

Guideposts to Meaning

**Discovering What
Really Matters**

by Joseph Fabry

An Institute of Logotherapy Press Book

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Chapter Seven

Guideposts to Uniqueness

Meaning Through Uniqueness

Uniqueness is the third area where you may find meaning. The search for meaning through uniqueness is different from the one that leads to the “aha” experiences of self-discovery. Your uniqueness becomes evident not so much as by what you are as by how important you are in relationships with others people or in situations.

A situation, such as a job, where you feel easily replaceable by another person—or even by a machine—will not seem meaningful to you. You will find meaning in situations where you feel unique. Of course, no one is completely irreplaceable, but there are many circumstances where it does make a difference whether or not you exist.

Creativity

One area where your uniqueness shows up is in your creativity. Only *you* can create a poem, a picture, a song, a collage, the way *you* do. Your creations may not be masterpieces, or win awards, but they are yours and yours alone. A professor of zoology expressed his awareness of uniqueness when he was asked by colleagues why he “wasted” his time collecting driftwood and pebbles, out of which he made little animals, instead of spending his time doing serious research in zoology and publishing his findings. His answer: “Any research project I do can be done by many other zoologists. But I know that if I don’t put together these little driftwood creatures, no one else would make them just as I do.”

More and more people are trying to overcome frustration and emptiness by writing, painting, pottery, and other artistic endeavors. These people turn instinctively to art as a self-cure for the neuroses in our affluent, pleasure and power-oriented society.

Your creative uniqueness does not necessarily have to be expressed in art. Some jobs obviously offer you the opportunity to be creative. This is true for teachers, scientists, ministers, physicians, and people in the helping professions. They can be (but are not necessarily) creative. If you use your job creatively, you are likely to feel fulfilled, and your work will be satisfying. On the other hand, if you do your work only for the money you make or the prestige you gain, your uniqueness will evaporate and you are not likely to feel fulfilled. Money and prestige are powerful motivators. But if money and prestige are an individual's goals, rather than means toward meaningful goals, feelings of failure can result.

Will, an 80-year-old man who had amassed a fortune from his business enterprise, expressed doubts that his life had had any meaning. He had always looked down on artists, and now his only son was a poet, not very successful but obviously happy. Then a friend pointed out to him that he had been creative in his own field—that he had built up his business and used his imagination, providing work for hundreds of people and manufacturing needed goods. As Will listened to his friend, his life was retroactively flooded with meaning he had not been consciously aware of before then.

Meaning through uniqueness can be found in any job. If you sell real estate, you can find meaning by making a special effort to sell to your customer—the houses that best fit their need. The same can be said of any sales job, from insurance to shoes. If you are a plumber or a mechanic, your uniqueness may lie in your creative efforts to be the best in your field. If you have a humdrum job in an office, you may find your uniqueness in your relationships with your co-workers. Or you may find it in the knowledge that you are working to keep your family alive.

Creativity is a guidepost to uniqueness and meaning. You have to become aware of this treasure and use it.

Human Relationships

Personal relationships are another source of meaning through uniqueness. No one else can relate to your child, parent, or friend the way you do. A grandfather said: "It took me sixty years to see clearly my special relationship with another human being. Ever since my granddaughter was born, she has made me feel that I am special, that I can give her the time and complete attention that not even her parents can give her."

A true love relationship is always based on the uniqueness of the other. Frankl defines love as the ability to see the uniqueness of another person, including potentials the other may not be aware of, and the ability to help the other person actualize those potentials.

Stages of Uniqueness

The Early Years

In youth, the basis for your uniqueness is created. Your first—and probably most important—special relationship is established with your mother. Others follow shortly, with father, siblings, relatives, family friends. As a child, you are naturally creative and open to relationships with others. In a nurturing home your uniqueness is encouraged, you are loved for your specific qualities. You feel that you are special.

But soon influences come into play that run counter to your uniqueness. Even in the most loving family you are expected to conform. That is when you put on masks. School places a special premium on conformity. During the teen years you struggle for uniqueness. You are supported by your peers then. But they, too, make you conform to *their* values. Society pressures you—about what you “ought” to do, what you “ought” to study, what career you “ought” to select, whom you “ought” to date and have as friends and marry. The contradictions between the various “oughts” confuse the search for meaning, and the teen years are often a time of meaning crisis.

As early as the 1930s, Frankl warned that this meaning crisis of the young can lead to the adoption of dangerous beliefs and to dangerous actions. Among the beliefs about which Frankl expressed concern are:

Nihilism: Life has no meaning.

Hedonism: Life is short. Why waste it on a search for meaning. Go after pleasures.

Pandeterminism: Certain forces—genes, psychological drives, my past, predestination, the stars—determine my life and its meanings. There is no point in struggling for meaning because something is controlling me.

Reductionism: I am nothing but an animal that can be trained, a thing that can be manipulated, categorized, predicted.

Conformity: I don't have the capacity to find meaning, and thus I do what other people want me to do—surrender to cults, gurus, dogmas.

Fanaticism: Only my path to meaning is right, and I do everything I can to force others to follow my path.

The young are not the only ones who adopt these beliefs, but they are the ones who most often express these ideas. And these ideas, which are usually difficult to counteract, obstruct the development and awareness of personal uniqueness.

Awareness of the uniqueness of another person is a priceless gift that gives meaning to the lives of both people in the relationship. Many people in our alienating society, especially children, grow up feeling that nobody cares—and that is the opposite of feeling unique. Many organizations,

such as Foster Grandparents and Big Brothers and Big Sisters, try to restore human relationships that have worn thin, or to create relationships where none have existed before.

List Making

You may not be aware of the extent of your uniqueness. Perhaps, if you were asked to list your unique qualities, you would not be able to think of any. Answering the following questions may help you to be aware of your uniqueness.

The last time you moved, who in your old neighborhood missed you? What is it about you that they missed?

Do any of your childhood friends, schoolmates, former office colleagues or fellow workers stay in touch with you? Why?

Who in the past has called you in an emergency?

Who has made a sacrifice for you? In time? Money? What made each one do that?

What have you done with your father (mother, partner, child, friend) that no one else could or would do?

What qualifications do you put down on job applications?

Which of your qualifications do you think convinced your boss to hire you?

What are the reasons that your partner picked you?

Why do people invite you to spend time with them?

What's in your purse/wallet? Empty your purse or wallet. What do the contents tell you about your values, priorities, habits? What things do you carry with you that most other people do not carry?

A Wardrobe of Adjectives

If you like drama, you can concoct a "wardrobe of adjectives." Imagine that you have a closet full of adjectives: proud, modest, cheerful, sad, anxious, courageous, and so on. Select one of these, as you would a piece of clothing, and parade around the room. How does it feel to wear it? How does it affect your relationship with others? Does it fit? On what occasions would you want to wear it? Try one adjective after another.

These negative approaches can be counteracted by an understanding of the basic belief system of logotherapy: that human beings are creatures in search of meaning, that people want to make sense of their lives in spite of the apparent non-sense that surrounds us, that by finding meaning in our lives we can approach an understanding of the wholeness of which we are parts, that we all know deep within ourselves who we are and what we want to become and what is meaningful to us, and that we each have the defiant power of the spirit with which we can overcome limitations or learn to live meaningfully within those limitations.

Most people are willing to accept the first three paths to meaning: to discover one's true self, to determine one's choices, and to feel one's uniqueness. (More people are likely to resist responsibility and self-transcendence.) The Socratic dialogue that concentrates on awareness of uniqueness uses the techniques described in Chapter Two. Below are some approaches that you can use at any age to learn about your uniqueness:

Think back to a moment when you felt good about yourself and the world, when things made sense even though there was reason to be confused or to feel pain.

Make a list of the main events in your life (or a drawing of your life with its high and low points). Do you see any pattern, or was everything you experienced the result of chance?

Remember incidents when you felt a sense of fulfillment, although you went through a painful experience, such as staying up with a friend during a crisis.

Recall episodes in your life when you surprised yourself by acting differently from what you expected to, from what others expected of you.

Who are your role models? What qualities in them do you admire? Do you have some of these qualities? What would you have to do to acquire them?

Do you have a dream about your future? What stands in the way of making it a reality? What can you do to *make* it a reality?

Tell about an ability you realize you have that, in the past, you didn't think you had.

Tell about a situation in which you felt part of a totality.

Tell about a moment when you took off your mask.

Tell about a time when you were rejected because you were different.

Tell about things that you and your parents (or peers) see differently.

Tell about something you did for the first time.

Have a fantasy about your future as you expect it, and a second fantasy about your future as you would like it to be. (Or draw a picture of your future life, and then change it so that it expresses what you want.)

Tell about the nicest compliment you ever received.

Tell about someone who trusts you.

The Middle Years

In middle age you are likely to feel more secure about your relationships, goals, and values. You have made important decisions about your career, marital status, lifestyle, and place in society. But middle age often is

a time of major changes in the unique relationships (professional and personal) that once were meaningful. Your job or career, selected years ago, may have become stale. And perhaps so has your marriage. Your children have grown up and moved away. They have replaced you, at least to some extent, with their own friends and partners. You have developed doubts about relationships in which you once felt unique, and you begin to wonder whether you are going to live the rest of your life, perhaps another 30 or 40 years, in situations where you feel replaceable. Should you perhaps look for new links that express your uniqueness: a new partner, career, hobby? Your midlife crisis has struck. It's a crisis of values.

One way to sort out your values is the activities list. Make a list of things you like to do. Not things that you just *want* to do, but activities that you really enjoy. Use this list to examine your uniqueness.

If you feel in some sense unique doing an activity, write a "U" next to it.

If you enjoy doing an activity alone, write an "A" next to it. And write an "O" next to each activity that you enjoy doing with others. Some items will get both an "A" and "O."

Make a dollar sign next to each item that costs money.

Write a "J" next to each item that is job-connected.

Write a "P" next to each item that has something to do with your partner.

Write an "F" next to each item that is family oriented.

Write an "S" next to each item that is connected with the society in which you live—your friends, peers, and colleagues.

Write a "C" next to each activity that is creative.

Write a "Y" next to each activity you would not have listed three years ago.

Place a "W" next to those you have actually done during the past week.

Place a "No" next to each activity that you would not want to list three years from now.

Then select the five activities you like to do best, and label them from 1 to 5.

What have you learned from this exercise about your uniqueness? What surprises you? How many of your favorite activities are connected with your partner, family, peers? With your job? How many are creative? Do you like to do them alone and with others? Are they expensive? Have your likes changed during the past three years? Would you like them to change during the next three years? Do you really do what you want to do?

How do you feel about your list? What would you like to change? Are you in a rut? What would you have to do to get out of the rut? List advantages and disadvantages of possible changes. Couples (married or otherwise) may use this list to see how much they know about each other's uniqueness. Can you guess which items your partner will number

1 through 5? If you can, how does that make you feel? If you were wrong, how did that make you feel? How does your partner feel when you guess right? Wrong? Some people feel good if the partner's guesses are right. Others want to keep some part of themselves private, hidden from everyone.

Another exercise for exploring uniqueness (helpful for people of all ages, but especially for those at the turning point of midlife) makes use of the old fairy tale about three wishes. If you had three wishes, what would they be?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What longings does each wish fulfill? What do your wishes say about where you are in your life? About your values, goals, relationships? About how fulfilled you feel now? About your hopes for the future?

By what practical means can you fulfill each of these wishes? What would be the first step to take for each? Are you prepared to take those first steps?

The Later Years

In old age the meaning-through-uniqueness aspects of life offer new challenges and opportunities. You have lived a long life, had many relationships that have sharpened your sense of your uniqueness, even if only unconsciously. Yet many elderly people feel that their lives have become meaningless. They feel useless, and as if they are treated like things instead of like unique human beings.

Many of the people in nursing homes and similar institutions feel that they have been put on a shelf to wait for death. This is also true, though perhaps less obviously so, of elderly people who live alone. These people may be widowed, and their contemporaries are dying or dead. Their busy children visit in a hurry and remember birthdays and holidays with routine gestures that give little recognition of the uniqueness of the elderly parent.

The shelving of the elderly is a new phenomenon. Until two generations ago the uniqueness of old people was appreciated. They were sought after for the treasures that come with old age—experience, wisdom, and time to be with others. For centuries children and young people who felt hurt or confused went to their grandparents or elderly aunts and uncles. Today young people with problems go to psychiatrists at \$100 an hour. And Grandpa sits alone feeling useless.

One reason old people feel useless is the unhealthy value system of an affluent, industrial, materialistic society. The worth of the individual is measured in income and prestige and power. Most retired people are cut

off from sources of money and prestige and power. And so society considers them worthless, and many consider themselves worthless. Modification of attitudes is required to shift from a self-evaluation based on what one *has* to self-evaluation based on what one *is*—from material goods and power to meaning.

Meaning in retirement. Retirement, when it comes, is a condition that has to be accepted. But retirement also provides many choices. Instead of brooding about what has been lost, the retired person can focus on what has been gained. You can ask yourself:

- What have I always wanted to do that I didn't have time for?
- What abilities have I acquired that I can use now where they are needed?
- What relationships have I neglected that I can now revive?
- What creative activities have I foregone that I can now turn my attention to?
- What unique knowledge do I have that I want to pass on? (This question refers to family history, identification of people in family photos, personal recollections, audio and videotapes, favorite recipes, personal skills, and so on.)

Your responses to these questions can lead to many meaningful activities.

Meaningful leisure. Many people talk longingly about retirement while they are still working. When asked what they will do when they stop working, such people are likely to reply that they will lie in a hammock, go fishing, read books, travel, play bridge or golf. All of these are legitimate leisure activities, but—unless they express something unique about the individual, these will not be fulfilling in the long run. Uniqueness in such leisure activities may be found in your relationships with other people while you are fishing or playing golf or bridge. You may satisfy a unique need in yourself with travel and reading that focuses on a long-neglected interest in a particular subject, or with retirement activities such as volunteer work.

The emphasis in meaningful leisure is not on the leisure, but on the meaning. You can use your triple treasure of experience, wisdom, and time in volunteer activities that are meaningful because they are needed. Some of those are discussed in the chapter on self-transcendence. But volunteer work is also fulfilling because your experience is an asset. Now you have time to relate to others and to make use of the wisdom you have accumulated. You can become

- the handyman of your neighborhood
- the bookkeeper, treasurer, or publicity person of your favorite organization
- a teacher of skills you have developed in your work
- a volunteer in a charitable institution (even if you have to learn new skills)

a helper in causes in which you believe or of individuals about whom you care

Many retirees refuse to commit themselves to such retirement activities unless they are paid. They have to be led to that important change of attitudes that enables them to see that their value and usefulness is measured not in materialistic but in human terms. The ironic thing is that many elderly people lead empty lives because they will not use their skills unless they are paid. Others, who volunteer their services without pay, end up being offered paid part-time or even full-time jobs.

Older artists. It has been said that there is an artist in every child, and a Grandma Moses in every old person. This creative potential is often buried, ignored, or repressed during the so-called productive years. Many people do have creative hobbies all through their lives. Those who don't might ask themselves if they don't have some creative urges lurking within. The obstacle may be a value disorientation—retirement art seldom makes, and often costs, money.

More and more of the elderly are taking up painting, mosaic, pottery, writing, stitchery, quilting, knitting, jewelry making, or other forms of art.

They take classes to learn or improve skills.

They write journals, family histories, poetry, essays, playlets, cookbooks, records of their dreams, assignments for classes in various fields.

They volunteer in amateur, and even professional, theatrical groups.

They become gourmet and specialty cooks.

They design and make their own clothes.

They knit, crochet, embroider, and sew for family members, friends, and charity bazaars.

They make puppets and entertain their friends.

They arrange and label family photos in albums.

The list of activities available to retired people can include anything that can be imagined. Creativity does not need to be expressed in artistic endeavors. Retirees can help with the organization of businesses and clubs, they can promote causes, edit newsletters, set up mailing lists and speakers' bureaus and banquets, and they can help political candidates and causes they believe in.

Elderly persons are likely to respond to suggestions with the "yes, but" argument. They may feel that they are too old, too weak, too sick, that they cannot see or hear well, cannot walk or drive. Most older people really do have some limitations, but they also have areas of freedom in which they can make choices. There is, though, little point in telling anyone in what areas he or she should be creative. These ideas have to come from within, through Socratic dialogues that contain logohints. Occasionally an individual will find a solution without any help.

Ruth was an 87-year-old woman who lived in a nursing home. She was almost blind and unable to walk. But she suffered less from her disabilities than from the treatment she received from the staff. All of her life she had been a lady in her own home, active and needed. Now she was reduced to being considered a thing—“the broken hip in Room 27.” Ruth felt a great need, as we all do, to be somebody, to feel useful. So she asked for wool and crochet hooks—crocheting was something she could do without seeing. And she began to make little caps, which she presented to the nurses.

Within days Ruth became “the patient in Room 27 who crochets for us.” One nurse asked Ruth if she could make booties for her baby. Another nurse suggested that Ruth should have a little table in the hall of the nursing home, to sell what she crocheted. Ruth refused to sell what she made, but she took “orders” for caps and scarves and booties from the staff. Ruth found uniqueness in the saddest of circumstances.

Preparing for retirement. Logotherapist Robert Leslie has said that the best time to start preparing for retirement is in junior high school. What he was really saying with this startling statement is that it is never too early to plan for a meaningful retirement. You certainly cannot expect, after devoting so much of yourself during your working years to your job, to suddenly, at age 65, be able to switch to other meaningful activities. Long before it is time to retire, you have to expand your unique relationships and activities—it is never too soon to acquire hobbies, enjoy family and friends, games, travels, sports, and artistic activities. Then when your sixty-fifth birthday arrives, you will already be engrossed in a smorgasbord of meaningful activities.

Looking back. When the elderly are beginning to have doubts about their usefulness, they are at a time in their lives when there is the additional danger that they will look back and begin to doubt whether their lives really had meaning. Such doubts can easily lead to depression.

In that situation, a shift of focus is needed. The harvest of life has been brought in. Frankl warns against seeing your past as a “stubble field” of things grown that no longer are there. Instead, he suggests, when you look back you can see the “full granaries” of your life’s harvest. The death of your partner cannot take away the happy times you had together. Retirement does not erase your achievements. Your present weaknesses cannot cancel the results of your past strength.

Frankl uses another simile. A person may look at the “wall calendar” of his or her life with fear and trembling. Such a person sees that “calendar” getting thinner each day as another day passes and another “sheet is torn off.” Another person, as each day passes and each “sheet is torn off,” makes notes on the back of the sheet about the achievements of that day and saves all the pages in a pile. That person, rather than watching the remaining calendar grow thinner, pays attention to the growing heap of experiences.

A Socratic dialogue with an elderly person concentrates on the

positive and the meaningful, with special emphasis on the individual's uniqueness as seen in retrospect. This dialogue can be stimulated by family photographs, old letters and mementos. Useful questions would include these:

- Who were the significant people in your life?
- What did you admire about those people? In what ways did they help you to become what you are?
- For whom did it make a difference that you were there? In what ways did it make a difference?
- Whose existence made a difference to you?
- What were your happy moments? What or who made them special to you?
- What were your crises? What did you learn from them?
- For whom were you an example—by what you did, how you behaved, what you said?
- What qualities do you like in yourself?
- What would you say is the motto of your life?
- What one sentence would you like to have engraved on your tombstone?

Uniqueness does not disappear with age. Its expression may be limited by physical and psychological weaknesses—inability to walk, see, hear, or by depression. Opportunities exist in the areas still intact. Relationships are possible until the last moment of life. Logotherapist James Crumbaugh speaks of relationships in three areas: subhuman, human, and supra-human. Every person can find uniqueness in one or all of these. On the subhuman level, people—and not only the old—find unique relationships with pets; on the human level we each find relationships with others, as helpers and seekers; and on the suprahuman level, many find a relationship with divinity. All of these can nourish the uniqueness of each of us.