

# THE SUNNY NIHILIST

How a meaningless life can  
make you truly happy

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## Introduction

At the end of my street in Melbourne, Australia there is a sandwich board belonging to a store that, from what I can tell, sells candle-making ingredients. Each morning, it's updated with a motivational platitude – ‘Why carry the mountain when you could climb it?’ ‘You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.’ ‘Be the hero of your own story.’ Once it helpfully advised passers-by to ‘Do something great!’ A few years ago, that sandwich board advertised discounts, opening hours, and more traditionally candle-related news. But at some point, someone decided these stale practicalities were a waste of such cosmic space. The board needed to serve a more meaningful purpose. Now it regularly asks if today is the day you're going to change your life. Selling candle-making ingredients has become secondary. Meaning itself is now the product.

This business isn't alone in its shift of perspective. In recent years the search for meaning has been upgraded from a private pursuit to a very marketable action. Today, the promise of, and search for, meaning

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has been grafted onto almost every part of our lives. A product, service or experience is no longer judged simply on whether it's 'good' or 'bad', but whether or not it is, in some abstract way, 'meaningful'.

Maybe you don't have a sandwich board, maybe you have a podcast advert. The kind that talks about community, memory, nostalgia and values for two minutes before revealing it's talking about mortgage insurance. Or a baby food brand that suggests buying its pre-packaged, mass-marketed vegetable mush is a searing statement about the climate crisis.

When the candle store began experimenting with its rebrand, I was working in digital media at a company where meaning's skyrocketing currency was already becoming particularly apparent. One day I attended a meeting with some very smart copywriters as they brainstormed ways to communicate that a popular, delicious and totally vacuous ice cream brand *meant* something. The thinking was that if the consumer felt this ice cream was more than an ice cream, but embedded with some life-changing social or cultural value, they'd spend six dollars on it.

We kicked around a few ideas: maybe people could share defining personal moments that conveniently involved this delicious snack? Or we could ask influencers to tie it back to their wellness habits? After over an hour of brainstorming increasingly lofty and wonkily noble reasons to not only buy reconstituted skimmed milk on a stick, but really *experience* it, one of my

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co-workers snapped, exclaiming: ‘It’s just an ice cream! Just let it be an ice cream! Stop trying to make everything a *thing!*’

His suggestion wasn’t adhered to. The ice cream, like the sandwich board, continued on its journey to find meaning. But since then, whenever faced with an overly earnest bite of marketing, I find myself wondering, ‘Why *does* everything have to be a thing? Why *can’t* an ice cream just be an ice cream?’

This tendency to sew meaning into every piece of life isn’t a radically new habit. As a kid I was conscious of the apparent importance of figuring out what it all *meant*. In Sunday school, bible stories and crêpe paper crucifixes would regularly be interrupted by earnest adults leaning forward to ask, ‘What do *you* think Jesus’s mission is for mankind? Why are we all here?’ Gazing blankly back, I’d offer a well-worn generality like, ‘To be kind?’

The preoccupation with meaning continued when I got home. Between fart jokes and sibling pranks *Arthur* interrogated identity, *Rocko’s Modern Life* questioned the banality of suburban capitalism, *Hey Arnold* considered the imprint of family trauma, and even *Rugrats* – a show about the exploits of babies – grappled with the endless expanse of death. *The Simpsons* basically made the interrogation of existence a subplot.

Whether presented by an unpaid religious disciple or bathed in a soothing, Nickelodeon-orange glow, the implication was clear. The only way to fully enjoy and

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understand life was to spend every spare moment pondering the meaning of it.

The thing was, from what I could glean, it seemed pretty wild that I existed at all. The fact my parents decided to have sex on some random day in 1987, at the instant the sperm and egg that made me were feeling particularly energised, allowing me to win the lottery of conception, already seemed significant. Add to that the luck of surviving birth and the almost decade that followed. I wasn't sure why anyone needed to complicate things further; my very presence seemed complicated, and miraculous, enough.

But despite the impressive chaos surrounding us, parents, teachers and TV babies all seemed terrified by the idea of me facing a single meaningless moment. The irony was that despite their insistence otherwise, to me the pointlessness of life kind of seemed central to its appeal.

When I couldn't sleep, or felt scared and overwhelmed, I'd think about the notes in human history that had to align for me to occur. I'd picture an unknowable mass of violent singularities, tangles of matter, energy, space, gravity, quarks, protons and neutrons forming epochs and ecosystems over the past thirteen billion years or so. And attempt to comprehend all the brains that grew, teeth that shrank and spines that straightened to form a string of faceless ancestors, stretching from the Pleistocene to me. I was a nervous kid, prone to silent crying sessions in school bathrooms, but that swirly mess of

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barely understood science and history became a go-to refuge. It made me, and my problems, feel very small. I understood that amid the tangle of that luminous turmoil nothing I did or didn't do would ever really matter. With context reaffirmed, I'd exit the toilet stall feeling lighter, satisfied with the knowledge that my life was worthless, but I was lucky to have it.

Now I'll concede that despite the firmness of those tween convictions, the search for meaning is of course not an inherently bad thing. Our quest for it has driven civilisation forward. Quivering lovers promise each other that before their fateful meeting their lives were absent of it. Weary heroes are propelled by it in times of exhausting crisis. Fallen villains interrogate it and find their blackened hearts lightened. Foundational concepts of community, ethics, logic, morality, consciousness and equality were born from the investigation of it. The urge to wrestle with meaning has inspired too much art, literature and film to mention. A lot of the time, we're better for it.

Meaning, perhaps more than anything else, offers comfort. In his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl makes perhaps the most moving case for the value of meaning. Frankl, his first wife and parents were all interned in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. Throughout this time he concluded that a sense of meaning and purpose would help him to maintain his sanity and ultimately survive. As German philosopher

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Friedrich Nietzsche (more on him later) said, and Frankl often quoted, ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.’

Cognisant of that, I would suggest that meaning is most valuable when seen as an endpoint – a light on the horizon, to guide and orient us in times of crisis or doubt. In which case, even if there is no final payoff, answer or transcendent nirvana, the ongoing exploration of what we’re all doing here (and to each other) is an honourable pursuit. Few people get to the end of a period of deep, honest, private contemplation and think, *well that was a waste of a decade*.

Problems arise when the promises and expectations tied to meaning begin to eclipse the concept itself. Which I would argue is exactly where we find ourselves (and our ice creams) today. Somewhere along the line, that noble, deeply personal, perhaps lifelong quest began to feel more urgent and commodified. The pursuit of meaning shifted from an epic journey to a scavenger hunt. It’s not enough to try and locate purpose in love, family, work or religion (although readers beware, those areas hold their own traps). Now we’re being asked to find meaning in everything we do. From our morning coffee to our weekend laundry load, each event or chore needs to be optimised and elevated into a clear-eyed statement about existence.

We wake up to push notifications from horoscope apps assigning us a cosmic narrative before we have a chance to turn off our alarms. Daily newsletters flood

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our inboxes, prescribing never-ending tasks and goals to meditate over and mark as complete. In the shower we listen to podcasts about making this day matter, then towel off and cram in a few minutes of mindful journalling about what we managed to meaningfully achieve the day before. When we exercise – a formerly (and pleurably) mindless pursuit – we cue up playlists on slick apps designed to interrupt our solitude with a voice telling us what this exorcism of calories *really* means. And how with every step we're remaking ourselves and darting towards some unspecified new life that's only another 2.5 kilometres away.

I'd like to say that my Happy Meal-sized philosophical epiphanies buffered me from all that. For a while, my dedication to meaninglessness held steady – ruining many Sunday school classes, philosophy lectures and stoner conversations along the way. Whenever I felt sorry for myself or lost, I'd return to the swirling mass of random occurrences that had resulted in my birth and think, *well at least that all worked out*. My smallness, in the world and my own mind, offered a strange sense of peace. But, as it turns out, not even a lifelong devotee of pointlessness is able to totally avoid the deadly and decadent trap of meaning.

My entanglement in the rising commercial value of meaning moved from perplexing to toxic when I was working in that digital media job during the 2010s. Journalism is hard and expensive, and unfortunately the most deeply thought out, well researched, actually

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purposeful content often doesn't get read. It's a painful reality for editors and writers who are pulled between their dedication to the public good and the managers standing over them asking if anything will 'go viral' that week. But, as it turns out, there is an easy work-around embedded in our brains' aforementioned desire for enlightenment and a sense of purpose.

It's human to want to understand what all *this* actually means. It's also a lot of work. In the past writers and philosophers dedicated their lives to answering life's big questions. Henry David Thoreau spent years living mostly alone in the woods while writing *Walden*, his critique of the West's relationship with consumerism and the destruction of nature. Epicurus founded The Garden, a literal micro-society where his followers lived together in total pursuit of understanding and achieving happiness. Editors don't have that kind of time. But if you can figure out how to offer the valuable feeling of introspection and reward in, say, a four-minute read with a good Instagram-deliverable strategy, it's a much easier and more economic sell.

This is one of the reasons that in the past decade, you've probably observed as the internet's limitless expanse of digital space is colonised by masturbatory first-person narratives blindly assigning meaning to every animal, vegetable and mineral within a twenty-metre radius of a writer's desk. Recently a friend shared an article about what 'sitting' really means. Before I could reply in exasperation I remembered that I have

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written stagnant explorations on such enriching topics as exclamation marks, the class implications of fizzy drinks choices, and what Skeet Ulrich's Instagram says about intergenerational internet use.

These wafer-thin examinations drive clicks, audience growth, ad sales and social shares. Which is how they made their way onto the intellectual assembly line, and former explorations of meaning that once took years were replaced by 800-word hot takes that had to be filed before the newsletter went out at lunch.

To this day I can look at a half-dead pot plant and work out a way to argue that it's a statement about post-internet morality, or our pursuit of peace in an urban setting, or the terror of exiting a cultified projection of adolescence. Sure, it's not a skill that greatly benefits the human race, but it is a survival adaptation for a system and culture where meaning has become twisted into a form of currency that everyone is very keen to cash in on.

Our growing love of this fast-absorbing enlightenment is easy to make fun of. But it's also deeply understandable. While I've been sceptical since birth of taking things too seriously, there is no doubt that some things should be deeply interrogated. Just because your choice of luxury frozen dessert doesn't matter, isn't to say that nothing else does. As Frankl showed, meaning has the capacity to make the pain and confusion of life a little easier to bear.

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I was writing this book as the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests erupted around the world, and issues of race, violence and power began to be unpacked and disseminated on a scale most of us had never witnessed in our lifetime. Every person, every platform, every corporation (some better than others) became obsessed with trying to understand not just the news, but how these events informed and influenced all aspects of public and private life. It was a period when there was huge value in considering the meaning behind all things: what systems contributed to the life I have? How have I been helped while others were hindered? How do my daily choices, small and large, contribute to the health and safety of people I may never even meet?

That kind of interrogation is rewarding, transformative, and has a huge capacity for good. It's also intensely stressful and often painful. It rewrites history, and displaces us in our own understanding of morality, fairness and worth. Which is why, outside of the world-altering news moments that dominate social and traditional media and demand our attention, most of us avoid it. In its place, we prefer an easier form of evaluation, one built around the thing that is most familiar – ourselves.

Trying to assign extreme value to the most pointless parts of our lives feels great at first. That second cookie you're eating is a personal stand against misogynistic beauty standards. Posting a flattering photo of yourself

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to Instagram is an act of empowerment. A sleep-in is an affront to capitalist culture. Your sixth glass of wine and eventual hangover a fuck you to the cult of productivity. Doing nothing at all can quickly start to feel very important. But spend too much time in this space and things begin to distort: petty grievances become life-changing proceedings, we expand to take up space in our own brains that we probably don't deserve.

Over time, innocuous concepts like meaning and purpose turn corrosive as all that obsessive thought, fixation and study of our own minds and lives fails to return any sense of relief or clarity. In fact, it starts making a lot of us feel worse.

In my own life, I began to notice that as I abandoned my meditative childhood commitment to pointlessness, and participated in this hedonistic worship of purpose, things started to spiral. With meditation apps telling me today was *the* day, podcast hosts assuring me I was *the* one, and that damn sandwich board telling me this was *the* moment, I started to view my world from a new, warped perspective.

As meaning increasingly became the metric, I sought and assigned it to areas of my life that until a few years ago I would barely have given a second thought. Anything I wasn't able to immediately assign a point was deemed a waste of time and energy. I became obsessed with locating a reason in everything I did – worrying about how I spent my time, feeling guilty if I wasn't constantly involved in 'meaningful' pursuits.

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In many ways, my life during this period was going pretty well. I had a ‘cool job’ that I liked being asked about at parties, a nice partner, a cute apartment and enough money to have developed a preference for cloudy wine that tastes like sand. But rather than taking a breath, glancing around and considering how pleasant it all was, I was consumed by what it all *meant*.

The thing about meaning is that it’s most valuable when in short supply, and best served in a sea of pointlessness. In the past you might have hoped to have a handful of meaningful things in your life: a partner, a hobby, a social cause, even a job. They’d take up a lot of time, but be surrounded by other, non-meaningful (and hence less consuming) subjects. Remove the pointlessness, and the pressure starts to build. Leaving you constantly wondering: what’s the point, the aim, the benefit, the end goal of all this? What’s it adding to my life, my being, my identity? When those questions can’t be answered, any act (however pleasant) can start to feel like an ashen waste of time.

This experience wasn’t entirely internal. At work I noticed my performance was no longer judged on the completion and quality of tasks, but rather held up to an existential framework of what it all ‘meant’. Most of the time no one cared very much if the work was actually valuable or making the world a better place, rather that it fitted into the haphazard narrative of purpose we’d all sleep-walked into.

The language of fast-serve meaning and purpose

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is conspicuously pliable: it can be delivered via an ice cream advert, a sandwich board or a boss. Everyone gets behind it, believing it's about them, because it's about no one and nothing. It consumes huge amounts of our time and attention, but offers nothing more than a passing feeling that we're doing something worthwhile. The problem is, once you start believing in all this, it's hard to stop.

As a noisy anxiety began to swell inside me, I once again took up silently crying in bathroom stalls. Locked in a cubicle as a kid I'd comforted myself with the reminder that my problems (and I) didn't really matter. Facing my own smallness was a comfort. Now, I was overwhelmed by the apparent, albeit totally unexplained, importance of every single action. Sometimes I'd stare dead-eyed into the mirror muttering, 'This isn't the whole world, this isn't the whole world,' over and over like it was an incantation holding the roof up. Meaning hadn't expanded my mind, it had resulted in a self-obsession so complete I needed to literally remind myself I wasn't *actually* the physical centre of the universe.

I tried to speak to others about this inverted existential dread. And while we couldn't always explain it, there were a lot of us labouring under the same scramble of purpose, pain, stress and fast-acting fulfilment. It congealed in our bodies, introducing a creeping malaise of dissatisfaction, disappointment and displacement. But talking, reading and researching the mounting

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feeling only returned the same cyclical advice: to feel whole, we just needed to keep searching for the elusive point to our lives. Once located – through some combination of therapy, deep breathing, good lighting, motivational podcasts, imported foods and stretching in humid rooms – we'd be relieved. Our lives would be stamped 'meaningful'.

Obviously that point never emerged. The only thing I discovered was if you clench your jaw hard enough, your teeth will start to crack. Instead all the pressure, confusion, fear and exhaustion finally came to a head late one night while I was walking home from work. A few blocks from my home I began to feel lightheaded. The growing tension inside me seemed to be finally cutting off airflow. Doubled over, struggling to take a full breath, my heart raced, everything felt like such a *thing*. There was no quiet, pointless part of my life I could picture for a second to catch my breath.

Then it hit me. A realisation rang out so clearly that another person might wonder if it was divine intervention. 'Who cares, one day I'll be dead and no one will remember me anyway.'

The sense of relief was immediate. Straightening up I looked at the sky and thought, *I'm just a chunk of meat hurtling through space on a rock. Futile and meaningless.* My chest relaxed, my lungs inflated, for the first time in years the mist cleared. I thought of everything I cared about, stressed over, lay awake at night worrying for, and saw it for what it was – ultimately pointless. In

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a hundred years no one would give a shit about my job. No one would give a shit about me.

I was immediately transported back to my eight-year-old self, my brain felt clear and my body loose. I thought about the mass of matter, the billions of years, the unknowable bodies that had carried me to this space, and how I'd be washed away in the continually crashing wave of time and memory. The way I figured it, maybe a few people per generation are remembered for anything. And even then, maybe for a few hundred years if they're lucky. Eventually, the greatest achievements, the highest minds, the most meaningful moments are forgotten. And even if I did somehow manage to achieve anything of note, to be entangled in the public consciousness for a generation or two, I wouldn't be around to enjoy it. 'One day I'll be dead,' I repeated, smiling, as if I'd created the concept myself.

When I got home that night my dog greeted me at the door as usual. Reaching down to pick her up I stared at her little face and felt her chicken carcass of a body wiggling between my hands. 'Stevie, in the course of human history, we're probably equally valuable to the planet.' Viewed over a billion years, her daily schedule of finding sleeping spots of varying temperatures wasn't more or less noble than anything I'd ever do. Some day we'd both die, be buried or cremated, and return to an indistinguishable mineral state.

Everything was futile. Nothing meant anything or mattered. Just like that, my life was handed back to me.

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Or rather, the life I had as an eight-year-old. It was the most comforting realisation of my life. I'd discovered nihilism. Or rather, as I'd come to think of it, sunny nihilism.