

## BOOK REVIEW

---

# The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life

*By William Damon*

Reviewed by Nathan Wacker

---

New York: The Free Press  
2009

It was first said by Nietzsche, “he who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” These words speak to the power of one’s purpose in life. The importance of purpose and meaning from a psychological perspective has been reiterated by famed psychologist, Victor Frankl. Frankl saw purpose as the primary means by which people can escape from an assortment of mental health issues and traumatic experiences. Through Frankl’s horrific experiences as a holocaust survivor, he saw how those who could see a meaning and purpose fared much better than those who had given up, both mentally and physically.

William Damon, as a developmental psychologist, expert on childhood development, and Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence at Stanford University, also recognizes the importance of meaning in life. In *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find their Calling in Life*, Damon notes a current shift in our culture to an environment in which many young people seem to lack purpose in their lives. He sees them as adrift. He discusses the ramifications of lacking purpose and the benefits of developing one’s own purpose at a young age. He finishes by advising both parents and adolescents on how to find a purpose in life through pursuing interesting avenues that bring about a personal sense of achievement and satisfaction.

Damon defines purpose as not merely a goal, and by no means a singular pursuit. It is an “ultimate concern, essential to all their personal successes, it gives them energy and satisfaction” (xii). Purpose to Damon is a very concrete, measurable action or plan. It is personal and independent, and should be a life-long pursuit granting satisfaction in the pursuit of a singular end. In his interviews of young adults across America Damon noted that those young people who had a sense of purpose generally had career aspirations or selflessly sought to dedicate themselves to a charitable cause.

Damon’s research and analysis are clearly derived from a Western, secular perspective and by no means

dive into the multicultural aspects of purpose. An emphasis on independent choices, individual hopes and dreams, and achievement are all values of Western culture and do not necessarily represent all cultures. For instance, he notes a surprising and high number of adults in their thirties living at home with their parents in places like Italy and Japan, and assumes this is evidence of a lack of purpose rather than a cultural preference (2-3). In many instances, he seems to conflate the idea of purpose with having a career and being independent.

However, Damon is a developmental psychologist and he is writing about psychology for an American audience. The stories of success in finding purpose and the evidence supporting an epidemic of purposelessness are nonetheless a serious diagnosis of trouble in Western culture, since we value a career and independence. In addition, Damon notes that young people are hesitating to commit to family life and “differing or declining marriage” (1), another sign of social distress.

Damon explains how “faith and science agree” on the positive effects of purpose. He states “about 15% of the participants in one study considered serving God to be their ultimate concern” (54). As Christians we see our faith as inherently leading us towards a purpose of serving God and walking with Christ. However, other than a few pages dedicated to religious purpose, it is clear Damon prefers a career oriented tangible achievement as a source for purpose. Damon shares a short story of a young woman who finds her purpose in her Christian faith but says little to explain what her faith means to her or how she practices her purpose. But, in the end, Damon stresses the importance of having a purpose, any purpose, regardless of its origins.

Thinking about purpose and diagnosing its effects on society bring about a relativistic tension which is beneath the surface throughout *The Path to Purpose*. If everyone needs a purpose in life and purportedly it doesn’t matter what that purpose is then one’s individual purpose is relative, undefined by the constraints of society. Yet, in *The Path to Purpose* Damon does in fact judge people’s orientations as

purposeful or not according to the criteria of our society. He is choosing the actions and dreams of young people and assessing them by American values. In chapter four he describes how a young boy raised thousands of dollars to build wells in Africa. This boy had a constructive purpose outside of himself that was not motivated by money, greed, or any career aspirations. But he did have a charitable purpose that was highly valued in our society, it is a purpose that makes great headlines and makes everyone smile. There is no doubt that there is a real psychological benefit to this type of purpose, and digging wells certainly have a real effect on the lives of those who are thirsty. This is because, "People with purpose stop thinking about themselves, becoming fascinated instead by the work or problem at hand" (31). But it is also true that this boy was following the moral guidelines of his society in choosing an altruistic purpose.

Damon continues with an example of a purposeless young man who said he was happy to just drift through college with no real career plan, a clear contradiction to our society's values. Perhaps we condemn this type of attitude because it is not constructive and is presumably self-centered. If that is true, then we are evaluating purpose according to its ability to produce a net benefit to society rather than as an "ultimate concern, giving energy and satisfaction." In any case, young people's attempts to find purpose are clearly linked to how they are valued and viewed in society.

There is no doubt that finding purpose has great benefits in terms of fulfillment, relative success, and mental health. As Christians we can be assured of at least one lifelong purpose found in our faith. As Damon's book demonstrates, by choosing a "why" to survive any "how," young people can find their place in their world and flourish in their specific role in society. Much of what we view as purpose may be culturally constructed, but that by no means discredits the vast benefits of having purpose and meaning in life.



**Nathan Wacker** is a graduate student in the Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University. He recently traveled to the Philippines to study purpose among Christians in Manila. His research interests include the anthropology of Christian communities and teleology. He has volunteered with non-profit organizations and churches across three continents.

*Author email:* [nathan.wacker@eastern.edu](mailto:nathan.wacker@eastern.edu)

---