

# InPresence 0032: The Meaning of Life

## with Jeffrey Mishlove

Video Transcript - *New Thinking Allowed* with Jeffrey Mishlove

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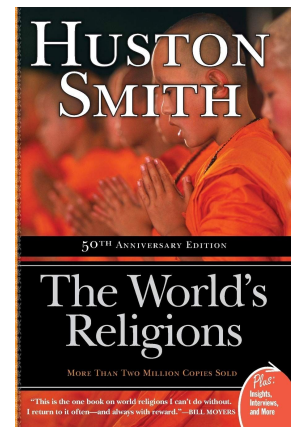
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(00:39) Hello. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today I'd like to talk about the meaning of life. I've had the privilege, many years ago, of conducting many interviews with the great philosopher and scholar of *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith. And, I remember he put it so clearly to me one day, he said, the closer you are to God, the more meaningful everything is. I think for many people that is true, and in many circumstances that's true. Particularly for people who are religious, and who are engaged in religious institutions, because those institutions provide meaning. They provide opportunities for helping others. They provide rituals and passages through life. And they provide guidelines of what's good and what's bad, what's right and what's wrong.

(01:40) So, you almost get your meaning handed to you on a silver platter. They even have martyrs. And in martyrdom, people who have suffered greatly - there's a sense of higher meaning, a higher calling. That even suffering itself has value, when it's done in the name of your God, your religion, your church.



(02:07) But what if a whole generation feels abandoned by their God? Now, I grew up Jewish, and I was born in the 1940s – right on the heels of the Second World War. In the synagogue that I used to attend as a child, I would go, and the adults would all be praying - “davening” was the term that we used – it's a Yiddish word, I think. And, they would be crying. They would be in tears. That's what my early religious upbringing was like.

(02:46) That was the life of my early religious training. Seeing the adults in tears at every religious service, because so many of them had recently lost relatives in the war, in the Holocaust. I drifted away from religion as soon as I was out of high school. In fact, I delivered a sermon at my little synagogue in Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin – I think I was a senior in high school – and the sermon was based on the idea, “Be true to yourself” which was a concept that I had learned in attending a Jewish youth group leadership training program. And that was it. “Be true to yourself” for me meant I didn't need religion. The truth of the matter is that I am part of a generation of Jewish people who have left the religion in greater numbers than ever before - on the heels of the Holocaust.

(03:52) It's never happened. You know, for 2000 years, Jewish people had maintained a very strong religious identity. And I suppose it's still true today because there's a segment of the Jewish population that is going back to the older orthodox, even the Hasidic Jewish ways, and recovering the mysticism of Judaism. But, by and large, the trend has been toward secularism. And I'll confess, I'm part of the secular movement.

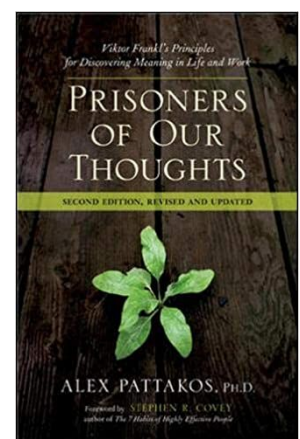
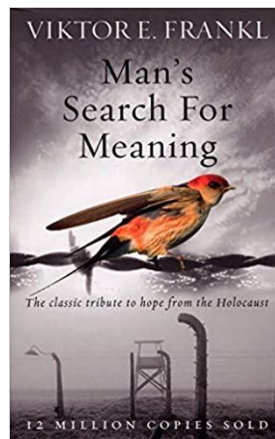
(04:24) One day, I was reading a Jewish prayer book. I had been in Israel, and it was a very inspiring time for me - at 8 hours, in Israel, while I was cruising the Mediterranean. Really, even those 8 hours, was somewhat life changing for me. So, when I got back, and it was the Jewish high holidays - I certainly was not interested in attending a synagogue. But, I picked up some Jewish prayer books and I sat home that day, instead of going to work, as I might have done and I began reading through a Jewish Reconstructionist Prayer Book. The Reconstructionist Movement in Judaism is trying to, I think, rebuild the religion after the horrors that were faced. There was a poem in the prayer book that actually moved me. I think it spoke to something inside of me that I wasn't fully conscious of.

(05:23) The prayer went something like this. It said: One day the spirit of God is going to hover over the bones of all of those who were killed in the Holocaust. And God will say to them "Wake up. Wake up. I bid you to wake up." And the spirits of those who have lain in mass graves would say to God "No, why should we answer you now? Why should we listen to you? When you never listened to us in our time of need?"

(06:05) I think that is a feeling that has affected my whole generation of Jewish people. You'll find Jews very active in Hinduism, and in Buddhism, and in Sufism, and in Yoga. They've turned away. And of course, Secular Jews.

(06:27) But, it's not just about Jews. How many people do you know who feel completely forsaken? Even Jesus on the cross, "Oh my God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" There's a moment when we all face a dark night of the soul. Sometimes it's severe. Sometimes it's crippling. There are people who are just so depressed, so discouraged, so despondent that they're unable to hardly lift a finger to help themselves. These people are devoid of meaning.

(07:13) Now, I did conduct a wonderful interview with Alex Pattakos on *Man's Search For Meaning*. He was a student of LogoTherapy, devised by the great psychologist who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*. Viktor Frankl was imprisoned in the concentration camps. And he saw people around him dying. He survived, and he managed to survive by clinging to a sense of meaning. He was of course a trained psychoanalyst and had a great



advantage in that regard, but it occurred to him that, meaning, finding meaning in life is central to our existence. A life without meaning is not a life worth living.

(08:08) I recently saw a contemporary movie *7 Days In Entebbe*, and it talked about the - it depicted, the terrorists of the German Baader-Meinhof Group. They're getting ready to hijack a plane. And there's a beautiful woman amongst the hijackers – at least in the movie, she's quite beautiful. And someone says, "Are you ready to kill? Are you ready to die? Aren't you afraid of dying?" And she said, "No, I'm not afraid of dying. The only thing I'm afraid of is a life without meaning." So, for her a meaningful life meant she had to become a terrorist and hijack an airplane. Which, indeed, she did.

(08:51) Now, the Existentialists in philosophy – Sartre, Camus, and even Heidegger - developed the notion that, in effect, God is dead - which has become an important theological movement as well. We have to find our own meaning. We create meaning in our lives. But how can you create meaning when you are completely despondent? When things don't seem to be going well for you?

(09:27) Someone recently asked me, on the comments section of these videos, "Is it the case that people who show a lot of psychic activity were typically abused as children?" And, sadly the answer is "Yes." When we talk about people reporting lots of spontaneous, objective, psychic experiences, what we learn is that, number one – yes, they were abused. And, number two, they have a symptomatology which could be called a very volatile temporal lobe in the brain – a certain part of the brain that lends itself to visionary experiences is quite active and can suddenly - they can be put into an altered state of consciousness.

(10:16) I suspect for many people that's true because their childhoods weren't safe. They were being raised in a family of alcoholics, perhaps, or people who were emotionally or physically abusive. And what is a child to do? But to escape into an inner world, and that inner world may also be an opening to psi abilities. Now, the challenge for many people in such circumstances is to make life meaningful for themselves. To work through the pain. That's where meaning comes. It's finding your own strength in the pain itself. Which, I think is the meaning of religious martyrdom, as well.

(11:13) So, we live in an era where God is – kind of there, and kind of elusive, kind of alive, and kind of dead. Where it's up to us to create meaning. But sometimes we feel forsaken - that we live in a world completely without meaning. I know it's true for people who, for example, may work professionally on legal cases for the government. [They] find, after spending 20 years, working on a massive anti-corruption case, or an anti-fraud case - these big government cases involving cartels and monopolies, and breaking up monopolies. And they're getting close to resolving a case of 20 years of work, for example, when the government decides to drop the case completely.

(12:09) There are people I know, right now, a good friend of mine – who is about to become homeless if he can't pay the rent in the next 40 days. And he doesn't know what he's going to do. How is he going to survive? He's worked all his life as a tarot card reader, and now, because he's so depressed, nobody wants a tarot reading from him.

(12:31) It's like: What do you do when everything that you strove for, that gave you meaning in your life is taken away from you? How do you recreate the meaning? It's not an easy thing to do. I know, I felt it myself after spending nearly 10 years in graduate school, earning a doctoral degree in parapsychology and then being libelled and discovering that I had lost the respect of my peers - people who didn't know me well, because the libel was out there, and I had very little platform to defend myself. And even if I tried to defend myself, they were, you know, sitting on the fence, they said "Let's wait and see." I had to reconstruct my life. And many people do.

(13:20) How is it working out for you? Where are you finding meaning in your life? What can you do to create more meaning in your life? I'll tell you one thing that you can do, and that is to be of service to other people, to help other people. Because no matter how bad things may be for you, there's probably someone else who is even worse off and who can use your help. So, I'll leave you with that thought. Thank you for being with me. (14:01)

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