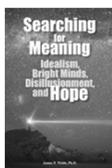


# ***Searching for Meaning:*** *Idealism, Bright Minds, Disillusionment, and* **Hope**

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## **Things We Know about Bright Children and Adults**

As they get older, they:

- are more likely to be idealists
- seek complexity and engage in metacognition
- are more likely to reach higher levels of moral development
- are more intense and more sensitive (Dabrowski OEs)
- see non-traditional ways of acting and being
- are likely to question or challenge tradition.
- search for consistency and “universal truths” in themselves and their environment
- are more likely to raise questions about life meaning and purpose
- these characteristics can make them more prone to disillusionment

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**“ The unexamined life is not worth living.”**

Socrates (469 - 399 BC) in Plato *Dialogues*, Apology

**But examining one’s life prompts a realization that much of our life is spent being involved in illusions where we try to keep up appearances.**

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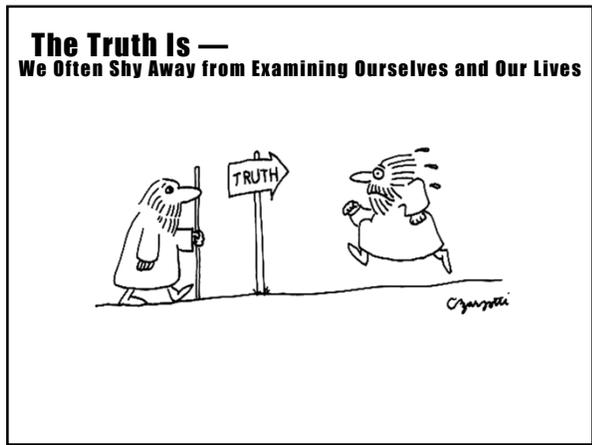
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As we gain more life experience, our perspectives shift. We are more likely to question the status quo, and we become disillusioned (*if we are not already*).

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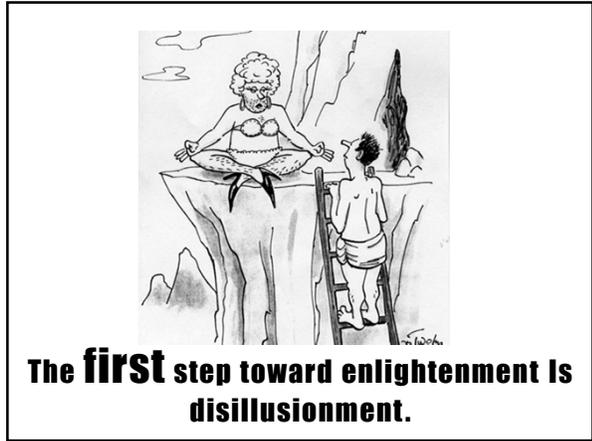
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Discontentment with self,  
Dissatisfaction with co-workers  
or profession,  
Marital expectations and  
communications,  
Expectations, and relationships  
with children

**...can be sources of disillusionment  
and depression.**

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And so we often create our own illusions,  
but...

**"It's very hard to keep your spirits up. You've  
got to keep selling yourself a bill of goods,  
and some people are better at lying to them  
selves than others. If you face reality too  
much, it kills you."**

~ Woody Allen

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**Illusions Provide Us Structure,  
but...**

Most illusions involve Schopenhauer's triplet:

1. What you have – material goods are transient
2. What you represent in the eyes of others – evanescent and makes us slaves to what others think (or appear to think)
3. What you are – this is what truly matters and gives inner equanimity.

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Bright minds are more likely to have higher expectations, to see how things might be, and to be lonely idealists.

How can we help them – *and ourselves* – find **Hope** amidst the disillusionment?

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### How Do People Make Sense of their World?

- Humans give the world a structure that we, ourselves, create.
- Humans have little tolerance for ambiguity and lack of closure. We feel compelled to search for consistency.
- We adopt “fictional finalisms” (e.g., there is a heaven for virtuous people and a hell for sinners)
- We prefer the comfort of certainty to the chaos of questioning.
- “All fantasies to fulfill illusions stem from anxieties.”
- We seek partners and groups who share our beliefs. This can lead to false, but reassuring, certainty.
  - Religious groups
  - Political groups
  - Causes groups

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### Thoughtful People often Have Particular Difficulties Making Sense of the World

- Brighter individuals are more driven to search for universal rules; they recognize the inconsistencies and hypocrisies.
- Thoughtful persons also recognize that:
  - Their ability to make changes in the world is very limited.
  - Their life is short.
  - Their idealistic concerns are shared by few others.
- We all have a zone of tolerance (*or intolerance*)
- We feel isolated because we recognize that no matter how close we become to others, a gap remains, and we are nonetheless alone.
- If we must die, if we must construct our own world, and if each of us ultimately is alone, then what meaning does life have?
- Such realization and concern can prompt existential angst and depression.

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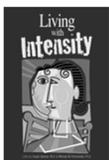
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**“Although disintegration is likely to result, with existential depression as a main component, this can be a ‘positive disintegration!’”**



~ Dabrowski

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### **How Does Existential Depression Develop?**

- We grow up in families that are predictable; we know the routines and the rules.
- We develop values based on “shoulds” and irrational beliefs. (Ellis & Harper)
- But others hurt us, and the hurts make us withdraw from others into ourselves. (Sullivan)
- As we move outside the family, we see that there are other ways of doing things and other ways of thinking.
- The brighter we are, the more likely we are to be aware of the inconsistencies and conflicts with our own family’s belief/value system.
- We become aware of time and space limitations, of chance and randomness.
- Conflict and tension result.

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- Many of us have an approach-avoidance conflict with our awareness.
- We want to be fair, correct, and consistent.
- We want to behave in consonant ways (to reduce cognitive dissonance – Festinger).
- Yet it is difficult to give up old traditions and habits, and the connectedness that they give us (price of violating traditions).
- Most of us vacillate, yet we experience depression because we can see the gap between how we might be and how we actually are or how the world should be.
- We also are angry at our powerlessness to make the changes that we see as needed.

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**Key Points about Existential Depression?**

- Humans get meaning in their lives not by any outside authority, but internally through their own choices, desires, and pursuits.
- Disillusionment can arise spontaneously from intellectual introspection about one's life and life meaning.
- Any significant transition – change of roles in family or work – can trigger introspection and a crisis in meaning.

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**Life Milestones Are Often  
Awakening Experiences**

- Estate planning
- Becoming an orphan
- Making a will
- Death of friends

Graduating

Birthdays

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**Key Points about Existential Depression?**

Existential depression is likely when a person comes face to face with issues of life, death, freedom, and the meaning and purpose of their life, and it often prompts a crisis.

The basic issues (“ultimate concerns”) of existence are:

- **Freedom**—in an existential sense, this refers to the absence of external structure— that is, humans do not enter a world that is inherently structured. We must give the world a structure, which we ourselves create. Thus, we create social customs and traditions, education, religion, governments, laws, etc.
- **Isolation**—no matter how close we become to another person, we will never completely know that person, and no one can fundamentally come to know us; a gap always remains, and we are therefore still alone.
- **Death**—an inevitable occurrence, and it is the opposite of existence as we know it.
- **Meaninglessness**—the fourth primary issue, stems from the first three. If we must die, if in our freedom we have to arbitrarily construct our own world, and if each of us is ultimately alone, then what absolute meaning does life have? The notion that existence is absurd – irrational in ways that cannot be explained or understood with words or concepts – was described by Kierkegaard and later expounded by Camus, Kafka, and Sartre.

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### Key Points about Existential Depression?

- Brighter children and adults are more prone to existential depression because of
  - Greater developmental potential, which allows them to see possibilities
  - Higher overexcitabilities (intensity and sensitivity)
  - The choices they make as they seek idealism
  - All three of these combine to increase the likelihood of positive disintegration that involves questions about existence and meaning.
- Once the existential “bell” is rung, you cannot *unring* it.
- What can we do about it? How do we cope with it?

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### Doesn't Success Help? What Is Success?

#### Academic?

- Presidential Scholars research (Kaufmann, 1992)
- Valedictorian research (Arnold, 1995)

Not necessarily...

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*Success is something that gives our lives **meaning.***

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**The Meaningful Things** (Reher, 2002)

- Personal relationships
- Altruism
- Religion and religious activities
- Creative activities
- Personal growth
- Meeting basic needs
- Financial security
- Leisure activities
- Personal achievement
- Leaving a legacy
- Enduring values or ideals
- Traditions and culture
- Social/political causes
- Humanistic concerns
- Hedonistic activities
- Material possessions
- A relationship with nature

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**Primary Tasks for Bright Adults**  
(which may initially make us uncomfortable)

**Know** yourself. You cannot truly accept and like yourself if you don't *know* what it is you are accepting and liking.

- Recognize the illusions in your life.
- How do you see yourself?
- How do others see you?
- Find the blind spots in your self-awareness.

**Johari's window can be a model...**

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**Johari's Window**  
(Luft & Ingham, 1955)

	Known to Self	Unknown to Self
Known to Others	<b>A</b> [Open]	<b>B</b> [Blind] Decrease our "blind spot" through feedback from others
Unknown to Others	<b>C</b> [Hidden] Decrease through self-disclosure	<b>D</b> [Unknown] Decrease through introspection

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### Examining Our Illusions

(which may initially make us uncomfortable)

- One way to know yourself is through the "Coat of Arms" exercise.
- This exercise will help you thoughtfully evaluate your current coat of arms, and you may decide to construct a new or different coat of arms.
- Start by using symbols for concepts or ideals that you want to emphasize in your life now.

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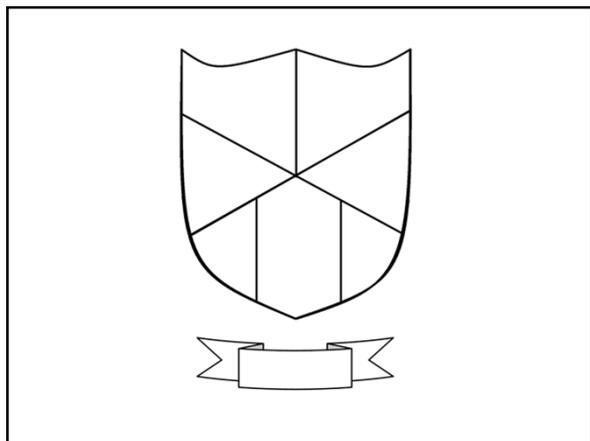
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### Your Personal Coat of Arms

- Title your shield by putting your name on the bottom of the page.
- In each section of your shield, put the following:
  - Think of *one word that describes you*, and draw a small picture to represent that word in one panel of the shield.
  - Draw a symbol to represent the *social or political cause* that you have done the most for during your lifetime.

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**Your Personal Coat of Arms** (continued)

- List *two things* you have been struggling to become better at, and write them in one panel of the shield.
- Draw a picture or note a *major fantasy* of what you yearn to do, or would do, if you had no restrictions.
- Select *three words* that you would like people to use to describe you, and write or symbolize them in one panel of the shield.
- Draw something to represent what has *caused the greatest change* in your way of living.
- Draw or symbolize the *most important person* in your life.

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**Your Personal Coat of Arms and Role Stripping**

- Now consider how central this coat of arms is in your daily life.
- How well does your shield help you cope with Schopenhauer's existential triplet regarding life meaning?

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**Role Stripping**

- Another very powerful exercise for knowing yourself is *role-stripping*.
- We have constructed our own "personal shield" to protect us and to represent our values
- Roles are a key part of our shield.
- Identify the *five most central roles* in your life (mother, son, office manager, teacher, civic leader, etc.), and write them on a piece of paper.

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### Role-Stripping

- Rank these roles from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most central to your life's activities
- Take 5 and consider how it structures and fits into your life. Now throw it away. Imagine that you no longer have it in your life. How is your life different? What adjustments will you need to make?
- Take role 4 and similarly think about how it structures and fits into your life. Now throw it away. You no longer have it in your life either. What is your life like now?

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### Role-Stripping

- Continue discarding roles, on at a time, until only one role is left. This is your central role., the one around which most of your life is focused. It is your core role.
- Now discard that role. Who are you without your roles? What of you is left? What value do you have?
- What would you be like without your roles. What value would you have?

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### Putting Ideals into Actions

- Your life focus should be on principles and values rather than illusions around tasks or people.
- You can expect that your development will involve periods of unsettling disintegration and reintegration as you move toward positive growth. This can be some of the hardest work you will ever do in your life, and you may want to seek professional help.
- Your journey will probably make you and others around you uncomfortable at times, and you may experience an approach-avoidance conflict.

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**Coping Styles**

- *Everyone needs a time-out*, and it is okay to give yourself permission to do so sometimes.
- Some ways are useful and productive, others are not so healthy though they may give temporary “quick fixes.”
- Less healthy strategies are usually superficial, temporary, or are ways of avoiding the real issues.
- We are entirely responsible for our own happiness or misery. It is up to each one of us to create the meaning which drives our life, whether it be through work, hobbies, charity, religion, relationships, offspring, family, or something else.

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**14 Not-So-Health Coping Styles that Foster Illusions**

- You can avoid being disillusioned if you just lower your expectations. Then you won't be disappointed.
- Trust only yourself because of past disillusionments. This will leave you very lonely, though.
- Knowing that you have “truth” and that your beliefs are the “correct” ones.
- Trying to control your life, or at least label it.
- Keeping busy to avoid thinking
- Actively choosing not to think about life matters
- Clinging to “things”
- Becoming narcissistic
- Learning to not care
- Numbing your mind
- Seeking novelty and adrenaline rushes
- Camouflaging to keep others from knowing you
- Withdrawal and detachment
- Anger

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**13 Healthier Coping Styles that Go Beyond Illusions**

- Creating your own life script
- Becoming involved in causes
- Using bibliotherapy and journaling for perspective
- Maintaining a sense of humor
- Touching and feeling connected
- Developing authentic relationships
- Compartmentalizing
- Letting go (*My Dinner with Andre*)
- Living in the present moment
- Learning optimism and resiliency
- Focusing on the continuity of generations
- Mentoring and teaching
- “Rippling” -- concentric circles of influence that affect others for years

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**Hope, Happiness, and Contentment**

- How can you also be happy, hopeful, and content?
- The Happiness Research – a part of Positive Psychology – indicates that it depends on choices you make in your thinking and behavior.
- “The 40% solution” – 50% of your happiness is genetic; 10% is situation; and 40% is your mental and behavioral approach.
- You *can* learn to manage your “self-talk” and your “life story.”
- Select a direction, including deciding on goals and values.

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**What to Take Home and Behaviors to Try**

- What meaning do you give your life? *Ultimately, you have to give your own life meaning.*
- *Accept* yourself as valuable separate from your roles and separate from others’ evaluations of you.
- Find sources to nurture yourself
- Increase your self-disclosure.
- Give empathy, even when you are frightened.
- Express your gratitude to someone to whom you have never before expressed it.

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**What to Take Home and Behaviors to Try**

- Nurture meaningful and supportive relationships with others
- Cultivate positive attitudes and emotions
  - Count your blessings
  - Practice acts of kindness, both random and systematic
  - Savor life’s joys, including momentary pleasures
  - Thank a mentor – in detail and, if possible, in person
  - Learn to forgive those who have disappointed or hurt or angered you
  - Take care of your body with proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise
- Accept that it is okay to create your own illusions and dreams.

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**Life Meaning**

- The people who need meaning the *most* are usually so busy seeking illusory achievements that they have no time to acquire or appreciate it.
- Without life meaning as an anchor, people are particularly at risk for disintegration and existential depression.
- Meaning comes from *authentic relations with others*, not just playing roles.
- What if you could start over? What would you do differently?
- What personal legacy will you be leaving?

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**You** have the freedom to create your own life, and you can strive toward idealism, regardless of disillusionments.

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“The reasonable man adapts to the world around him.  
The unreasonable man expects the world to adapt itself to him.  
Therefore, all progress is made by unreasonable men.”

~ George Bernard Shaw

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**Dreams**  
"Hold fast to dreams,  
for if dreams die,  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
  
Hold fast to dreams.  
For if dreams go,  
Life is a barren field  
Covered with snow."  
  
~ Langston Hughes

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