

## Sunsets: A Woman's Search for Meaning

There's a bulletin board hanging above my desk in my office that's covered, like a collage, with pictures of me, of friends, and of favorite vacation snapshots, flyers of long-past events, pins and buttons claiming my radical identity, a couple of poems I've written, and a fish hook that I found one day when I was walking by the river and felt the need to keep. I haven't changed this bulletin board in about five years and rarely even notice it anymore; it just blends in with the rest of the office. But recently it caught my eye, and I looked at it, really looked at the pictures and the flyers and the poems, and started to cry. It was like looking at a film of myself frozen in time. It is a picture of who I was five to ten years ago. On it I see relationships that have long since slipped away and dreams jaded by cynicism and time. I got the sense that that part of me that believed in permanence of those relationships and in the possibility of those dreams had died and that there was nothing I could do but grieve her loss. I think I was also grieving the fact that I was faced with the question, "What's the meaning of my life?" and had no answer. In that moment, I felt like I was in an emotional time warp, stuck somewhere between the past and the present, and my life seemed meaningless. Nothing mattered -- not the joy, the sorrow, the hopes, the dreams, the achievements or the pain. The only picture on the whole bulletin board that had meaning to me was a picture of the sun setting on the horizon of a white, sandy beach and the sparkling blue ocean near Key West.

The existentialists would say that I have been asking the wrong question. Rather than pondering the meaning of life, they suggest that I should ask myself, "What meaning do I make of my life, this minute, this day, this month, this decade, and this lifetime?" Life, they suggest, has no inherent meaning; what matters is the meaning that I give to it. Moreover, meaning cannot be found through intellectual pursuits; it requires engagement. Joseph Campbell furthers this perspective. He suggests that it is actually the experience of being alive that we are seeking -- an experience that resonates with the core of our being which allows us to feel the "rapture of being alive." The problem is that we tend to focus so much energy on achieving outer value that we forget to pay attention to the inner value, and it's that inner value, the "rapture of being alive," that ultimately matters.

I think I felt the experience of meaninglessness so keenly because I had so carefully organized my life around achieving meaning. I worked hard to attain degrees and achieve goals so that I could, if not save the world, at least make the world a better place. And despite my efforts, children still get raped and beaten, women still don't have equal rights, corporations still ravage the environment, people are still starving all over the planet even though there is a surplus of food, and my government is still forcing its will on the rest of the world. The catch was that I was so focused on reaching my destination -- one that I now understand is unobtainable -- that I rarely took time to experience the journey. When I was looking at my bulletin board, I was so focused on what was my failure to reach my destination that I missed the fact that somewhere along that path, I began to find my true self, the me that lies at the core of my existence that is not dominated by the rules and roles imposed on me by my family, my society and myself. At a deeper level, the sadness of realizing that I had missed those years by not being truly present with those friends and at those events reverberated deep within my soul.

The reason that picture of that sunset mattered to me was that I was truly present when my partner and I took the picture. It was the only memory captured on my bulletin board when I experienced the rapture of being alive. This, according to Joseph Campbell, is what it's all about.

For more information, see:

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Originally appeared on Suite101.com