

THE SEARCH

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AND PAUL McCUSKER



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INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of unprecedented technological progress. In a relatively short time, we've seen our social, moral, and technological assumptions break away from their foundations. The engineers of this new reality offer us remarkable opportunities for personal happiness, fulfillment, and connectedness. Or so it would seem.

Yet, for all of the changes we've seen, people don't seem happier, more fulfilled, or better connected. We are still asking the same questions that have been asked by every generation since humans arrived on the scene. Who am I? Why do I exist? What is the point of my life?

Socrates observed that the unexamined life is not worth living. He provoked those who simply wanted to go with the flow, who reduced living to being comfortable. Socrates was steadfast in his pursuits. He knew there was more to life than his contemporaries seemed to believe. He was always questioning. He was constantly searching.

Life is more than comfort. Life is more than a checklist of accomplishments and activities. While such a list might help you fill out a college or job application, it does not fill up your heart. Every life is a story, and a life without a purpose is like a

story without a plot. Each of us needs, especially in moments of pain and hardship, to discover the purpose of our life.

As children we often asked “*why?*” Why do we seem to stop asking? This is the wisdom of Socrates; he knew that every life is a story in search of a plot. He was the radical one who never stopped asking *why*. And you can’t find the *why* without tackling those often provocative and uncomfortable questions. But once you abandon comfort-seeking and take up the larger and more interesting quest for purpose, a new horizon opens up before you.

Because of these questions, the Augustine Institute has created *The Search*. With the dynamic and insightful Chris Stefanick as our guide, *The Search* explores the answers to the core questions of life, with clarity, credibility, and a healthy dose of humor along the way.

Whether you’re wildly optimistic or a jaded skeptic, *The Search* will speak to you. You may be reassured by some parts, and challenged by others. Either way, you’ll find a lot to think about. And when all is said and done, life’s questions will demand to be answered.

Are you ready for *The Search*?

Tim Gray

President, The Augustine Institute

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

We're on a journey—the ultimate journey: *life*.

We experience both the mountaintops and the valleys; we take in the air all around us. But whether you're up at the top or down at the bottom, we are all on the same journey.

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself—as you speed through the years—where we're all going? What is this journey that begins the moment we were conceived? Does the road ahead consist of randomly wandering through time, or is there a destination? What's the point of the journey? What do I get out of this exhausting climb? And is death the journey's end, or the beginning?

This brings me to my first point . . .

The Unavoidable

You are going to die. (I know. That's a strange way to start a book about life, but stick with me here.) So, at least in this life, we know the journey ends.

No one gets out of here alive. Walk through a cemetery, with rows and rows of tombstones, and you'll see that everyone has that one thing in common. No matter how important that person was, he or she ends up six feet under with a slab of granite on top.

Every tombstone has an end date. Every life has a certain number of breaths that it gets to breathe. Right now, as you

read this sentence, you've given up one, maybe two. You don't know when that last one will come, but each one is taking you closer to your journey's end. And the reason that remembering that is the perfect launching pad into a book about life is that it forces us to look intently at the part of the tombstone we don't usually notice. It's the part that lies between the start and end dates: the dash. That's the journey that is your life. You are in your dash right now. And the fact that every dash on every tombstone has a hard stop is what makes this question so urgent: What are you doing with it? What do you want out of your dash?

What Do You Want?

Think about it. What do you want out of life? Where do you hope the journey takes you?

You could be like Anne. She thought how sweet life could be if she had money. At first, it was about how nice it would be to pay the bills without worrying. Then it was about having a lot of nice things, and then the *best* things, and now she has a grade-A, solid-gold stock portfolio that set her up for an amazing retirement, with the leisure time to do all her favorite activities. Skiing in Switzerland. Sun bathing on the Riviera. It's a life others envy, and she knows it. Is that what you want?

Maybe you're like Steve. He went for *power*. He wanted to be the boss. He wanted control. He didn't want to spend his life working for other people's dreams. He wanted other people to work for him. People respected him, even feared him, and it was ideal.

There's also Kim. She was the definition of the phrase *peak physical condition*. No one doubted her sense of personal achievement when it came to her body. And talk about the adrenaline rush she got when she pushed it to the extreme, whether she was cycling or climbing or on the ski runs. You knew from her expression that she felt *alive*. Sound familiar?

I could also talk about Rick, who immersed himself in the greatest sensory experiences he could find. Emotional and physical *snap*, *crackle*, and *pop* is what he wanted.

And on the other end of the spectrum was Jon. He went after enlightenment, striving to hit the pinnacle of knowledge and wisdom.

Will any of these things get you what you really want from life?

Or you might want something more meaningful. You want a relationship where you can love and be loved. You want intimacy, maybe a family. What could be better than being a devoted spouse and a loving parent?

Or maybe it's simply enough for you to make a difference in your world. You want to *matter*. You want to serve and to be recognized for it.

Am I getting close to where your heart is?

You might want all of the above, or maybe you don't even know what you want. But this much is true: *you want something*. Everyone does. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning—even if we can't quite put our finger on it.

SNAPSHOT

KS had it all: power, wealth, fame, health, sex—you name it. He was the rock star of his time. People came from all over the world to spend time with him. He wrote books of philosophy and poetry; he even built one of the most beautiful buildings imaginable. And yet, he declared it all as nothing more than egotistical emptiness. He questioned what mankind ever gained for all of its efforts, since generations pass and the world goes on. "All things are full of weariness," he wrote. We're never satisfied with what we have, and there is nothing new to be done that hasn't been done before. He sought wisdom, he searched for the

ultimate pleasures, he accumulated as much wealth as he could, he looked for satisfaction in his work and leisure, in the acclaim he received and in the simplest pleasures, but he still yearned for something else—something that his life couldn't give him. You can read his conclusions in a book called *Ecclesiastes*.¹

The Longing

It's sad to think that some people live out their entire lives without ever asking the question, "What do I want?" For them it's too hard. Maybe they're too busy, so the question seems like a luxury. Or maybe they're too let down by life, so to ask is to suffer disappointment, or it might open up a hole that can't be filled. So their "dash" passes like a quiet flash—going nowhere in particular.

There's a problem, though. We can avoid the question, but the *longing* doesn't go away. It's as unavoidable as death. And if we want the most we can get out of life, we have to stop running from it.

You and everybody who ever lived longs for something. You may try to satisfy it with things that ease the longing or go for things that don't work at all—like our friends, Anne, Steve, Kim, and Rick above. Not that there's anything inherently wrong with money, power, or pleasure (in the right time and place and for the right reasons), but the worst fate imaginable is when you get it all and, in the words of Bono, you still haven't found what you're looking for.

So what *are* you looking for?

¹ KS is King Solomon of Israel (born ca. 990; reigned ca. 962–922 BC). *Ecclesiastes*, found in the Old Testament of the Bible, is a testimony to the search for meaning found in every generation since the beginning of human thought. The statement "All things are full of weariness" can be found in *Ecclesiastes* chapter 1, verse 8.

SNAPSHOT

You know someone like Jeff. He was the guy who fired on all cylinders, in academics, in his social life, in his work. Everything he ever wanted to do, he did. The jobs he took were in his sweet spot. The woman he married was the wife of most men's dreams. The kids inherited all of their best attributes: looks, ambition, skills, and talent. Jeff called you one day and wanted to meet up at a local cafe, just to catch up. And you were puzzled when Jeff confessed about the ongoing emptiness he felt. For all he had, he still hadn't found that elusive thing he had been looking for. Maybe he was depressed, just a bad day—you don't know. But when you walked to your car, you had to wonder: *If it's true for a guy like Jeff, then what about the rest of us?*

Driven

If I may be so bold, let's put a name to it: happiness. That's it, in a single word. We are all driven by a desire to find happiness. If we're on a journey, it's the reason we're walking. And this idea is nothing new.

The philosopher Aristotle thought so. He considered happiness the end goal of life and of every action. It's what every human being aspires to have. The Dalai Lama would agree. So would Buddha. And Karl Marx. And Nietzsche. And Muhammad. And Thomas Jefferson. And Epicurus. And John Lennon. And Jesus. And the vast majority of philosophers, prophets, and poets. Though they might differ in explaining how that happiness can be found, they'd all agree that we all want it.

Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century French mathematician, said, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this

end. . . . The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man.”²

You want to be happy. And not only now, in this minute, but for the rest of the day, the month, the year, throughout your entire life, and beyond! That’s why most people throughout history have experienced a shared longing for heaven—the ultimate *happily ever after*.

Most of us work hard to find happiness without even knowing it’s what we’re looking for. The girl you met online might be the one to make you happy. That guy across the room could be the one. The next big achievement at the office or on the court, the launch of that business, the latest philosophy or self-help guru, that preacher, this new approach—if any of that is attractive, it’s because we’re attracted to our own happiness. “Please, God,” the unconscious prayer of every human heart petitions, “let me find happiness before my dash comes to an end.” You may even hope to have it forever.

This is the motive of every action of every human, and to continue Pascal’s quote, it’s even the motive of “those who hang themselves.” Yes, even when our steps are misguided, the thing that keeps us moving anywhere on this journey of life is the hope of arriving at happiness.

SNAPSHOT

AP had come up against a psychological, emotional, and spiritual wall. He was in his thirties, a fairly middle-class young man who had spent a lot of time studying the latest philosophical and moral thinking, debating, and drinking. He even fathered a child by his mistress, and he was tired

2 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees Vol. II, Section VII*, translated by W.F. Trotter. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 113. Originally written in 1660.

of the emptiness he felt. He couldn't change the things he didn't like about himself, and he couldn't find a way to satisfy the nagging feeling that there was more to life than he understood—more to him than he had experienced. The feeling became a physical pain. Did he have the will to pursue all of his questions to their true answers? He wrote that, one day, his "vileness" emerged from the "secret depths of [his] soul" and was piled up in front of him. A "mighty storm arose in [him], bringing a mighty rain of tears." He went off to a garden, flung himself under a tree and felt misery come out of the "bitter sorrow" of his heart. He cried out to the heavens, "How long, how long?" How long would he have to suffer being the unfulfilled and flawed person he knew he was?³

The desire for happiness is the foundation of everything you do on this journey of life. It's what you're *really* looking for in your pursuit of [*insert your longing here . . .*].

Recognizing and putting a name to your desire simplifies the journey a bit, doesn't it? But if happiness is the simple hope of every human life, then why are so many people unhappy?

Answering such a complex question seems impossible. But it isn't. There is an answer that can form the foundation for a happy life—even when life is hard, even when you fail at the many things you thought would make you happy, and even when you experience sadness. That one thing is how you see the journey of life itself. That's where faith comes in. Your faith is how you sum up the start date, dash, end date, and the mysterious space beyond the end date. That's the framework for

3 AP is Augustine, the son of Patricius (AD 354–430). Born in North Africa, his life fell on the line between the fall of the Roman Empire and the coming Middle Ages. He spent his younger years as a student of philosophy and religion, embracing various schools of thought at the time. Nothing satisfied him. The questions he asked and the answers he found can be read in his classic work *Confessions*. The quotes here come from *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 12, translated by F.J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 178. I'll talk more about him later.

everything you experience. The question is, Do you have the faith to look for—and find—happiness?

Faith and happiness? Yeah, I know. They seem like mutually exclusive concepts. What does one have to do with the other?

Read on.

Nones

There was a time when people would reach a crisis and turn to religion to find the answers. Or maybe it wasn't a crisis, but it was a time when they asked the ultimate questions about what gives life meaning. They did the party years in college and, when they got jobs, spouses, and kids, they looked for something a little more stable. Sometimes they would return to the church of their childhood.

But things have changed. The fastest-growing religious group in the Western world is the “nones,”⁴ the people who don't identify with any particular religion. In the United States, “nones” recently surpassed Roman Catholics as the highest percentage of the population. And more and more people tend to stay nones throughout life.

And yet, more and more people are unhappy.

Generation Z—those born in the middle of the 1990s to the middle of the second decade in the twenty-first century—are the most anxious, most depressed, most despairing generation in history. Studies show that they have lost a sense of purpose and meaning to life. It's no surprise. They may also be the most irreligious generation in history. How's that working for them?

We can pretend all we'd like that the questions that gnaw at every human heart about meaning, what on earth we're here for, and what happens when we die are irrelevant. But those questions have bothered us at our core throughout history,

⁴ See 2018 General Social Survey (by NORC at the University of Chicago), from data collected in 2017, and Pew Research Center surveys conducted December 4–18, 2017.

because we want to be happy, and we need good answers to those questions to achieve happiness. And these can't be just good answers that we made up for ourselves. That would be "make believe," and we know it. We need answers that are *real*.

SNAPSHOT

At the age of seventy-five, Pete Townsend is still trying to figure out who he is. As a founding member of the classic rock band The Who, Townsend created some of the most influential music in rock-and-roll. His musical *Tommy* was a pivot point in rock history. Yet, for all of the fame and acclaim, Townsend could not get a true sense of himself as a human being. In several interviews, he confessed his own confusion and his disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of the 1960s. He said that his generation hoped to create a sense of community through music, serving the spiritual needs of the audience, but admitted, "It didn't work out that way. We abandoned our parents' church, and we haven't replaced it with anything solid and substantial."⁵ He yearned to know, but could not come to any conclusions. Or maybe he didn't like the conclusions he came to.

5 David Marchese, "The Who's Pete Townsend Grapples with Rock's Legacy, and His Own Dark Past," *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 2019.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HUNGER GAME

For every need you have, there is something out there to fill it. If your stomach growls, it's because there's something called "food" to fill it. To have a need that can't be fulfilled would make no sense. If there were no such thing as food, that growling in your stomach would be a mystery, a source of frustration, and possibly the cruelest joke ever played on humans.

We know that every heart longs for happiness. Fulfillment. Life to the full. So, how do we get all that?

We can become rich, famous, and successful, but we all know stories of rich, famous, and successful people who are empty. Take the "27 Club," for instance—the list of actors and musicians who have died from suicide or overdose, all mysteriously at the age of twenty-seven. (Maybe that's about how long it takes to go from leaving your parents' home to the abyss that comes from looking for happiness in all the wrong places.) Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse—the list is painfully long if you Google it.

Like a child who reacts to hunger by eating a bag of candy, we look to fill the hole with the wrong things. We're relieved for a moment, and in pain afterward. It's worse when we don't realize that the thing we're really hungering for is happiness.

But we don't know how to get it. Is it any surprise when life's journey ends in ruin?

Jim Owens¹

All of us have appetites in this life, and many of those appetites are met pretty easily. We're hungry, we eat, and we're satisfied. We're thirsty, we drink, and we're satisfied. We want to achieve something, we do it, and we're satisfied. But we also have the sense that all the eating and the drinking, all the productivity in the world, does not satisfy us completely. We have an appetite for something in the very core of our being, which nothing in this world seems to satisfy. What will it take to have lasting happiness? If you knew, would you take it? If you could be happy forever, would you turn that down?

That hole inside of you wants to be filled. We looked at some of the ways you can fill it. But eventually, if you're completely honest, you realize there's something more to be found. If not, then why do so many people with wealth, fame, relationships, power, and influence commit suicide? How could they possibly annihilate themselves when they've achieved the very things a lot of people yearn to have? Why do statistics show that lottery winners often suffer from ruined lives after receiving their money? We see the carnage of wrecked relationships as people move from one to another, in search of that elusive fulfillment. Men and women in peak condition fall into depression when age catches up to them and their bodies no longer provide satisfaction. Every means of happiness we concoct for ourselves eventually reverses itself, or simply fades, or,

¹ Jim Owens is a professional counselor. His quotes come from interviews for *The Search* video series.

worse, intensifies in a never-ending cycle of need, satisfaction, and greater need.

What do you want? Why are you here? What's your place in the world? Even if you get everything you want, will you be happy?

SNAPSHOT

Jack seemed to have been born with a yearning to know and understand both the world around him and the world within him. He looked up to the best thinkers of his time, and he looked down on all those old-fashioned and outdated ideas and philosophies from the past. Then a war began. He had to march off to another country and fight. He lost friends he loved. He was wounded by a piece of shrapnel that would stay lodged in his chest most of his life. The experience caused him to double-check the merits of modern thinking. He thought about God, but couldn't accept that one existed—and even resented it for not existing. He threw himself into his work, studying literature to become a professor at a prestigious university. Yet, for all of his knowledge and efforts, he could not find the answers to the questions that constantly needed him. He believed they were out there somewhere. They had to be. Otherwise, what was the point?²

So, what does it all mean? And how can I possibly be *really* happy without those questions answered?

2 Jack is Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963), a scholar, professor at Oxford and Cambridge, and author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and works of science fiction, poetry, and essays. His own account of his search is *Surprised by Joy*.