

MEANING MAKING



**8 Values That Drive
America's Newest
Generations**



Josh Packard, PhD, and Contributors

Springtide
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



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I owe many thanks to many people for the existence of this book.

First, and most importantly, I thank the young people who responded to our surveys, the young people who told us their stories in interviews, and the young people in our own lives—to whom this book is ultimately dedicated. The hope and motivation behind all the work we do at Springtide is to serve you. We undertake this service both by amplifying your voices, stories, and values, and by equipping the people and organizations in your life to serve you better.








Next, a note of gratitude for the organizations and examples highlighted throughout these pages. In a rapidly changing world, we set out to find and hold up new spaces that are emerging to meet the needs and encourage the values we hear young people expressing. These organizations—and the people who lead them—are on the cutting edge of care. We admire your work and hope to translate the spirit of your innovation so that others might follow your lead.

Finally, to the researchers, writers, editors, and designers who are responsible for each sentence, idea, data point, and detail: Ellen B. Koneck, head writer and editor; Jerry Ruff, former managing editor; Megan Bissell, head researcher; Jana N. Abdulkadir, social science research intern; and so many more. Books are always a team effort, and this was certainly true for this book. I especially want to thank Rabbi Elan Babchuck, a member of the Springtide Research Advisory Board and a role model in creative and expansive thinking in service of young people and others. We are grateful for your help, both providing feedback in the building of this book and for your eloquent and humbling words of introduction.

—Josh Packard, Executive Director



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FOREWORD

In my role at Glean Network, a think tank focused on developing and equipping innovators and entrepreneurs to imagine and develop the future of faith in America, I spend a lot of time looking at numbers. The think tank studies statistics, deciphers data, and ultimately tries to craft narratives that inspire hope and spark thoughtful action on the part of spiritual, business, and social impact leaders around the country. The American religious landscape is shifting so rapidly—the rate of disruption is only accelerating—and making sense of those shifts is the first step toward better serving the people behind those numbers.

One of the challenges of parsing these numbers, however, is that we must rely on the accepted labels and categories used by the researchers. For years I've listened to colleagues and friends refer to almost a third of the population in America as “nones.” Others focus on the “unaffiliated,” the “nonbelievers,” the “nonreligious.”

While these typologies might offer convenient and clean ways of understanding the world, they end up defining people by who and what they are *not*. What these labels gloss over is the humanity of each individual seeking to make meaning of an increasingly indecipherable world, to discover their purpose in life, and to feel known during a time of growing anonymity.

This book reminds us that we can do better. *Meaning Making* introduces us to people—*real people*—whose lived experiences and deepest yearnings paint vivid pictures that numbers and labels alone could never do. This approach allows humanity to tell the story about numbers—and not the other way around.

Meaning Making is an invitation for innovators in every sector—from tech to education to religion—to design around the deeply felt needs of our nation's youth. It invites entrepreneurs—from venture-backed to social to spiritual—to build on the solid foundation provided in these chapters.

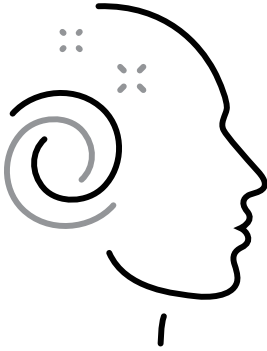


Meaning Making doesn't just outline these emerging opportunities to meet the needs of young people; it hands us a blueprint to build a world worthy of them. And while much of the work of innovation and entrepreneurship might rely on counting people, this book reminds us to make sure that those people count.

Rabbi Elan Babchuck, MBA

Founding Director, Glean Network

Director of Innovation, Clal



CHAPTER 8

MEANINGFUL

At age 13, Alec Gewirtz said he “came under the spell of certain voices, like [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, who were deeply curious about the largest questions of life, and how revelatory experiences could speak to these highest questions. I was unsure exactly where they fit into the religious landscape, but I was totally captivated by them.”

Alec said as he moved into high school and later college, he was seeing “profound emotional wounds in the people around me. I had the unavoidable sense that people were not living the deeply rewarding lives that they could be living.”

Alec himself came from what he described as a “nonreligious family. My parents were Jewish, but I had no bar mitzvah, because it conflicted with basketball practice. We had a Christmas tree.”

Similar to many young people we have surveyed, although Alec was not attached to such traditional institutional religious entities as a synagogue, church, or mosque, he found himself asking the sorts of questions those institutions have been wrestling with for millennia.



Alec enrolled at Princeton University as a religious studies major. “Religious organizations have historically met profound human needs, and nonreligious people in the present don’t have many parallel institutions to meet these same needs,” he explained. “To create such institutions, we need to study some of the past institutions that were so successful in doing so. Even if I can’t borrow comprehensively from them, I can take inspiration and concrete lessons from them.”

Alec noted many others at Princeton on a quest similar to his own: to find a convening space where they could engage in the meaningful conversations they were craving. “There is and always has been a large number of people who have not been in tune as regularly as they would like with the most profound aspects of human experience and want to have structures to make those experiences as rich and deeply meaningful as they could be,” he said.

Alec sensed a need for a nonreligious structure where he and his fellow students could wrestle with human experience at a deeper level. Not finding one, he set out to create one.

MEANING MAKING

Insights from Springtide Research

In this book, which is dedicated to exploring and unpacking the values that young people practice and—importantly—want the organizations they join to practice too, many instances of meaning making have surfaced.

- Any gesture that grasps for “more” is a practice of meaning making.
- Any impulse toward something beyond what’s simply expected, easy, or at the surface is a practice of meaning making.



- Any pursuit of the transcendent—whether in creative expression or commitments to causes, prayer, or personal relationships—is a practice of meaning making.

Each of the values highlighted in this book are specific instances of these gestures, impulses, and pursuits, and they all point to one overwhelming conclusion: Young people want meaningful lives.

Being accountable, inclusive, authentic, welcoming, impactful, relational, and growthful are all ways of adding meaning to a person's life and to the lives of others. They are virtues and values that call a person to something more real, more open, more thoughtful, and more considerate of the world around them. They are attempts to live a more purposeful, more *meaningful* life.

This capacity to grasp for what is beyond—to pursue virtue and practice values that contribute to the well-being of self and other—is a uniquely human capacity. Other chapters have demonstrated the way meaningfulness is embodied through accountable community and supportive inclusion. They have shown the way meaning making is lived out in creative self-expression and in opportunities for safe participation. This book has pointed out the way meaningfulness looks like environmental activism, social relationships, and the desire for constant growth.

But the value of meaningfulness is expressed in another way only hinted at in previous chapters. It is the explicit way that people pursue questions (and sometimes answers) about the nature of truth, beauty, goodness, justice, suffering, and so on. It is that philosophical impulse to ask *why* coupled with the human impulse to live out the answer. It is the way one person can transcend their particular experience by finding themselves bound up with the stories, ideas, and activities of others. This was the kind of meaning-making work Alec was determined to take up as he pursued life's big questions.





But this desire for significant meaning is not unique to Alec’s story. When Springtide surveyed young people about the value of meaningfulness in their lives, we found that 65% of respondents say it is important for organizations they participate in to provide opportunities for them to clarify, articulate, and act on their personal mission in life.



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When asked about current or future work, nearly 50% say that work is not worth doing if it has no meaning. More than 40% say they avoid activities that don’t mean anything to them, and that joining an organization is a waste of time if they don’t find meaning in its activities. To put it directly, the data are clear that if you are not helping young people find meaning in the ways they engage with your organization, you shouldn’t expect them to stick around for long . . . or to even show up in the first place.



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“ To put it directly, the data are clear that if you are not helping young people find meaning in the ways they engage with your organization, you shouldn’t expect them to stick around for long . . . or to even show up in the first place. ”

Additionally, over half (54%) of young people agree that it is important to live according to their faith values. This is a significant statistic that tells us that whatever young people believe in, they want to live out and practice it in their lives. In other words, they aren’t interested in rituals, routines, or work that isn’t rooted in or connected to some greater purpose. Significantly, 25% of young people Springtide surveyed feel as though their life rarely or never has meaning or purpose. That doesn’t mean they aren’t seeking it—it means they have needs that organizations, peers, and trusted adults can help them satisfy.

The examples that follow highlight and unpack the trend toward meaningfulness as a value for young people, including how certain individuals, organizations, and educational institutions are responding innovatively to meet this desire.

MAKING MEANING WITH MUSIC

Together with collaborator Rev. Sue Phillips, Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile produced the *How We Gather* report while students at Harvard Divinity School. This report highlights an emerging trend among millennials and young adults: a trend *toward* community and meaning making, which was an especially surprising finding against the backdrop of steady religious disaffiliation for the past decade.





They discovered and studied nontraditional spaces answering this call: workout gyms providing personal accountability, arts movements promoting social and personal transformation, grown-up summer camps as creative communities imbued with ritual and retreat. This report notes six recurring themes in the organizations they studied: community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, and accountability.

In the introduction to their report, the authors describe the way young people are forging something new. Despite checking the “none” box on quantitative surveys when it comes to religious practices, young people are seeking meaning. In fact . . .

when they say they are not looking for a faith community, [they] might mean they are not interested in belonging to an institution with religious creed as the threshold. However, they are decidedly looking for spirituality and community in combination, and feel they can't lead a meaningful life without it.

Ter Kuile, writing in *Pacific Standard* in 2019, breaks these categories and spaces down even further. He notes a statistic reported in June 2018 by *Vice*: “Eighty percent of these young people have a sense of spirituality, believing in some cosmic power, while seven in 10 are looking for spirituality but think organized religion is not relevant.” And then he asks the all-important question: How are young people finding meaning? How are they “caring for their souls?”

At this point, ter Kuile observes a fluid pattern that can and does pervade many different types of organizations and social gatherings: the way *music* can connect people and give meaning. “The most common ‘spiritual technology’ for connection is music,” he writes, noting that traditional institutions for meaning making and meaning giving, like organized religion, haven’t met young people’s expectations.

Drawing on a story from his own experience, he recalls a time when undergraduates in a dormitory he oversaw created a



space after a student died by suicide. “His friends wanted to process their emotions together. . . . They suggested bringing a guitar, and hosted a gathering of grieving—telling stories and singing together.”

Something about music transcends traditional boundaries: music has form and structure but also emotion and flexibility—meaning can be interpreted differently by each person, and even by the same person at different points in their life. Though music may not be the cause for gathering at your own organization, the principle this illustrates can apply broadly.

Young people are seeking meaningful experiences wherever they go. If one is not provided—as in the case of students grieving in the space of their dorms—they will create it. **Music is one of the tools anyone can use to make space for meaning, but there are others: technology, poetry, ritual, and more. Many of the examples and tips provided in this book are ways to bring meaning-making practices to spaces not always associated with that task.** Perhaps music can be incorporated into some practices at your organization. Alternatively, maybe you can use onboarding as a way of creating a sense of belonging and welcoming. Perhaps you can use social media as a medium for cultivating authentic relationships. Maybe your group can hold space for raising environmental consciousness: these are *all* ways of bringing meaning-making practices into your organization.



ACT >> ON THE DATA: Sixty-five percent of young people say it is important for organizations they participate in to provide opportunities for them to clarify, articulate, and act on their personal mission in life. Music has a particular kind of power for creating meaning and connecting communities. Can you imagine ways your organization might harness the power of music to help young people clarify their sense of purpose?





ASKING THE BIG QUESTIONS, LIVING THE BIG ANSWERS

In *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation*, Springtide reports a pattern noted by other researchers: young people are more isolated, disconnected, stressed, and lonely than ever before. Research for this book found that 25% of the young people surveyed feel as though their life rarely or never has meaning or purpose.

Whether or not they feel their life has meaning at the moment, young people are *seeking* meaning. As in the example of music, they are seeking all kinds of meaning *outside* conventional spaces like religion, family, or even work. **New organizations and groups are emerging to fill this void and to facilitate meaning-making practices in the lives of young people. Part of being an organization that helps young people cultivate meaning in their lives is understanding where a sense of meaning and purpose comes from.**

Dr. Laurie Santos, a professor of psychology at Yale University, teaches the most popular course in Yale's 319-year history. "While most large lectures at Yale don't exceed 600 students, Psychology and the Good Life had enrolled 1,182," a *Business Insider* article reports. This course, Psychology and the Good Life, focuses broadly on the practices and pitfalls of pursuing happiness.

Using brain and cognitive behavioral science, Santos invites students to recognize why the brain might *believe* that money, fame, a promotion, or a new gadget will make a person happy but why—in fact—the "next" thing always disappoints. In addition to learning why winning the lottery or an Olympic medal won't make a person ultimately happy, students also learn practices that actually can, scientifically and statistically, increase their happiness—in other words, habits that can help facilitate a sense of meaning and purpose, no matter the circumstances.



“ Why this universal fascination with the question of happiness? Because it captures one of the deepest and most common longings of the human heart. It is one of those questions that grounds and transcends individual human experience, and connects people to one another. ”

This course has been popular not only with students but people of all ages around the world. Santos has launched a podcast, *The Happiness Lab*, that unpacks these themes in conversation with other experts and practitioners. Yale offers a modified version of the original course on Coursera called The Science of Well-Being that anyone can take.

Why this universal fascination with the question of happiness? Because it captures one of the deepest and most common longings of the human heart. It is one of those questions that grounds and transcends individual human experience and connects people to one another. It's the same as the question of meaning and purpose—the assumption being that if you find one, you have the other. They are interchangeable. If the winning lottery ticket won't bring you meaning, purpose, and happiness, then what will?

A *New York Times* interview with Santos gets at some of the recurring themes that come up as antidotes to a sense of meaninglessness: “Students want to change, to be happier themselves, and to change the culture here on campus,” Dr. Santos said in an interview. “With one in four students at Yale taking it, if we see good habits, things like students showing more gratitude, procrastinating less, increasing social connections, we're actually seeding change in the school's culture.”





In other words, practicing many of the values highlighted in this book—accountability, social impact, authenticity, relationality—are all ways of finding meaning. The *Times* article continues, quoting Alannah Maynez, age 19: “In reality, a lot of us are anxious, stressed, unhappy, numb. . . . The fact that a class like this has such large interest speaks to how tired students are of numbing their emotions—both positive and negative—so they can focus on their work.”

It is clear just how urgently and desperately people, *especially* young people, are seeking these paths toward purpose. In 300 years of class offerings at a world-renowned institution, students are signing up in droves to read and discuss living a more meaningful life. But the practices that emerge out of this reading and discussing are not confined to the classroom. Gratitude, accountability, relationships, creativity—these are values any organization can and should take up to add meaning to their group.



ACT ON THE DATA: A quarter of young people report feeling that their life rarely or never has meaning. But young people—in fact, all people—seek meaning. Consider listening to *The Happiness Lab* podcast or signing up for The Science of Well-Being, a free course on Coursera, to learn more about how to add small, intentional practices to your organization to add meaning to your group and to the lives of young people around you.

CREATING MEANINGFUL SPACES

Alec Gewirtz, like his Princeton peers, wanted communal spaces where they might articulate and clarify ideas for acting on a personal mission in life. In his sophomore year, Alec started a listserv essay in the form of a Sunday letter sent out asking a



question that “people around me seemed to be grappling with,” regarding such topics as past friendships, or how to keep from growing apart from parents. The letter attracted 400 subscribers, with a 75% open rate. Alec sensed a need for “something bigger.”

He began Workshop No. 1 in response. Alec told *The Daily Princetonian* in 2018: “I started Workshop No. 1 because there wasn’t a venue on campus where people could reflect on how to build more fulfilling lives. People needed a space where they could step outside their weekly routines to recapture a sense of purpose, and for most students there wasn’t that venue.”

“People want guidance,” Alec told Springtide. “They want a framework in which they can address questions that inevitably arise in life, stories to situate those questions, principles to address. There aren’t attempts to do that on my radar. I say that as someone now very much slowly trying to ready myself to do something . . . more.”

“I know that wherever it takes me, it won’t take me in isolation. The need is so enormous; I can’t pretend to meet it even for one population by myself. Essentially, I see it as an artistic, intellectual, organizational, and community-building project to create institutions people so desperately want.”

Alec isn’t naïve about the challenges in creating such spaces. “I’m not equipped to do all of that. There is tremendous cultural fear of any new institutions in this space being somehow cult-like. There is lots to guard against in trying to create these institutions.

“I am a religion major because I think that I want to devote my life to creating values-based communities for religiously unaffiliated people of our generation,” Alec said.





“I don’t know where it’s going—it’s totally plausible that the sorts of ideas that I try to promote, the stories to bring those ideas to life can live alongside religious commitment. I’m not allergic to that possibility,” said Alec, who at the time of our interview was living in a L’Arche¹ community in Toronto that included five people with severe intellectual difficulties.

“I met with an evangelical pastor in the Midwest. His advice to me was not to be afraid about throwing up walls around what I’m doing. People do want to organize around identities. To create something sustainable, there needs to be some sort of identity, perhaps around lacking religious identification at least in part. That’s where I am for now. But what we promote may fit alongside people in more liberal religious communities. Maybe intergenerational efforts are needed.”

“I am approaching my reading, writing, living, with the goal of helping to meet, in whatever small way I can, these profound human needs.”

Our research confirms that Alec is on to something that aligns with the values of many young people such as himself. It’s clear that young people are drawn to be a part of groups and organizations that connect them to something larger than themselves. And if they have to create those organizations themselves, they will.

Young people want to see their story as bound up with the story of others, to see their work as meaningful, and they want their daily work to help them to clarify and act on their personal mission in the world. To put it in sociological terms, while the formal mission or tasks of an organization can be mundane—that is to say, “regular” or “not spiritual” in nature—it must in some way connect them to “something more.” It must help move them beyond themselves as individuals and engage the big questions that both transcend and ground individual experience.

¹ L’Arche is an international organization that brings people with and without intellectual disabilities together to live in community with one another.



BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Takeaways

1. Any gesture that grasps for “more” is a practice of meaning making. Any impulse toward something beyond what’s simply expected, easy, or at the surface is a practice of meaning making. Any pursuit of the transcendent—whether in creative expression or commitments to environmentalism, prayer, or personal relationships—is a practice of meaning making. Each of the values highlighted in this book are specific instances of these gestures, impulses, and pursuits.
2. Music is one of the tools anyone can use to make space for meaning, but there are others: technology, poetry, ritual, and more. Indeed, many of the examples and tips provided in this book are ways to bring meaning-making practices to spaces not always associated with that task.
3. New organizations and groups are emerging to fill a void and facilitate meaning-making practices in the lives of young people. And part of being an organization that helps young people cultivate meaning in their lives is understanding where a sense of meaning and purpose comes from.
4. Why this universal fascination with the question of happiness? Because it captures one of the deepest and most common longings of the human heart. It is one of those questions that grounds and transcends individual human experience and connects people to one another.





✓ Act on the Data

- ❑ Sixty-five percent of young people say it is important for organizations they participate in to provide opportunities for them to clarify, articulate, and act on their personal mission in life. Music has a particular kind of power for creating meaning and connecting communities. Can you imagine any ways your organization might harness the power of music to help young people clarify their sense of purpose?

- ❑ A quarter of young people report feeling that their life rarely or never has meaning. But young people—in fact, all people—seek meaning. Consider listening to *The Happiness Lab* podcast or signing up for The Science of Well-Being, a free course on Coursera, to learn more about how to add small, intentional practices to your organization to add meaning to your group and to the lives of young people around you.

Reflect on Your Experience

- If you've read all the chapters in this book, which stands out to you as the most immediately applicable for integrating into your organization's culture? If you haven't finished reading, which intrigues or intimidates you? Why do you think this is?

- How would you define the meaningful aspects of your life? What would you point to as practices, people, or organizations that bring meaning and purpose to your days? Once you have a sense of these things for yourself, invite others to reflect on this question and share your reflections as well.

- Have you, like Alec, ever felt like you had a need or desire but the outlet for it didn't yet exist? What did you do to meet the need you perceived in yourself or others at that time?



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Thurston, Angie, and Casper ter Kuile. *How We Gather*. This report, along with others in the series—*Care of Souls*, *Something More*, *Faithful*, and *December Gathering*—can be found on the website of the Sacred Design Lab.

