

# When nothing seems to mean anything?

Helping young people to find meaning in life

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**J**ordy sits opposite me, defeated. Reading between the lines, it's as if he's saying, "The things that mattered to me in the past don't seem to matter any more. When I was little, I lived for my mum's love, for my dad's approval, for birthdays and for Christmases, for being with my friends and for having fun. Then when I was a bit older I lived to come top of the class, to win prizes, and this time last year I was living to be with Lisa. But now I'm not sure about anything. Those things were good – they really mattered at the time – but since Lisa and I broke up, nothing seems to mean anything any more. I don't want to be with her again, but the trouble is that I don't know what I want to do instead!"

Young or old, we spend our time trying to find meaning in our lives because, without it, everything seems pointless. Without meaning, we become anxious, desperately attaching to a person or to a belief, to a behaviour or even to a 'thing' if that's what appears to give our lives meaning and takes away the Nietzschean dread.

Jordy looks at me, expecting answers. He could be Hamlet complaining, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" [1.2.] Like most young people going through crises of meaninglessness, he's in transition. For some young people, that transition is marked by complaints of boredom ("I'm bored! I haven't got anything to do!"), with the implication that the world (in the shape of parents and authority-figures) should be making life easier. For other young people in transition, the cry goes up, "What's the point? What's the point of anything?" which is a good question deserving of a thoughtful response (though not in the middle of a Maths lesson).

Because young people are young, adults are inclined to dismiss their existential wonderings as unnecessary or foolish. They're not. Young people are no less philosophical than adults and no less preoccupied with trying to find meaning in their lives. The difference is that they're trying everything for the first time whereas adults have long since tried living to win prizes, or living to be with Lisa, and they haven't necessarily found the long-term meaning they were looking for. In his own way, Jordy is trying out some of the obvious meaning-making experiences available to him and finding that none of them make much sense at the moment. Before long, people will be telling him that getting a job or going to university will give his life meaning. In a few years, they might be suggesting that getting promotion or having children or making lots of money might do the trick. They might suggest religion. Or raising money for charity. Or getting fit. In due course, Jordy will probably try out all these things and more, hoping that his latest *raison d'être* will prove to be the real deal, the thing that gives his life meaning. Maybe it will.

"We spend our lives trying to figure these things out," I say to him, slumped in his chair, "because when we can't find any meaning in our lives, it feels terrible."

He looks at me beseechingly. "So what am I supposed to do?"

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“There’s nothing you can do at the moment,” I say, “except to keep living through this and wait to see what becomes important. I’m not promising that it’s easy. It isn’t. But everyone’s in the same position, Jordy, trying to work it out for themselves. And if they’re honest, they all have times when they feel that their lives have no meaning, that *they* have no meaning.”

We go back to talking about his break-up with Lisa, about his parents, and about how disloyal his friends have been recently. Eventually he gets up to leave, still disgruntled, still disappointed, but like the ancient mariner, a sadder and a wiser young man.