Life goals and meaning in adolescence: General and clinical perspectives

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Preface

My life has involved much travelling and I have made my living in varied and at times odd ways. My earlier search for work took me abroad and I lived out of a big suitcase for years. Whenever I returned home, usually out of money and luck, I contacted the local psychiatric hospital with hopes to balance my accounts working shifts as an assistant. First time I entered a psychiatric ward was 27 years ago, barely 18 years old.

Eventually I settled down and acquired my first health related education. Gradually I achieved responsibility and influence. However, I began to experience a burgeoning unrest concerning the mental health care tradition and ideology I was part of. We were, I realized, not prone to question ourselves, and when we did, our answers often came across as dogmatic and self-righteous. I needed to understand more, give myself better arguments. I handed in my notice and took up psychology.

Five years later I earned my honors degree. My academic focus was on personality psychology and I linked this with consciousness- and experiential psychology as well as eco philosophy. Immersing myself in these topics I was inevitably introduced to the greater issue of human meaning. It became clear that purpose, engagement and meaning were core phenomena underlying many issues of psychology holding considerable potential for human growth.

Looking back at the early years of my health career I cannot recall asking patients; “tell me about your dreams and goals, what will it take for your life to become meaningful”? I now argue that this is one of the most potent questions to ask. Penetrating deep into the motivational system few remain indifferent to these topics. This dissertation basically deals with the core dimensions of this question. How can we better understand the human potential for existential growth and how can we utilize this knowledge with some degree of scientific precision? In the following I will shed light on these subjects hoping that my contribution, however modest, will merge with the increasing concern for optimal human functioning that characterizes the zeitgeist within mental health work today.
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