; the efficient cause, the shoemaker. But the final and formal causes are the purpose and design of shoes. That is simple enough for all to understand; questions about human design and

purpose are admittedly much more complicated. But without purpose and goals, any journey or human growth is difficult if not dangerous.

SOCIAL OR CULTURAL PURPOSE

All social institutions serve the common good. They exist for reproduction, socialization, material sustenance, recreation, and the higher expressions of human civilization that so we have families, schools, business, media, governments, parks, and museums.

Gradually, politics and our society have lost their high purpose and deep substance, sacrificed for a winning style, immediate gains, and instant power. In literature, political debate, and businesses, collectively, we are losing our sense of the common good. It is no wonder that communities flounder and that schools and families often can only "make do" as policies and resources flaccidly change.

The media first of all, begin to reflect this anarchy and chaos, and their articulation of adult hypocrisy and compromise is most clearly and passionately recognized by children and youth. Then the media begin to exploit the confusion of our times. This, in turn, feeds the rebellion that characterizes adolescence. The spiral of confusion and anomie deepens.

THE CHALLENGE

A clearer articulation of individual and social design and purpose is needed. It is interesting that some of the poorest developing nations have a clearer sense of the common good and social goals than do the so-called developed countries. Globalization helps us all recognize how we can help each other.

Individuals can find purpose in a cultural milieu that lacks any clear sense of purpose. Amidst the cultural chaos, it is important to ask a child or young person, "What is your purpose in life?" When young people kill each other without remorse, where does one start? The answer obviously lies in social systems such as family, media, schools, gangs, or peers. Individually, one must develop relationships with these young killers (drug abusers or those academically, personally, and sexually irresponsible) so that meaningful communication can occur. Communication with young people at risk (and even gifted youth) should point to the ultimate dignity of human life, the meaning and purpose of our existence. It is our social task to believe, when no others may seem convinced, in the high notion of the common good. Social responsibility must begin with such belief.

"Anomie" is defined (by *The American Heritage Dictionary*) as "A collapse of social structures governing a given society," "The state of alienation experienced

by an individual or class in such a situation," and "Personal disorganization resulting in unsocial behavior." If the word, anomie, implies lawlessness or lack of order or design, it is clear that youth workers must begin by recovering some sense of purpose in order to help those are most at risk in our society.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What evidence of anomie or lack of purpose do you see in society, in media, and in the lives of children and youth?
2. Do you have any sense of anomie in your own life?
3. What connections do you see between social and individual anomie?
4. How would you help young people who see no purpose in life?
5. What advice would you give school teachers these days in terms of moral education, character development, and encouraging long-term goals?
6. How does your own faith give you strength in today's world? How can such faith apply to education in a pluralistic and secular society?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Lack of any sense of direction and purpose is evident to any who really care about children and young people.
2. Society and most religions are giving little attention to this issue; this topic makes little sense in a postmodern world. Still, those who care about young people and how they are living their lives must grapple with the issue of purpose.
3. Purpose in life can be approached within most world views or personal philosophies of life. In a pluralistic, secular society, frame the question and possible answers in terms acceptable to all. Religious faith and biblical understanding should contribute positively to this discussion.
4. It is important that the personal faith of children and young people find integration with their life goals and world views.

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