

Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making

by Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray
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Years ago, with just a bit of teaching experience behind me, I was trying to decide whether or not to pursue education as a profession. A friend told me that if I decided on English teaching as a career path, I would need to regard English as “The Mystery.” I chose to continue teaching, and fifteen years later, I have reformulated his original cryptic words: *Existence is a mystery, and the work you choose must allow you to engage and explore this mystery, The Mystery*. My friend gave me a great gift on that day, and I have been unwrapping it ever since. It is still wrapped, as it always will be, but sometimes its essence shines through. Often this happens in the classroom, but it has not always been clear how such moments come about. *Helping College Students Find Purpose* by Robert C. Nash and Michele C. Murray is a book about the art of inviting the mystery of existence into the campus experience of students.

Nash and Murray describe a university campus on which students’ efforts to make meaning are central. They call upon each member of the campus community to support students in this endeavor, from faculty members, to administrators, to student affairs professionals. In its simplest form, “meaning,” for the authors, is the *why* for living (xxii). They acknowledge a tendency in education to load students with tasks without investing adequate time in identifying a meaningful context for the work. They call on university educators and administrators to take an active role in supporting students as they search for and create meaning in their lives, which are touched to some degree by personal and global stresses, challenges, and crises as well as existential questions and philosophical puzzles. They present a strong rationale for placing meaning-making in the center of the classroom as well as the campus itself. They support this with a range of practical approaches and specific recommendations, as well as real-world examples of implementation.

Throughout the book, their work is supported both by rich descriptions of students and interactions with them as well as by the written work of students themselves, all serving to ground the authors’ beliefs, assertions and recommendations in situations and

personalities that may well remind us of some of those in our own personal and professional lives. They have included numerous bulleted lists of practical recommendations, questions for students, defining concepts, and pithy guidelines, all of which serve to consolidate their material into actionable steps, portable concepts and digestible chunks.

The book's title, with its primary focus on purpose, is somewhat misleading. "Meaning" is present but only in the subtitle. One wonders if the decision for this title configuration belonged to the publisher. Meaning is central for Nash and Murray whereas purpose, while important, is definitely secondary. Indeed, they quote Marinoff (1999) as a means of drawing an important distinction: "Purpose is an ultimate object or end to be obtained. It is a goal. Meaning has to do with how you understand your life on an ongoing basis" (xx). It is this ongoing effort to understand life that Nash and Murray explore. As they state, "Without our meanings, our purposes are, sadly, meaningless" (xxi). The need to join purpose with meaning is one of several crucial linkages that emerge in the book. Others include merging students' past experience with current course material; balancing traditional research with inner "me-search"; and combining the exotelic (driven by external goals) with the autotelic (driven by internal goals). It is this last pair that is the basis for one of Nash and Murray's strongest indictments of higher education:

We think that one of the main reasons why so many students on our campuses get bored, burnt out, driven, angry and alienated and then look to drugs, sex, junk food, alcohol, violence, or internet addiction to fill their free time is because they have become excessively exotelic. Unfortunately, higher education today is all about producing exotelic graduates.... Too many students who attend our campuses today do so mainly to earn the credentials that will admit them to all-consuming careers. Sadly, such students are out of flow. They work for extrinsic rewards, and when these rewards lose their meaning, they look elsewhere for satisfaction. Too frequently, however, the "elsewhere" is not the best place for them to search for meaning. (188)

I have a memory of a teacher complaining openly about the educational system in the United States. Though I cannot recall how old I was, the content of the teacher's criticism remains clear. He said all of education was about preparing for the next step: kindergarten prepared children for elementary school, which prepared them for middle school, which prepared them for high school, which prepared them for college. I cannot, however, remember what he had to say beyond this. He was criticizing the system, but did he present an alternative? Nash and Murray do present an alternative, and they do so

eloquently and specifically. They lay the groundwork for this alternative in Part I, and in Part II, they present a practical array of tools, strategies and attitudes for facilitating meaning-making in the classroom.

Nash and Murray are aware that some will not accept their premises. Among the detractors are those who feel it is beyond the scope of faculty responsibility to work with students in the ways proposed by Nash and Murray; those who maintain that meaning itself is simply too illusive to pin down in any context; and those who feel meaning-making work is “soft” (xxviii). In reading through these criticisms, a question arose: What is the precise opposite of actively supporting students’ meaning-making in the classroom? This brings to mind an image of a lecture-style class, in which the instructor presents students with factual information. In such a class there is no opportunity for students to attempt to link the contents of the lecture to their lives in any way. This leads to another question: What if every educator endeavored to understand and implement the recommendations Nash and Murray put forward? It may be instructive to keep both of these questions in mind while considering their ideas.

In the first chapter of their book, Nash and Murray identify and describe the *quarterlife generation*, which can span the ages from seventeen to the mid-thirties (xviii); thus this includes all traditional university students as well as a portion of non-traditional students. The quarterlife generation is “a transitional period of profoundly unsettling philosophical and existential questions” (xviii). They also cite Cupitt (2005) when stating that the questions typified by the quarterlife generation cross all boundaries of ethnicity, sex and religion. This universality lends great support to the foundational premise Nash and Murray put forth: it is the role of university faculty and staff to support students in grappling with their most challenging questions, fears and uncertainties, which relate to such areas as finding a vocation, choosing a spiritual or religious path, maintaining healthy relationships, finding a mate, dealing with financial concerns, and discovering their adult identities.

In establishing the framework that undergirds their work in meaning-making, Nash and Murray highlight existentialism and postmodernism, stating that these two philosophical movements have adequately explored the “meaning of meaning.” They begin their presentation of existentialism with Frankl and provide a basic definition: there is no certainty in the universe outside of existence; therefore, the job of making meaning falls to the individual. They acknowledge the gloomy side of existentialism with its angst and isolation. Indeed, they describe an outwardly successful student, who is inwardly suffering an existential crisis. As a means of addressing such crises, they go on to present the optimistic side of existentialsim as described by Tilich, Buber and Yalom in addition to Frankl and others. They bring existentialism specifically into the context of higher

education with a list of “reconstructed principles,” among which is a question that addresses the core concern of the book:

Knowing that, in the end, each of us is called to make meaning, all of us on campus need to continually ask the following questions: how can we assist students to find the most effective ways to make the wisest choices in their own, and others’ best interest? How can we help young people find their own best wisdom paths? How can we encourage them to use their personal freedoms to become interdependent agents in the world, acting always with prudence, compassion, and responsibility toward others? (36)

Nash and Murray begin their presentation of postmodernism by dividing philosophers into two general categories: *realist* and *nominalist*. The former posits a knowable objective reality; the latter, with which postmodernism is aligned, claims such a reality does not exist, and therefore room must be made for a multiplicity of narratives. Postmodernists reject dominant cultural stories; the result is an opportunity to create meaning for oneself. The authors even provide an imaginary motto for the movement: “We made it all up—everything—lock, stock and barrel” (42). It is worth noting that in the conceptual absence of an objective reality “out there,” the classroom dynamic changes. The professor no longer speaks from a place of privileged knowing. After all, as Nash and Murray explain, *we’re making it all up*. It takes a certain kind of courage to commit to this sort of teaching because each discussion, each class period and each academic term will be something wholly unique.

In both existentialism and postmodernism, the incomprehensibility of the outside world is contrasted by the power of the individual as meaning-maker. Functionally, the reference of these philosophies in the book serves to clear the decks in preparation for the more practical information that follows in Part II.

For the final chapter of Part I, Nash and Murray move to discuss the matter of religion and spirituality, which may seem incongruent after a chapter on existentialism and postmodernism. However, the message that emerges is that religion and spirituality are choices each individual must make. Their implementation of existentialism and postmodernism encourages the individual to step away from preexisting overarching stories and to move inward to a place of personal meaning-making, where everyone is free to include the religio-spiritual narratives of their own choosing.

Nash and Murray conclude their book with individually written reflections, where readers learn of their religious and spiritual beliefs. Murray is Catholic, and Nash, not a Christian, aligns himself more with the Eastern traditions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. At

several points in the book, it seemed possible—even likely—that both authors were writing from a Christian perspective. It was refreshing to learn of their differences in this area because one of the strongest messages of the book relates to the need to accept and respect diversity in all forms: ethnic, cultural, philosophical, and those related to religio-spiritual beliefs and traditions. They express this clearly: “We strive to establish a communication process that promotes no hidden agendas, only the goal of fostering a pluralistic philosophy of religio-spirituality in stress-free settings throughout our campuses” (77). In this type of educational setting, religion is not simply an object of study; rather, students’ own ways of believing become part of the conversation.

The trend toward careerist education notwithstanding, Nash and Murray state with surprising frankness, “We believe strongly that the quest for meaning in life is what a genuine liberal education should be about” (60). For them, religio-spirituality is the essence of this quest across cultural, professional and temporal boundaries. It is in their chapter on religion and spirituality that they begin to address what emerges as a core strand in the book: the need to balance specific, career-oriented training with inquiries into the mysteries of existence that typically fall under the purview of philosophy and religion. They cite studies indicating that university students in the United States want this religio-spiritual component as part of their educational experiences, and they offer guidelines on how to encourage students to stretch their willingness to acknowledge, understand, respect, and even embrace beliefs that differ from their own by employing what Nash has termed the *art of mixed-belief capaciousness* (74).

They include specific suggestions on avoiding offense when discussing matters of religious belief as well as a list of questions for exploring the religio-spiritual domain. For instance:

- “Do you think there is a plan for human lives? Is there one for your life? If yes, where does the plan come from?”
- “Do you think your actions make any real difference to anyone or anything in the larger scheme of things? If yes, why? If no, why not?”
- “Will human life go on indefinitely, do you think, or will it ultimately end? If you don't care for this question, why not?” (79, 80)

Consider how such questions might impact a class of future doctors, economists, teachers, or corporate executives. As Nash and Murray point out, such concerns are universal; the orthodox believer and the atheist have equal access.

In *A Pedagogy of Constructivism: Deep-Meaning Learning*, the chapter that begins Part II of the book, Nash and Murray pick up and further develop the constructivist thread

they introduced in chapter 2 when describing postmodernism. They trace constructivism from Kant to Dewey to Piaget and to Bruner. They provide a useful basic description: constructivism encourages “learners to create meaning through direct experiential activity” (92). They highlight the need to see each student as a whole person, with preexisting experiences and beliefs. The constructivist educator attempts to help students understand and apply these in new contexts, relative to new information to create new meaning. Here again Nash and Murray respond to careerist education, calling on educators to help students link inner and outer worlds and “see the deep connections between subject matter, marketable skills, their personal values and their interest in contributing to the common good...” (87). They go on to make and explain several recommendations for developing constructivist settings on campus.

Each of the eleven recommendations is well supported with explanation, references to research and other writings, specific examples and additional lists of practical steps. Here is a sampling of their recommendations:

- “Realize that students are interpreting, as well as observing, ‘the outside world’ they are attempting to analyze, explain, and change” (98).
- “Constructivist educators understand that meaning-making is all about the students; we are there mainly to evoke, respond, inform, and clarify” (102).
- “Deep-meaning educators encourage students to do a great deal of personal narrative writing in order to convey their stories of meaning.” Making meaning is a function of being able to ‘me-search’ subjectively as well as to research objectively” (119).

Several commonalities, hallmarks of constructivism, are present among these. First, the student is central. Second, they acknowledge and respect different ways of seeing and interpreting. Third, there is a linking of inner and outer worlds.

In the next chapter, *Make Room for Meaning*, Nash and Murray provide practical advice for educators who are interested in helping students pursue a path of meaning-making. Here they offer the option of first reading *Resource A: Four Therapeutic Approaches to Meaning-Making* at the end of the book, where they introduce the therapeutic approaches on which recommendations in this chapter are based: logotherapy, narrative therapy, philosophical counseling and positive psychology.

Their recommendations are *tell stories*, *ask philosophical questions*, *create purposeful silence*, *tackle tough topics*, and *connect content and context*. For each of these meaning-making practices, Nash and Murray describe how to engage students in the same three contexts: inside the classroom, outside the classroom, and one-on-one with students. That

they cover each of these areas is a reminder that Nash and Murray do not limit their recommendations to the classroom. On the contrary, theirs are suggestions for the entire campus.

Nash and Murray provide detailed descriptions for each recommendation in this chapter. As well, they include illustrative vignettes of how they have, for example, asked philosophical questions of students, or put purposeful silence to use. They provide readers with useful tools and techniques, such “re-storying,” creating a positive, life-affirming story in place of an unhealthy one. They encourage educators to have discussions with students in the wake of tragedy and provide guidance for doing so. Importantly, they note that not all suggestions will work equally well for all educators or in all situations. They extend the invitation to be selective and to make personal adjustments and additions to the tools they describe.

The third chapter in Part II is *The Ethics of Meaning-Making*, which, amidst all the recommendations and invitations to explore meaning-making with university students, is a wise inclusion. Nash and Murray begin this chapter by recognizing the uncharted nature of teaching for meaning, for which there are at least two essential reasons. First, they point out that higher education has not typically supported or encouraged meaning-making on its campuses, which means those educators who chose to explore this area do so without the support and guidance of long-standing traditions. Second, because of the student-centered nature and reliance on constructivist principles, no educator can predict what will transpire in a given class session or in a one-on-one discussion with a student.

Many of the guidelines are very straightforward, such as:

- “Treat each person fairly, impartially and equitably.”
- “Do not foist personal beliefs on others.”
- “Understand that not everyone is ready to be a vulnerable meaning-maker; avoid imposing vulnerability on others” (167).

Other guidelines are more nuanced and may require some time to digest and implement, such as “know well how the interpersonal dynamics of projection, displacement, and transference affect both you and your students” (176). The need for such words of caution serves to remind readers that in teaching for meaning-making there are pitfalls and challenges that are rare in more traditional classroom settings.

One of the most significant and necessary points in this chapter has to do with educators’ knowing their limitations: “Unless you are a certified counselor or therapist, leave clinical diagnosis to the professionally competent” (173). Nash and Murray also advise educators to recognize and act upon the need recommend professional counseling

to students, and they provide examples of suggesting counseling to students and even walking with students to campus counseling centers.

The next chapter is *Meaning Maxims for Both Inside and Outside the Classroom*. If the chapter on ethics created a somber tone, this next one is likely to excite educators. Nash and Murray present a collection of maxims, or aphorisms, that they have used to stimulate meaning-making conversation or writing. Along with the aphorisms are numerous suggestions on how to incorporate them into classroom settings. One of these methods is asking students to create their own maxims. Nash and Murray report that maxims, in their brevity, appeal to younger learners, and from these nodes of condensed wisdom and imagery, fruitful discussions or writing can take place.

Nash refers to a collection of aphorisms by Porchia he often uses. Born in Italy, Porchia grew up in Argentina and worked as a gardener, work that inspired his writing:

- “If we could escape from our suffering altogether, and did so, where would we go outside them?”
- “The person who has seen everything empty itself is close to knowing what everything is filled with” (181).

Nash and Murray align their use of maxims to constructivist education by noting that there is no single correct interpretation, each maxim being a point of entry and departure.

The final chapter in the book, aside from the two resource sections, is *Two Personal Reflections for Our Readers*. It is here that Nash and Murray, by example, remind readers of the role meaning-making plays in the lives of educators. Moreover, these reflections demonstrate that meaning-making is by no means limited to the quarterlife generation; it is a hallmark of a life well lived, an ongoing process of knowing oneself.

Nash and Murray close their book with two resource sections. The first, *Resource A: Four Therapeutic Approaches to Meaning-Making*, which, by its very inclusion, may appear controversial because of the juxtaposition of education and therapy. They are aware of this, and in the introductory paragraph they state unequivocally that they are not suggesting educators attempt to act as therapists. They go on to explain the value of looking to humanistic forms of therapy for guidelines on bringing meaning-making into the classroom.

The four therapeutic forms are logotherapy, created by Viktor Frankl; narrative therapy; philosophical counseling, as put forward by Marinoff; and positive psychology. Nash and Murray describe each of these forms and provide examples from their teaching practices that illustrate how they can be employed to be of service to students

Nash and Murray close the book with Resource B: Crossover Pedagogy, in which they call upon faculty, staff, administration and student services professionals to work together to put meaning-making first on college campuses. They cite research that shows student engagement was higher than predicted on campuses with a “shared responsibility for educational quality and student success” (278). Finally, Nash and Murray describe their vision for overcoming obstacles that impede this kind of shared responsibility.

Helping College Students Find Purpose should be of interest to anyone working in higher education. I teach English to university students in Japan, and while I have no classes dedicated to the philosophy of meaning-making, I now see many opportunities to work with students in some of the ways suggested by Nash and Murray. As they write, “The challenge of working with students as they ponder life’s puzzles may draw on an educator’s academic training...but more often than not it relies on the educator’s humanity and willingness to mentor students as they wander down the road of meaning” (279).

