

## Part I

# Making Meaning in the Quarterlife

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# 1

## Is the Quarterlife Generation Ready for Meaning-Making?

The following questions come up again and again during our many off-campus consultancies on the topic of meaning-making:

- Can college students handle the intellectual complexities of meaning-making?
- Are they mature enough?
- Have they had enough life experience?
- Is the concept of meaning of equal interest to all students?
- Does meaning-making require a particular level of emotional and social intelligence?

In response to these questions, we start off this chapter by describing the mindset of the *quarterlife generation*. We emphasize the big and little meaning questions that the quarterlife generation is asking these days. Following this, we introduce a five-cycle sequence of quarterlife challenges around the issue of choice. Then we introduce one young woman who has wrestled with some of the archetypal quarterlife questions to develop a path of meaning and

4 HELPING COLLEGE STUDENTS FIND PURPOSE

purpose. We close the chapter with a practical section on how to take advantage of a meaning-making moment in a particular educational setting. (Parts of this chapter appeared in slightly altered form in Nash's article "Crossover Pedagogy," appearing in *About Campus*, 2009, pp. 2–9. Reprinted with permission.)

### Quarterlife Challenges

Two of the leading writers on the quarterlife generation (Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Robbins, 2004) believe that this period of life spans the ages from twenty to thirty-five, with significant developmental overlaps for both late teens and pre-midlififers. Thus the quarterlife generation includes most undergraduates as well as most graduate students. Robbins and Wilner think of this period in the adult life narrative as a challenge for the following reasons:

- It is threatening for quarterlififers to face the world on their own, many for the first time, away from the securities of families of origin, earlier schooling, and, for older quarterlififers, familiar jobs, marriages, and surroundings.
- Unprecedented competition for highly specialized jobs in the twenty-first-century world is fierce, and the resultant emotional stress can be devastating.
- The pressure to select the right colleges and universities, the right preprofessional major and minor fields of study, and the right graduate schools, professions, and occupations, in order to succeed later in the work world, can be nerve-racking.
- Friendships are, at best, tentative, and committed, intimate relationships are often put on hold, because so much of one's future is up in the air.

- Quarterlife concerns about success and failure in a changing economy and in an increasingly specialized, technological job market induce intense anxiety, depression, eating disorders, drug abuse, and, in extreme cases, violence and suicide.
- “Do what you love, and love what you do” seems for many quarterlifers to be a near-impossibility, either in college or in the job market, because the expectations are so high to secure future jobs that will confer security, status, wealth, and power benefits.
- Credit card debt, school loans, and personal bankruptcies are out of control.

We prefer not to think of the quarterlife experience as a *crisis* but rather as a series of exciting, real-life possibilities for students to make meaning. Although it is true that some students do live their quarterlife years in a narrative of panic, stress, and insecurity, others live in very different narratives of meaning. Here are some big and little meaning questions (some of the questions, which we have reworded, come from Robbins, 2004) that all quarterlif-ers are asking, in one way or another, on our campuses, regardless of the particular narratives they may inhabit (note the similarities between these quarterlife questions and some of the existential questions about meaning typically associated with midlife):

- *Hopes and Dreams*—How do I find my passion? When do I let go of my dream? What if I don’t get what I want by a certain age? How do I start over, if I find I need to?

When is the right time to make a commitment? Is it possible to have a fulfilling relationship and a fulfilling job at the same time? What if I make the wrong choice on either side? Am I stuck forever?

6 HELPING COLLEGE STUDENTS FIND PURPOSE

- *Educational Challenges*—Am I studying what is right for me? Why do I have to be so preoccupied with gearing up for graduate school and a career when I'd just like to enjoy exploring the arts and humanities? How well am I handling the freedom of college and being away from home for the first time? Why does my college experience neglect all the really important questions that come up for me regarding my hopes and dreams for the future?

- *Religion and Spirituality*—What is the right religion for me? Why am I so critical of my childhood religion? Why is it that a noninstitutional spirituality seems, at times, to be so powerful for me? Will my parents be disappointed if I don't remain loyal to the religion of our family? Why does God seem so far away from me on some days and so close at other times? Can any good come from doubting? Do I need a religious faith to be a moral person? Can I be good without God? Is there any other way to make a meaning that is enduring without religion or spirituality? Why is it that so many of my college friends think of religion in such negative terms? Will I be able to make it in the world without experiencing the consolations of organized religion along with its supportive communities? In what religion will I bring up my children, if I have any?

- *Work Life*—Will I always have to choose between doing what I love or making lots of money? Will I ever really look forward to going off to work every day? Is it true that I'll change careers many times before I retire? If, yes, then what's the point of taking all this time to prepare for a particular career? Will I ever find work where I won't feel such stress to produce all the time? Does my work always have to be so competitive and bottom-line? Is it possible to find a career that is congruent with my personal values? Will I eventually have to settle for a career driven by my obligation to pay off the tens of thousands of dollars that I will owe in student loans? What does "balance" look like when work

and stress build up? Why is it that I feel I have so much potential, but I am afraid to actualize it? Why am I so haunted by self-doubt?

- *Home, Friends, Lovers, and Family*—Why is it so hard to live alone but also so hard to sustain a relationship? Is there really such a person as a “soul mate”? How will I know when I fall in love with “The One”? Am I loveable? How do I avoid feeling stuck in my relationships? Why can’t I find close, enduring friends who stay the course without drifting away? Is there something about me that causes this? Why is the thought of moving back in with my parents so terrible? Now that I’ve moved away, how do I make friends? Who will be my true friends, will I ever fit in, and how will I know who I can trust?

- *Identity*—Why is adulthood, at one and the same time, so threatening to me yet also so attractive? Why is it that I alternate between thinking that my life is either exciting or boring? How can I stop feeling overwhelmed about everything? Why do I worry so much about how I look? Why can’t I like who I am? Will I ever be truly happy with myself? Why do I feel so guilty when others claim I am privileged? Why is everyone so hung up on identity politics? Aren’t we all human beings underneath our skin color, sexual orientation, neighborhoods, and private parts?

Many of these questions are part and parcel of life’s journey, no matter the journey-taker’s age or stage. Still, quarterlifers seem to be experiencing a deluge of doubt and possibility that is unique to that place between adolescence and adulthood. Books and internet resources (Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Robbins, 2004; Steinle, 2005) have been popping up to fill the void. Each of these resources affirms the questions of quarterlife and offers a most welcome comfort to the intended audience: “Quarterlifer, you are not alone!”

Notably, Robbins and Wilner (2001) and Steinle (2005) chose to populate their guides to the quarterlife with the voices and

circumstances of real quarterlifers. The young adults featured in these books discard the mask of self-assuredness to reveal the confusion and pain they sometimes experience in trying to find their way. They wonder how to lead a more fulfilling, less “empty” life than the one they know; they express their dismay at the realization that life is not always fair; and contrary to the Pew Research Center findings discussed in the preface, they want to know how to pursue a career that means something to them personally and will make a positive difference in their communities.

Regardless of gender, race, or social class, the respondents for each text underscore how universal many of these questions of meaning are. Although their social identities may frame the context in which they seek clarity, these quarterlifers express the same basic frustrations, excitements, worries, and questions (and even the same answers), regardless of the part their social identities suggest they play in life. Each of them wonders, through their interviews and written responses, whether they will discover a meaning and purpose worth living (and even dying) for.

### **Cycles of Quarterlife Meaning-Making**

The students we have encountered are no different from the quarterlifers represented in print. We find that not only do our quarterlife students ask the same powerful questions, but they also pass through recognizable meaning-making *cycles*. Different from stages or other linear and sequential developmental steps, the cycles of meaning-making in the quarterlife tend to appear and reappear with each new meaning challenge. Some of us are more ready than others to undertake the meaning-making project. Being aware of these cycles helps us to find the best ways to time, fine-tune, and present meaning-making opportunities to the right audiences, at the most appropriate time, and in the most effective manner. However, we are always very cautious in the use of our developmental cycles, because we do not believe that any kind of sequencing

should be the last word on who, how, when, and why to teach meaning-making.

If carried to an extreme, developmental ages and stages can often become tight little boxes that slot and plot students throughout their college experience—and, sadly, long afterward. In some ways, we prefer Robert Havinghurst's phrase "developmental tasks." *Cycle* is a metaphor for describing particular sequences of quarterlife development, and, in some senses, the metaphor works very well. But mastery of all the earlier tasks of childhood and early adult development is necessary before quarterlifers can move on to the next sequence (Havinghurst, 1972). The term *cycle* also indicates the somewhat repetitive nature of meaning-making. Meaning develops in spiraling layers over time, and we want to allow for the likelihood that quarterlifers will find themselves revisiting one or another cycle on their way to becoming more fully themselves.

We offer what follows as suggestive and not definitive, as observations based on our informal experiences with quarterlife students over the last several years. (We are indebted to David L. Norton, 1976, for inspiring us to think about the ongoing interplay between seeking self-fulfillment and working for the fulfillment of others. He calls this developing a "philosophy of ethical individualism," and he believes that reconciling these two sometimes conflicting ideals is the challenge of a lifetime for all of us.) The existential theme for each stage is *choice*, with its different configurations, as students travel through the quarterlife cycle of meaning.

*Cycle One: I choose myself.* Quarterlifers realize at some point that they must start to take responsibility for their own lives. This moment of existential awareness may happen suddenly or gradually, over a brief or long period of time, at any age. This narrative of self-awareness and self-construction takes this form: "Only I can live my life for myself. Nobody else can tell me who I am and what I must live for. From this moment on, I'm the one who has to make sense of my life. And I've got almost forever to do it, because I'm young

and healthy, and I feel immortal. Even though this independence is challenging, I'm looking forward to being on my own, without anyone telling me what to do."

Cycle Two: *Choosing myself is scary*. Quarterlifers begin to develop a sense of their own finitude. Their self-awareness takes this shape: "I like choosing who I am and who I want to become, but I'm afraid choice carries with it certain risks. I can do anything that I want, it is true, but what is it I really want to do? The people whose advice I respect sometimes want different goals for me than I do. At times I'm afraid of letting down people whom I respect and love. I don't want to disappoint anyone, but I also want to be independent and happy with my own choices about how to live, love, and work. But what is it I can do that is worthwhile? Who should I love? When should I make lifelong commitments, if at all? What should I believe? I need mentors and guides I trust and respect, but who should these people be? I know that others are depending on me to fulfill my promise as an adult, but just what are my duties to myself and my duties to others? What should I do when these duties are in conflict? Is it really possible for me to live a life of personal integrity when every choice I make stands to harm or to help others, and I've got to decide whose side I'm on?"

Cycle Three: *I'm not really as free to choose as I thought I was*. In the third cycle, quarterlifers become far more aware of their own boundedness. They realize that their choices are limited by their external circumstances, their individual temperaments, and other conditions over which they have little control. They still relish the idea of being autonomous agents who are able to construct their own meanings, but now the whole experience takes on a sharper, existential edge. It is more tuned in to the limitations of finite existence and bounded choice-making, as well as to what the Greeks called *fortuna* ("chance" or "luck"). No longer is the quarterlifer a superman or superwoman.

Happiness is, at best, a fleeting thing, and the months and years are as passing seasons. Now these questions arise: "Is there

any enduring meaning in my life? When I've done everything I'm supposed to do, will this guarantee that I'll be in a satisfying relationship and a good job, and enjoying my life? If I've worked hard to achieve my goals, will this mean that I'll finally be happy and fulfilled? I know so many people who, to the outside world, appear to be incredible successes. But they often tell me they feel so unsettled and so restless. Some of them are even doing self-destructive things. If all goes well when I graduate, I will still have more than two-thirds of my life to live. But I don't ever want to be in a state of depression about opportunities lost. Where do I go from here? Will I be able to settle for less than I want, knowing that there are limits on my ambitions?"

Cycle Four: *I'm becoming more, not less, cautious in my choices.* During this cycle of meaning-making, quarterlifers start to realize that age, events, and added responsibilities are taking hold of them . . . almost by surprise. Often, when we listen to quarterlifers at this time of meaning-making, we are reminded of a Woody Allen line: "I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Their self-talk covers more than just death, of course; it usually takes the following form: "Life is happening to me almost when I'm not even looking, and, lo and behold, I'm getting older. Who I see in the mirror every morning is not who I used to see. Now what? I've still got so much left that I want to do, but I'm realizing that what I want to do might actually take more time than I will actually have. How can I avoid slipping into despair, frustration, and just plain exhaustion?"

"Will people still love and respect me, even though I probably won't be as active a risk-taker as I want to be? In my later years, what in the world will I have in common with people who are younger and more creative and vital than I am? Will I look too eccentric and settled to them, completely out of touch—the way that my parents and teachers look to me now? It won't be long before I'm out in the world, hustling like everyone else, and I'm really afraid of losing my passion for life. I never want to compromise my integrity, or lose

my sense of humor, or give up on my faith that there is some force greater than me in the universe.”

Cycle Five: *I will choose my meanings to the best of my ability, and I will try not to live a life of regret or bitterness.* In the fifth cycle, meaning-making becomes less concerned with the navel-gazing questions of self and more concerned with developing a generative, outward-facing philosophy. This cycle is less about resignation for quarterlifers than it is about authentic realization both in and out of community. *Authenticity* is the realization that we are the *authors* (each word has the same Greek word root—*authentēs*—meaning “one who makes or originates something”) of our own lives. In some ways, this cycle is a restatement of Cycle One, only now it is grounded in a narrative of existential responsibility (*response-ability*—the ability to respond) to others as well as to self:

“Yes, it is true that I am the author of my own life, but there are limits. There is around me a circle beyond which I cannot pass, but within that circle I have tremendous freedom to make choices; choices that can be as satisfying, exhilarating, and life-expanding as any I’ve ever made. Only now I need to proceed more carefully, not thinking only of myself but also being willing to respond to the needs of others. I am not a completely free agent, and I recognize now that there is a balance between freedom and responsibility. I live in a complex social network that imposes certain duties and obligations on me. Having said this, however, I also realize that this social network also confers a wonderful sense of freedom. I am not completely alone. I have others on whom I can rely to help me make wise and good choices.”

### **Introducing Maigret Lisee Fay: The Life and Times of a Cycle-Five Quarterlifer**

Inspired by a presentation of the quarterlife cycles of meaning that we made, Maigret wrote to us about her take on her quarterlife experiences. We were astounded by the insights she shared and

asked her permission to include her story in our book. Much to our delight, Maigret agreed. Unlike some of the other quarterlife portraits and vignettes we will share throughout, we do not filter Maigret through our own lenses as mentors for meaning-making. Instead, we want Maigret to speak for herself in this piece, with her own chosen title.

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### **Twenty-Seven: Exactly Where I Am Supposed to Be**

I'm sitting here thinking about what life is *supposed* to be. Then there's what it *is*. Where do they meet? Nobody has room for both. So we conform to the *supposed* to, or accept the *is*. Or, we balance in the middle. I AM the middle at 27. I am not settled, but not restless either. I'm not among the newlyweds with baby on the way, but I am also not feeling that my life is missing anything right now. I am exactly where I am supposed to be.

I offer my thoughts on acceptance, perfectionism, career, and reflection and how these play a role in, and contribute to, my quest for meaning as a quarterlifer. I need each of these components in order to create meaning in my life. My approaches to these allow me to maintain a feeling of contentment and centeredness, which ward off the pressures and uncertainties that plague many quarterlifers. In sharing this reflection, I hope to provide a different perspective for others in their quarterlife phase, and I hope to better understand myself.

### **Acceptance**

I believe Paul Tillich's words that "He who risks and fails can be forgiven. He who never risks and never fails is a failure in his whole being." This is why recently, I embraced the "control my own destiny" mentality over the "let go so things can fall into place" mentality.

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## 14 HELPING COLLEGE STUDENTS FIND PURPOSE

Long story short: I risked; I am forgiven; I am back to letting go. Accepting myself and forgiving myself for mistakes made has been a great source of meaning-making in my life. I like the person that I am, and I want to be present to my life. Before we speak of getting along with others, first we must get along with ourselves. I love what has come before by respecting my past. I love what is ahead by not obsessing over it. In being happy within myself, I can enjoy life and not be constantly searching for something else. To me, that is truly being open. The moments when I stop trying to figure it all out or come up with all of the answers are the times that I discover the most meaning and acceptance of my current place in life.

**Perfectionism**

The danger in giving in too much to perfectionism in my quarterlife, when everything seems to be “up in the air” already, is that I will miss out on living life and celebrating my successes. I think perfectionism could also cause me to miss out on learning lessons from my mistakes. If I am too caught up in trying to “avoid messes” then I lose time for appreciating the moment. In his *Confession*, Leo Tolstoy describes his battle with perfectionism. He says, “The starting point of it all was, of course, moral perfection, but this was soon replaced by a belief in overall perfection . . . a desire to be better in the eyes of other people. And this effort . . . was very quickly displaced by a longing to be . . . more renowned, more important, wealthier than others.” Tolstoy became so consumed with being perfect and being seen as perfect by others, that his values shifted. His life was centered on an unattainable goal and dissatisfaction followed.

A little bit of perfectionism can be a good thing, but too much will stir up an already overflowing pot as a quarterlifer. I already have enough decisions to make about how I want to live my life and how I want to develop the meaning in my life; I do not need the added pressure of trying to make that fit some unattainable mold determined by a source outside of myself. I will continue to make messes as I

navigate my life—a good life is full of many little messes, and sometimes in cleaning up the mess we find our meaning.

### Career and Calling

I used to have this fork. It came from a set of utensils made for toddlers. This was back in the '80s though, so children's utensils were still made of metal, just like their adult counterparts. Not all that plastic, rubbery, safety stuff we have now. I remember we had four each of forks, spoons, and butter knives. The handles were white, porcelain animals wearing blue overalls. The spoons were cats, the knives were bunnies, and the forks were dogs. One of the forks had accidentally gone through the dishwasher at some point. The steam and heat proved too much for the little puppy and he cracked. After the accident, his ear was gone along with half of his face. He was broken, fragile. The break had exposed the smooth, white insides of the porcelain. I remember caressing the place where the dog's skull would have been, had he been a living thing; I was very attached to this damaged fork. As a little girl, I *had* to be the one using that fork at dinner. I believed I could protect it and prove to my parents that it did not need to be thrown out. To me, it was just as good as all the others. I remember all of this vividly.

Even at such a young age, I had a sense of caring that I think I was born with. I had to care for the fragile, broken fork that no one else wanted. I don't think anyone taught me to love the *broken* and neglected, I think this was the part of me I brought into the world. Of course, this value of mine was reinforced and strengthened by my upbringing, but I had a natural inclination towards helping.

Now I find myself teaching children with autism as an interventionist. Maybe it was chance that brought me here, but as I learn more about my work, I learn more about my own values. In reading my agency's code of ethics for a previous course I took, I came across one principle that struck a chord in me. Our "Societal Obligation"

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states that “Employees . . . shall, through their endeavors and community affiliations, advance the understanding of the nature of . . . developmental disabilities. . . . They will strive for the destigmatization of these conditions, and for the amelioration of human suffering. They will work to the best of their abilities to contribute to the welfare of the community as a whole, and to promoting the dignity, self-determination, and worth of the people they serve.” This is what I do. When I read this to myself, I literally overflow with passion and drive. It is an incredible feeling that no words, no image I can conjure up could come close to portraying. You just have to trust me when I say *this means something to me*.

One of my keys to happiness and a meaningful life is doing a job that means something to me. The job I have found for myself really is a vocation. It is my “summons or strong inclination to a particular . . . course of action.” I feel compelled to do this work. If it is going to be what I spend the majority of my time doing, then I have to believe in it. I do this work to “become” more myself, not just to “acquire” a paycheck. That, combined with causing what I believe to be a positive impact on another person’s life, is all I really need to feel successful.

### **Reflection**

To truly create a meaning-filled life, I also make time for reflection. Knowing myself is necessary, especially when working intensively and directly with people, like individuals with autism where I will experience physically, emotionally and mentally draining days. Since this work matters to me, I don’t want to crack under the pressure. I want to be able to provide therapeutic support for a child no matter how I am feeling internally, while still validating and accepting my internal feelings at some point. This is why I value my ability to write about my life up to this point. Some may see it as self-indulgent, or without much of a point. However, writing my story allows me to better myself by getting to know what really matters to me and why. I apply this every day in my one-on-one work with people who are outside of the “mainstream.” I ask myself questions to make sure I am being

thoughtful in my meaning making. Friedrich Nietzsche said, "We only hear questions that we are able to answer." I think it is necessary to open yourself up to the questions that don't have answers. You might just find all the answers you need. You might just find yourself.

### **Exactly Where I Am Supposed to Be**

I believe we can lead several different lives within a lifetime, but only one life at a time. Whenever we choose to lead a certain life, we follow its particular path. This also means choosing *not* to lead other possible lives at that time. Being limited to one path at a time is really a great gift, because it allows us to fully enjoy the present moment. Some things I can plan, some are out of my hands, but I believe that I am exactly where I am supposed to be right now. Each day can bring a new struggle, or a new release. My definition and awareness of my own identity helps me to make the decisions of how I will walk each path I am presented with.

What sometimes makes these decisions challenging is the fact that quarterlifers today are in an unprecedented situation: we have all of the options in the world, but now there are *no* guidelines or rules for choosing the right path. Subsequently, I believe the need for trusted guidance and a support system are, in some ways, more important than at other transitional life stages. Those of us facing the transition from college life into the Real World need people to turn to who understand the plethora of options facing us. Having professors and professional mentors that are aware of the challenges facing quarterlifers and the common themes of people in this period of life, will help us to navigate our way to a more meaningful and fulfilling journey.

The problem, or "quarterlife crisis," really emerges when you cling too tightly to where your life is *supposed* to be or allow the negative thoughts about where your life *is* run rampant. Compassionate educators and mentors have the opportunity to help their quarterlife students be fulfilled by the *middle*.

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## What Cycle-Five Quarterlifers Can Teach Other Quarterlifers

Maigret's reflection offers the following lessons for quarterlifers:

- It is possible to live one's life whole. Integration and wholeness (the meaning of integrity) are achievable, if one is willing to work for it. At least for some quarterlifers, integrity need not be a pipe dream.
- It is possible for us to match our inner and outer lives, at least some of the time. For example, Maigret understands that her inner life always defines and shapes her outer life. Therefore she takes time out of her busy schedule to look for what we might call "inner" and "outer" narrative overlaps. For her, being in the world in a way that reflects her full humanity is more than just an abstract philosophical question. It is a very practical one.
- It is possible to find a close symmetry between our ideals and our realities. It is not necessary for ideals and realities always to be at war with one another. What we hold by way of our most praiseworthy convictions can be translated into actual commitments.
- Maigret demonstrates that one can live in a variety of sometimes conflicting roles and narratives without becoming schizophrenic or causing harm to others. She is working hard to achieve balance in her life.
- Maigret is finding a way to integrate both heart and head in her work without compromising either one—without putting blinders on her feelings or on her thinking. This is an ongoing struggle for all of us, because either our heads seem to want to control our hearts or vice versa. Maigret is seeking a wholeness of head and heart. She is rapidly becoming what we might call a "whole being."

## Two Potential Meaning-Making Moments

Quarterlife students like Maigret, representing all ages and stages, frequently come to us in our roles as faculty and staff, directly seeking our advice about the meaning of their lives. We sometimes look at them with bewilderment and helplessness, but more often with empathy and solidarity. How many of us in higher education have really taken the time to examine the meaning of our own lives? Most of us know that we were born, we live, love, and learn, and then we will die. All human beings, no matter their educational level, wonder if there is anything more to life than this “eternal recurrence,” the Hindu view that time repeats itself cyclically *ad infinitum*.

Approximately 120 billion human beings, since the beginning of human time, have lived this repetitive cycle (Dillard, 1999). Nobody escapes it. Few are remembered for long. One of the universal meaning questions that all of us ask in our own ways has to do with the inevitability of our eventual death and the short shelf life of others’ memories of us: will we be remembered even months or years after our death, let alone decades or centuries? Or will we merely melt into one enormous statistic as tens of billions of others have before us? Does any of this really matter?

One of our recent quarterlife students recently spoke to us about a philosophy professor of his (let us call him Dr. So-What-Now-What), with whom he had a love-hate relationship. He told us that this man, steeped in Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Buddhism, and Hinduism, always made the following comment over and over again to his classes, whenever students were arrogant enough to think that they had come up with a sensational new insight about the meaning of life: “Such as it always was. Such as it always is. And such as it always will be. So what? Now what?” Little did this student know that his philosophy professor was restating Schopenhauer: “The true philosophy of history lies in perceiving that, in all the endless changes and motley complexity of events, it is only

the self-same unchangeable being which is before us.” Perhaps his professor was even trying, in his own way, to provoke a thoughtful response from his students. Perhaps not. The student was never sure.

We believe this professor could help many of his Cycle-Two, Cycle-Three, and Cycle-Four quarterlife students to think in a different way about the meaning of history in their own lives by getting them to unpack, and discuss, Schopenhauer’s short narrative passage on time, change, and changelessness. At the very least, and even though this professor’s familiar riposte always manages to bring his students up short, he might be able to help quarterlife students to look deeper within themselves to accept their responsibility to make meaning of their lives, no matter how repetitive and predictable these lives might seem. If our developmental sequence of quarterlife questions is accurate, then all of our students, each in his or her own way, are ready to tackle this philosophy professor’s take on the meaning of history.

Whether intentionally or not, this professor creates meaning-making moments in his classroom, and we commend him for this. But for quarterlife students his words should not be left hanging; they are potential stimulants that cry out for continuing conversation, clarification, and interpretation. For example, quarterlifers at all stages of the developmental cycle need the professor’s help to think further about the following types of meaning-making questions: Is there a “true philosophy of history,” as Schopenhauer says? Does history have a purpose? A fate? A design? Or is it all a matter of brute chance? Or is the “purpose” nothing more than some historian’s pet theory imposed on it? Why does Schopenhauer choose the words “motley” and “complexity” to describe historical events? Also, in what sense is there “only the self-same unchangeable being” before us? Do quarterlifers believe this? Why did Schopenhauer believe this? In other words, the philosophy professor could become a philosophical counselor, a meaning-making educator, if only for a little while.

Schopenhauer's philosophy of history raises universal questions for all of us, whether we are quarterlifers or not. We all need to come to terms with the fact that tens of billions of people have been born, lived, and died since the beginning of human time. Some of these 120 billion people lived life better, of course, and some lived it worse. Some died living; some lived dying. Some lived for the next life; some lived for the now. Some lived without a concern for meaning; some found it impossible to live without meaning.

The meaning of life's ceaseless ebb and flow is not for Dr. So-What-Now-What to assert for his students, of course. Nor is it for any of us to declare. This is each quarterlifer's task to discover for him- or herself. Therefore, as meaning-making educators, we must ask ourselves: how can we help each of our quarterlifers to understand and respond to such a large question, given where each might reside in their unique narratives of meaning? How can we cut it down to size? We think quarterlifers are more than ready to consider questions like these. In fact, we believe that this entire generation is capable of responding to such questions, at all points throughout their years of meaning-making. It is our responsibility to know which quarterlife sequence each of our students is living in and then be ready to ask them the appropriate questions, just as we have with Maigret, whose responses we read in an earlier section.

One more example will suffice. Another of our quarterlifers, a junior English major, remarked that he was more and more becoming a creature of rituals and routines. In the words of Victor Hugo, one of his favorite authors, whom he quoted frequently, he was trying to "recover the ground beneath my feet." He went on to say, in Hugo's words, that he did not want to become a "rock that is massive, haughty, and immobile" as he got older, had a family, became successful in a career, and accumulated possessions. Instead, he wanted to strive for *gelassenheit*, or "letting be." As we talked, Robert asked him what advice he might give to other quarterlifers like himself. He said: "Live and let live. Practice some generosity

toward others, especially toward those whose choices, ideas, and lifestyles you dislike. Let go, and let be. Enjoy. In the end, it's all a matter of taste and temperament anyway, right?" In many ways, Maigret in the previous section would agree, even though she might choose to live these responses in a different way—through service to others.

It was clear to us that this student's comments were an outgrowth of the quarterlife meaning-making cycle in which he lived. Hugo spoke directly to many of his Cycle-Three and Cycle-Four fears. Equally clear to us, his comments also confirmed the fact that we are all more alike than not, even though our individual stories, phases, and stages are singular. We all have a need to tell our stories in our own special ways and to have others tell theirs as well. What binds us all together is the universality of our questions, the overlaps in our stories of meaning, and the commonality of our psychobiological needs. What sometimes separates us, though, are the unique, age- and sequence-related stories we fashion in order to deal with our particular cries for meaning. But this separation need not resign us to a life of isolation and loneliness. We tell our stories of meaning, as do most other quarterlifers, to reach across the terrifying chasm of meaninglessness and separation to make contact with others like us.

Robert often says this to his classes at the beginning of a new semester:

I make the assumption that each of us is all about discovering and making meanings that will sustain us in the days and years ahead. Let us, therefore, agree that your meanings may not work for me and vice versa. Therefore, please resist the temptation to foist your "successful" formula for finding the keys to your existence on me, and I will promise to return the favor. Meanwhile, whenever it is necessary during our time with one another, let us agree to huddle together within the protective cocoon of

our mutual humanity for the comfort and affirmation we need when things go dismally wrong, or for that matter, ecstatically right. Be willing to share your meanings with the rest of us, and we will do the same with you. Beyond this, we cannot, indeed, dare not, go.

Finally, here is what Dr. So-What-Now-What might have said to that student to draw out his thoughts regarding Schopenhauer's thesis of eternal recurrence. Granted that we are born. We live. We love. We learn. We get old. We die. Do you think there is anything more? Does anything really change? Or is *everything* change? Do we read the meaning of our lives from the past to the present, or from the present to the past, or from the present to the future? How do you read the meaning of your life up to the present time? Are we living in fast or slow motion? What speed are you living in? Is it all about "infinite recurrence"—Bill Murray's *Groundhog Day*, over and over, and then it's just beginning once more? Or is it only about the "eternal now," past and future beside the point, the present moment all there is—never duplicable, no facsimiles, be here in the moment a la Ram Dass, nothing more, nothing less? Finally, do you think Philo was right centuries ago when he said that the "true name of eternity is Today." What do you think he meant by that comment?

### **How One Quarterlifer Created Meaning in a Seminar**

What follows is the personal statement of a quarterlife student, Meredith Long, after taking a semester-long course with Robert. We reproduce this personal reflection because it demonstrates well two points: first, most quarterlifers, if given a chance, are willing to pursue the meaning-making project with great intensity and enthusiasm; second, quarterlifers experience the meaning-making project in such different ways. This quarterlifer starts her reflection with a quote from one of the authors she read during the term.

The point of non-vocational higher education is, instead, to help students realize that they can reshape themselves—they can rework the self-image foisted on them by their past, the self image that makes them competent citizens, into a new self-image, one that they themselves have helped to create (Rorty, 1999, p. 118).

For me, this statement by Rorty more than adequately describes my experience in this course. I have been introduced to many new perspectives, and have questioned, refined, and redefined many of my own. It was refreshing to be able to converse so freely with fellow “philosophers.” I have learned much about myself, my fellow classmates, and my teacher through the sharing of our personal narratives. It seems amazing to me that twenty or so perfect strangers could grow so close in such a short amount of time. It just goes to show that we all have more in common than we might realize.

I would say that, according to Nel Noddings (1995), in a way, we are all existentialists in that “existentialists often choose stories rather than argumentation as their mode of communication. They do this because they believe that life is not the unfolding of a logical plan; one cannot argue from trustworthy premises what a life should be like or how it should be lived. Rather, meaning is created as we live our lives reflectively. Stories give us accounts of the human struggle for meaning. They inspire and frighten us. They tell us how we might be—for better or worse—if we choose to act this way or that” (p. 62).

I believe this proof-text from Noddings beautifully sums up what we have accomplished together this semester. In the beginning of the semester, we were introduced to the “art” of moral conversation and scholarly personal narrative writing. Both individually and collectively we reflected on readings, conversations, and personal stories, and then we attempted to create meaning on both a personal and communal level. Our classroom served as our own community, within which we were able to create a safe haven, where the free flow of ideas and sharing of personal experiences were encouraged and

supported. We were able to share personal accounts of our own struggle for meaning, free from judgment. At times I was inspired, at others deeply saddened, and others still, surprised by how much my own narrative overlapped with those of some of my classmates.

I know I make meaning in my daily life by simply appreciating the fact that I am here. I am lucky because I have people around me whom I deeply love and who support me. I am passionate about the career I am pursuing. I am in touch with my spirituality most when I am outside, surfing, snowboarding, riding my bike, or hiking with my dog. The way in which my mind and body work together in harmony centers me. I feel at peace. I know that there is pain and suffering in the world. Sometimes things seem unfair and don't make sense to us. It is during these times I believe it is most important to connect with others and to live reflectively.

I am not sure I believe in God in the traditional sense or as an ultimate meaning of life, but I do believe in living the best way I know how. I believe in living with passion and authenticity, helping others when I can, enjoying the things I love to do, seeing the world, experiencing different cultures, being healthy in a way that exercises and enriches my mind, body, and soul. I believe in having the courage and honesty to take my life for what I believe it to be, and to make the most of it each day. I will continue to question myself and the world around me as well as share my experiences with others in hopes that they will, in turn, share theirs with me. I believe this process is necessary in order to continue to develop my own life-narrative. Thank you for everything.

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### **From Quarterlife Questions to Meaning for a Lifetime**

For Robbins and Wilner (2001), the quarterlife years, beginning around age twenty, are full of questions that poise emerging adults on the precipice of change. Responsibility. Relationships. Definitions

of success. Careers. Values and beliefs. All of these seem to be up for grabs as adolescence begins to give way to adulthood. The old ways of thinking, sensing, feeling, and believing fall away, and college students attempt to cobble together new ways that will carry them into the next stage of their lives. The feeling of crisis, Robbins and Wilner point out, occurs when the old ways have crumbled, but nothing substantial has risen to take their place.

By the time traditional-aged college students receive their baccalaureate diplomas, they will have been in school for sixteen to eighteen consecutive years. For many of them, graduation day represents the tremendous pride of accomplishment alongside the crippling fear of the unknown. To the best of their recollection, they have never *not* been students. To the best of their recollection, September means a return to school, a return to a comfortable way of life. Whether they have firm post-graduation plans or not, many students panic at the thought of entering the world that lies vast and mysterious before them. The rules change after college, and they are not sure whether they know the new game.

In the next chapter, we examine two philosophical approaches to meaning and meaning-making—existentialism and post-modernism.