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CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS

THE THIRTY QUESTIONS EVERYONE MUST
ANSWER TO BUILD A MEANINGFUL LIFE



INTRODUCTION

Nobody Worries About the Kid Who Wants to Be an Accountant When They Grow Up

Early in high school, I made the declaration to my parents that I was going to pursue a career in Accounting or Finance. One key influence was seeing my older sister stressed out to get perfect grades to go to med school someday. I thought to myself: “there has to be a better way to navigate to the future without trying so hard.” Also, through experiencing the financial success of my parents and relatives in South Orange County and the comfort and respect it brought- I felt the pressure to be successful in the same way. Plus, after watching a Michael J. Fox character on the 80’s family sitcom *Family Ties* get all the laughs because he was remarkably mature, conservative, and focused on business success (he read the Wall Street Journal, so I started to read it, too)- I knew Accounting or Finance was the safest choice for my future. It made too much sense! When you’re a teenager growing up in my family, in my town, and you say out loud:

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“Gee whiz, when I grow up, I want to go into finance!” not only does nobody second guess you, but you get a ton of praise and admiration.

The grand plan I hatched for my life, which I spent the next seven years relentlessly focused on, came on a whim to relieve myself of stress and anxiety- and nobody challenged it. I look back now and wish someone had. Those seven years weren’t a waste- I earned a valuable college degree, I had six internships in accounting and finance, and I discovered later on through mentoring, self-reflection, and risky trial-and-error that a meaningful life for me was down a different path. The biggest regret I have is that I pursued success through the perspective of others rather than listen to my own inner voice.

Looking back, I have no regrets. But, the biggest critique I have is that I didn’t have the tools to construct that framework for myself until much later.

Here’s a sad reality: you can do well in school, get into a great school, do well there, get a well-paying job, but still miss out on building a meaningful life. It happens all the time. I bet you can think of a lot of people who fit that bill.

The school system is not set up for students to build a meaningful life. It’s a sprint to gain the knowledge necessary to pass tests and be ready for the academic challenges in college. There’s little room for reflection, integration, or deliberate self-awareness building. **You can be successful in school but not know yourself or have a clear picture of what a meaningful life could look like for yourself.** You can get accepted into the top universities but miss out on the essential parts of growing up well.

Taking a step back, two fundamental beliefs that drive me:

1. *Every kid has the inherent potential to be successful.*
2. *Every kid deserves the opportunity to construct a meaningful life for themselves.*

Neither of those will come to fruition without intentional design and conscious commitment. Every kid requires intervention and guidance- no student is successful on their own, no student will construct a meaningful life unless guided. That's where school, family, and the broader community come in. We have an opportunity and the responsibility to guide students to success and meaning for their lives. (And, yes, those two should always overlap.)

Self-reflection is the critical skill students need to construct a meaningful life for themselves. Unless and until we provide frequent opportunities to reflect on what they're learning about themselves and the world, they will be mindlessly going down a path of least resistance, whatever that may be for that student.

But what is a meaningful life?

Through years of research and work with tens of thousands of students, educators, and parents, we've developed a keen perspective- building a meaningful life *is the point*, but it's not what the system is currently designed for. It has to be intentionally constructed.

What is the goal? It starts with getting clear about what it looks like in regular, relatable terms. There are three pillars to the foundation of a meaningful life:

1. A clear **identity**
2. A compelling **purpose**

3. Authentic connection

Constructing a clear identity is the primary pursuit of adolescence. Most of the journey, though, is off track. Teenagers look to their peers and mainstream media to give them answers to who they are, what's most important, and what the world is all about. A clear identity consists of your fundamental beliefs, core values, and a clear picture of who you are and who you're not. It can't come from the outside, although finding real-life illustrations will help. You have to search inward and do the honest work of looking in the mirror and accepting what you see.

Finding a compelling purpose is also something that can't come from external sources. As the saying goes, if you don't find your purpose, you'll play a part in someone else's. A compelling purpose is the mixture of your unique talents, strengths, interests, energy, wiring, and irritation. What you have to offer in terms of your assets and capabilities, combined with a deep desire to solve a problem, will bring you to the epicenter of an inner drive that makes you come alive and fix your focus.

Building authentic relationships, of course, is central to a meaningful life. Can you imagine someone who's confident about their identity and purpose but does not have anyone to share life with? Can you picture someone who's deeply satisfied with their work yet lives each day without anyone to lean on?

The question then becomes: *how do you help young people discover their identity, find their purpose, and have the ingredients to build authentic relationships?* Can you teach someone these pillars like we would teach social studies or a language?

Unfortunately, these three pillars require a custom design for each person, making it much more challenging to scale a learning paradigm.

Who's to say what should be most important to someone? How do you tell people who they are and what's worth their life's investment? Even coming from a particularly formed philosophy or religious perspective, there are dynamics of passing those tenets and principles that must be discovered rather than told.

Through two decades of work with teenagers, college students, transitioning veterans, and corporate executives, we've learned that the only way that works to guide someone to clarity is to create the circumstances for them to discover their own answers to life's most important questions. It doesn't work to give answers- we have to ask the questions. And expect them to discover answers.

We've identified a series of questions for each pillar that will yield clarity, confidence, and the foundation for building a meaningful life if answered through a simple process over time. Here's our core premise: if kids can articulate their answers to these series of questions, we believe they will have a strong foundation for constructing a life that's both poised for success and prepared for meaning.

ANSWERS TO LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

We want the absolute best for our kids, don't we? Not only do we want them to build a life on their own someday and get off the payroll, but we also want them to be happy, to be safe, to be well-adjusted and good, kind people.

But how confident are you that your kids have what they need to make that a reality?

I remember the first time I felt like a real adult— it was when my wife (then girlfriend) and I went to a jewelry store to look into buying an

engagement ring. We were only 22 years old, and I was convinced that someone from the back of the store would confront us and ask why we thought we belonged there. We still felt like kids, but something shifted when we left the store with a diamond.

There were other significant moments, too: the first time I rented a car on my own, the first time I signed home loan documents, and the first time my wife had an ultrasound. Every moment was a weird feeling- I knew I was doing adult-like things, but inside I still felt like I was playing pretend.

That begs the question: when are you considered an adult?

- *Is it when you reach a certain age?*
- *Is it when you've graduated from high school? Or is it college?*
- *Are you an adult when you can pay your bills?*

The judicial system says you're an adult at 18, the car companies say you're an adult at 25, and the airlines say you're an adult at 2 (they make you pay for your own seat, at least).

But just because your age has crossed a threshold, does that mean you're a proper adult?

Once, while coaching a Little League baseball game for my eight-year-old son, an opposing coach (who looked like he was at least fifty) invited me to "meet me in the parking lot" after the game because he thought I unfairly influenced the fourteen-year-old umpire during a close play at the plate.

Another time I got an angry email from a parent whose kid went through a YouSchool session because I had emailed her a video her daughter made but didn't get permission from her daughter first. In all fairness, I had lost her daughter's email address but had explicitly told the

students I would send them the videos we made where they shared their ‘life story’ over a three-minute video. The girl was frustrated that I sent it directly to her parents because she wanted to be the one to send it. Her mom’s email to me had 17 paragraphs (I counted) filled with accusations, swear words, and threats of my reputation ruined if I ever “lied to another child” again.

You can be an adult according to your age or stage in life, but you can be far from healthy or well-adjusted. You can make plenty of money and own your own home and have your own kids, but still be far off from the kind of maturity or heart that most of us would agree defines a healthy, good person. I’m sure you have stories about people you know, too.

We’ve been paying a lot of attention over the past few years to learning about the process and developmental thresholds that define adulthood. We’ve worked up close with thousands of students in high school making life decisions about what to do after they graduate. We’ve journeyed alongside thousands of college students taking steps towards a career. We’ve coached hundreds of transitioning military to redesign their lives post-service. Ultimately, all those life stages are about growing up, something few people learn how to do specifically. Most people just go through the motions, try to live up to the expectations people have of someone at their age, and hope it all works out later.

We’ve been in the trenches with thousands of young people- hearing what’s on their minds, learning from their experiences, and watching the decisions they make.

We’ve been doing a lot of research, too, from some of the sharpest minds regarding human development:

- Dan McAdams and Narrative Identity Formation

- Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (The concentration camp survivor and psychotherapist who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*)
- Trauma-Informed Care / Practices from Peter Levine
- The Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework
- Dan Goleman's Emotional Intelligence work
- CASEL's five social-emotional competencies
- Dan Siegel's adolescent brain development and attachment theory

Combined with research and years of boots-on-the-ground experience, we've developed a unique, common-sense point of view. **What we need to do is redefine the point of growing up.**

Redefining adulthood means we have a different set of parameters to define success. We're using an outdated model. Right now, we define adulthood as an age or a stage. We evaluate preparedness based on academic outcomes and diplomas. We look at a person who's employed and make false assumptions. Just because you can conjugate some verbs, do high-level calculus, enlist in the military, or get to work on time doesn't mean you're living life to the fullest.

Everyone needs guiding, prompted questions, expecting to respond with a clear, convincing answer. It's not content or solutions they need-it's questions.

Students need to be challenged to answer life's most important questions. The best environment for them to answer them is simple: first, show them. Students need to have the adults invested in their lives demonstrate what authentic answers sound like. Teachers, parents, principals, and coaches go first. Next, they need some time and quiet space to think for themselves. After that, they need to share with their peers-both in disclosing their thoughts and hearing from their peers, they will be

able to both clarify and navigate to answers that most deeply resonate with themselves.

The process is simple. It's repeatable. Every parent, every teacher, every coach, and youth worker can learn how to lead it. The best way to show it is to engage in the work yourself.

You can already be an adult according to your age or stage in life, and it's the perfect time to figure it all out- yourself, the world, and your place in it. It's never too late. Right now could be your moment to answer life's most pressing questions, to do the difficult work of self-reflection and discovery to come up with your answers. I hope you receive this book as your invitation and roadmap to do just that.

Even more so, I hope that you not only engage in the guided prompts within these pages and do what kids need the most- adults in their lives who are modeling and demonstrating an authentic life and choosing to invest in theirs. But that you choose to move towards kids through personal relationships and ask them these questions. It might be awkward, but it will be worth it.

EXISTENTIAL VACUUM

Do you ever get 'The Sunday Blues'? It's that icky feeling we all sometimes get when we're feeling bored, unsettled, and stuck. Growing up, my sister and I called it 'that homesick feeling' we would sometimes get like we knew we weren't in a place where we belonged. Everyone gets the feeling. You get it, I get it, and our kids get it.

Students will fill the void they feel, but will they fill it well?

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian Neurologist and Psychiatrist (Medical Doctor and Psychiatrist) who was sent to Auschwitz and three other concentration camps during World War II because he was Jewish. He experienced terrible loss with the death of his parents and his wife. But, he survived and came out of the camps to write *A Man's Search For Meaning*, a global bestselling book describing his experiences of the atrocities. The book is filled with insights about why some people clung to hope and survived while others died.

Frankl developed a framework to support people through suffering and to help explain how all of life works. He says we all have a "will to meaning" in our lives- an innate drive to find a purpose and a reason for being. One of the key ways he proposed to help us build a meaningful life is to engage with our own 'existential vacuum.'

An existential vacuum is the feeling we all get of hopelessness, meaninglessness, a stuck-in-the-moment with no foresight for relief. It's a disconnection from creativity, from bonding to others, from opportunities to use your talents for the sake of someone else.

Maybe you feel the existential vacuum on a Sunday afternoon when you think about going to work the next day. Perhaps it's on your commute home after spending all day in meetings that felt inefficient and repetitive. Or maybe it's in those rare moments of reflection when you hear about someone's death, and you wonder what kind of legacy you'll leave.

The existential vacuum is a feeling.

We all get it.

It's common to the human experience.

What does it feel like to you? Some say boredom. Others say loneliness. Or anxiety. Thoughts creep in: you don't have what it takes // you're all

alone // no one cares about you // nothing you do matters // this is too hard // this isn't the way it's supposed to be...

Where do you go when you feel it- what does it drive you to do? Entertainment? Social media? Work? Cleaning? Shaming yourself. Criticizing others? A review of your bank account or how many followers you have? Envy of others?

The temptation will always be to fill that void you feel with something that falls short of what you indeed desire. You'll be tempted to pursue:

- *Career Success.*
- *Respect from others.*
- *Products from Magnolia.*
- *Security.*
- *People thinking well and highly of you.*
- *Being busy.*
- *A higher degree.*
- *Cryptocurrency.*
- *Abs.*
- *Subway tile in your bathroom.*
- *The latest yoga pants.*
- *Running a sprint triathlon.*
- *A Tesla.*
- *A trip to Tulum.*
- *A scratch handicap.*

None of those accomplishments, products, experiences, or possessions will fill your life with meaning. They're distractions. And yet, most of what we pursue, search for on the internet, scroll through on Instagram, and invest in focuses on those trivial things. We model those pursuits to the next generation, too.

Adults feel the existential vacuum, and so do teenagers. Really, that's when the deeper questioning starts for most. Teens today are particularly prone to wondering what the point of life is all about.

They've been exposed to extraordinary events like financial crashes, political upheaval, a global pandemic, worsening racial tension, natural disasters, and rampant selfishness and immaturity from leaders. Sure, previous generations saw horrible global scenarios, too. But there's an edge out there that borders on collective nihilism. At least that's where the culture seems to be headed.

That is unless we can figure out a way to guide the next generation into deeper reflection and a wise framework for them to build their lives on faith, hope, and love.

As bold and audacious as it sounds, that's what we're trying to do through the YouSchool- give young people and the adults who care about them a roadmap for building a life that's deeply meaningful and practically relevant to bring good to the world.

In the meantime, I invite you to pay attention to your own existential vacuum. Here's what you can do to use that icky, empty feeling for your good:

- Understand it as an indicator. A prompt. A trigger. That feeling is trying to tell you something. It's trying to get your attention.
- Embrace it. Explore it. Befriend it. Be curious about it. Have a conversation with it.
- Make observations about it. Depersonalize the feeling as just something that comes and goes, like hunger or thirst.

- Talk with other people about it. Share the feeling you get with your friends. Talk about it with your kids.

The existential vacuum is an invitation, really. It's an invitation to take inventory of your life and the arc of your story. It's a reminder that there's something more, something more profound- and only that will truly satisfy your soul. Feeling lonely, empty, bored, or lost are the symptoms of a problem and indicate a more fitting, centered, and whole way to live.

THE OPTIONS FOR LIFE

Parents tell their children to pursue happiness. Later on, we'll explore together why telling your kids you want them to be happy can be so damaging and unhelpful. But, for now, let's explore the different options that are available for teens as they move forward in life because there are other, competing paths they need to choose, whether they're aware of them or not:

1. **The Survival Life:** some families have dealt with extraordinary circumstances- financial challenges, trouble with the law, health, traumatic and dangerous living environments, abuse, etc, that the imagination they share with the next generation is a life of survival. The primary emphasis is on taking care of yourself, getting a job to earn some money, staying safe, and getting out of harm's way.
2. **The Responsible Life:** many families communicate to their kids that the primary aim and most important expectation is for the next generation to act responsibly. That might look like taking over the family business, taking care of each other, taking care of the older generation, or fulfilling career expectations. If you want to do well in life, you need to do what's expected of you, pay

your bills, clean up your yard, and pay your taxes. Work is seen as an opportunity to fulfill expectations other people have of your potential.

3. **The Comfortable Life:** some families, especially those who generationally are moving their way up the economic ladder, stress the importance of creating a comfortable life and avoiding stress or headaches. Work is a means to purchasing power to prevent discomfort.
4. **The Happy Life:** this is confusing because it's so vague, but most families are hoping to prepare their kids for a happy life. Rarely defined, it usually lands in the ballpark of financial success, avoidance of conflict or strife, and the ability to take luxurious vacations and live in gated neighborhoods. Work is a means to provide for perks.
5. **The Fulfilling Life:** for parents who made mistakes in their life path, whether in career or marriage or otherwise, they often share a message with their kids to pursue fulfillment. Don't go after money or responsibility, they say. Make a run after a career and a lifestyle that makes you come alive and fulfills your passion. Work is a means to express yourself, your values, and your desires.
6. **The Meaningful Life:** the rarest of them all, this is the path that invites kids to participate in a cause or a mission bigger than themselves. It's an invitation to fight for something, to solve a problem, to contribute to the greater good, and to leave a legacy. It's a life that talks little about comfort or happiness or fulfillment, although the few that walk this path would say they're delighted and fulfilled- and far from comfortable. These are the kinds of

people who seem to get younger every year, continuously learning and growing and looking forward to ways to contribute each day.

When you look at those options, it's helpful to view them as a mirror to your own experiences and perspectives. What were you taught by the generation who raised you? What have you pursued? Most importantly, what have your kids been exposed to, and how could we shift their perspective if they haven't been shown what we hope for them?

In Part One of this book, we will start walking through the Critical Foundations for constructing a meaningful life. Thirty questions need to be answered by kids as they go through adolescence if you want them to obtain the self-awareness, confidence, and direction they need. These are questions that you ought to ask yourself, too. They remain open throughout life since they're questions rather than answers, ideas, or bullet points. These questions become vital for every new stage or season you enter to make the most informed decisions. Kids will watch you as you struggle to answer them and learn from you as you settle on answers that deeply resonate and provide value to your life.

In Part Two, we'll spend time thinking about this unique generation—their assets and liabilities, as well as what they need from parents and adults involved in their lives. We'll address what effective intervention looks like, in response to our decade working with students inside school systems and after school programs.

My hope is that you consider this book a workbook for you as much as it can be a curriculum guide for your work with students, whether as a parent, educator, or coach. This is the way life works best—together, on the journey, through engagement, humility, and courage.

