

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Life Purpose

Let's define it.

### Short Horizons

Is what gets in the way.

### Urgent Project for Parents

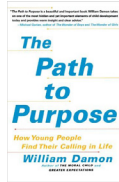
9 key things to consider.

### Entrepreneurial Spirit

Keys to cultivate.

### "You Can Do It!"

A worthy mantra for parents.



# The Path to Purpose

How Young People Find Their Calling in Life

BY WILLIAM DAMON · FREE PRESS © 2009 · 240 PAGES

"In my prior work, I had encountered the notion of purpose many times, but dimly and indirectly, as if through a telescope with an all-fitted lens. None of my earlier studies was about purpose per se; yet I now see that much of what I have been trying to understand for many years does in fact hinge on purpose. A study I conducted (with Anne Colby) of extraordinary moral commitment found that people who pursue noble purposes are filled with joy, despite the constant sacrifices that they feel called upon to make. In a subsequent series of studies (with Howard Gardner and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi) of men and women who have done socially valuable 'good work' in their careers, I was struck by how vividly these people were able to answer our questions about what they were trying to accomplish and why. An elevated purpose was always on their minds, driving their daily efforts. This purpose was their ultimate concern, essential to all their personal successes—it gave them energy; it gave them satisfaction when they accomplished their goals; and it gave them persistence when they ran into obstacles. ...

This work led me to examine how young people find their purposes in life. Do adolescents have purposes, and if so, how do they learn them? What kinds of purposes, in addition to those related to careers, are inspiring today's young? What happens when young people are unable to find any purpose at all to devote themselves to? The present book is the first account of the insights that I and my students have been gaining through our initial research into these questions."

~ William Damon from *The Path to Purpose*

*"How can I earn a living as a valued member of society and make a positive difference in the world? These are questions that, sooner or later, all young people must confront in order to make their most crucial life choices."*

~ William Damon

[William Damon](#) is a Professor at Stanford and one of the world's leading researchers on the science of morality and child development. (This is the third Note we've created on his great books. Check out [Noble Purpose](#) + [The Power of Ideals](#).)

In [The Power of Ideals](#), he profiled six "moral exemplars"—truly world-changing humans who embodied the best within us. (The sample included such luminaries as Nelson Mandela, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt and Dag Hammarskjöld.)

In this book, William offers us insight into how twelve remarkable young people have found and expressed their purpose—giving us insight into how we can help our children discover and express theirs.

Basically, it's a scientific look at Purpose by one of the world's leading developmental psychologists—a powerful look at how to cultivate purpose in our children (and, for that matter, ourselves) and why it's so important. It's fantastic. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump straight in!

## LET'S DEFINE "LIFE PURPOSE"

"The case that I make throughout this book is that finding a clear purpose in life is essential for their achievement of happiness and satisfaction in life, and that doing so is a good deal harder than it should be in our present-day cultural environment."

~ William Damon

"What exactly do I mean by a 'life purpose'? A purpose is an *ultimate concern*. It is the final answer to the question *Why?* *Why* are you doing this? *Why* is it important? A purpose is a deeper reason for the immediate goals and motives that drive most daily behavior.

Short-term desires come and go. A young person may desire a good grade on a test, a date to the prom, a cutting edge electronic PlayStation, a starting slot on the basketball team or admission to a prestigious college. These are desires; they reflect immediate aims that may or may not have longer-term significance. A purpose, by contrast, is an end in itself.

A person can change purposes, or add new ones, over the years; but it is in the nature of purposes to endure at least long enough that a serious commitment is made and some progress toward that aim is achieved. A purpose can organize an entire life, imparting not only meaning but also inspiration and motivation for ongoing learning and achievement."

Purpose.

It's the ULTIMATE CONCERN.

The *WHY?* behind what we do.

William argues persuasively that finding a clear purpose is an essential part of achieving the sense of flourishing that we hope our kids experience.

Here's how he describes the purposeful: "The *purposeful* are those who have found something meaningful to dedicate themselves to, who have sustained this interest over a period of time, and who express a clear sense of what they are trying to accomplish in the world and why. They have found a cause or ultimate goal that inspires their efforts from day to day and helps them fashion a coherent future agenda. They know what they want to accomplish and why, and they have taken concerted steps to achieve their ambitions."

That's the purposeful. The alternative?

He shares three: the *disengaged*, the *dreamers*, and the *dabblers*.

- The *disengaged* drift. They're not passionate about anything beyond themselves and their own enjoyment.
- The *dreamers* may aspire to create a life of meaning but they haven't grounded those dreams into a practical, realistic plan to bring it to fruition.
- The *dabblers* jump from thing to thing without sustained commitment—an essential aspect of being on purpose.

William tells us that, in his research, about 25% were disengaged; 25% were dreamers and 31% were dabblers. 20% met this description of being purposeful. (Yes, that adds up to 101% thanks to rounding.)

P.S. Keep this in mind: "To qualify as a worthy purpose, the *how* of a course of action, as well as its *why*, must be guided by a strong moral sense. Finding noble purpose means both devoting oneself to something worth doing *and* doing it in an honorable manner. For this reason, a telling way to distinguish between ignoble and noble purposes is to analyze whether both the means and the ends are honorable."

## WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF FINDING PURPOSE?

"The single greatest barrier to youngsters finding their paths to purpose is the fixation on the short horizons that infuses cultural messages sent to young people today. A popular culture celebrating quick results and showy achievements has displaced the traditional values of

*"We must recapture that longer and more enlightened view. As a revered international leader of an earlier era, Dag Hammarskjöld, once said, 'Only he who keeps his eyes fixed on the far horizon will find the right road.' It is our responsibility as adults in this uncertain, confusing, and increasingly cynical time to provide the younger generation with far-horizon guidance."*

~ William Damon

reflection and contemplation that once stood as the moral north star of human development and education. Instant mass communication transmits tales of highly envied people who have taken shortcuts to fame and fortune to every child with access to computers and televisions (and that amounts to just about every child in any industrial society). Among the most common formats for television shows at present are contests in which ordinary young people rocket to fame or fortune in a matter of minutes, days, or, at most, weeks. The appeal of quick material success is amplified by current economic conditions, which have led to unparalleled abundance and affluence for some, fierce global competitiveness for others, and the specter of deprivation for many others."

Want to know the biggest obstacle to kids (and the rest of us) finding our purpose?

Short horizons.

Note: That passage was written in 2008. Pre-Instagram, Twitter and Facebook taking over the world. Our culture's obsession with the "short horizon" is unquestionably worse today.

Why are these short horizons so deleterious?

Because *"any success in life, from the mundane to the spiritual, requires sustained effort."*

If we're constantly (!) bombarded with story after story of fame and fortune achieved in minutes, it erodes the sense of sustained effort required while installing a false sense of entitlement.

And...

It's not just the *speed* of achievement, it's the type of goals that are sought after as well. It's not like these media heroes are optimizing and actualizing in service to their families and world. They're getting rich and famous.

Of course, get-rich-and-famous-quick stories are not the bedrock on which lives of deep purpose and meaning are built.

Now for a quick look at how to bring purpose into our family's lives.

## THE URGENT PROJECT FOR PARENTS TODAY (← PURPOSE)

"I am entirely confident in asserting that the urgent project for parents today, in this world of increasing economic, cultural, and social uncertainty, is to help their children gain a wholesome sense of direction that will carry them through the minefields of drift, confusion, apathy, anxiety, fear, and self-absorption that threaten their generation. I am also convinced that the key to this sense of direction is finding a life purpose. While a parent cannot simply give a purpose to a child, and indeed any too forceful or controlling effort to do so is likely to have adverse repercussions, nonetheless there is much that a parent can do."

That's from the chapter on "Parenting for Purpose" in which William walks us through nine things we can do to help cultivate purpose in our children's lives.

Let's take a quick look at each of them (and, as we do, think about how you might be able to optimize each facet a little more today):

- "Listen closely for the spark, then fan the flames." William tells us every kid has a "spark" (or multiple things that capture their interest). We need to listen for them then help fan the flames of potential meaning. He shares a great sample dialogue of a parent asking their child about school/what they found interesting that day (science class) and how the questions built into a potential summer internship working with animals. (Inspiring.)
- "Take advantage of regular opportunities to open a dialogue." Lectures don't work. But, we can take advantage of the day-to-day "micro-occasions" to chat about things that interest our kids and how they may be able to invest more energy in those activities.

*"Purpose endows a person with joy in good times and resilience in hard times, and this holds true all throughout life."*

~ William Damon

*"Critics have complained, rightly I believe, that our obsessive reliance on standardized test scores deters both teachers and students from concentrating on the real mission of schooling: developing a love of learning for learning's sake—a love that will then lead to self-maintained learning throughout the lifespan."*

~ William Damon

- **"Be open-minded and supportive of the sparks of interest expressed."** We can't script our kids's lives. (Obviously.) We need to be open to what fires THEM up and, barring potential negative consequences, support them in cultivating those interests.
- **"Convey your own sense of purpose and the meaning you derive from your work."** Too often all parents do is complain about their work and act as if the only reason they do it is for the paycheck. That's creating a really toxic relationship to work. We need to share our own purpose and meaning we derive from work.
- **"Impart wisdom about the practicalities in life."** We need to support our kids in creating a vision of what's possible AND how to create practical, realistic plans to make those visions a reality. The dinner table is a great place to do that. (William talks about the Kennedy family and the conversations they had as an example of the power of family wisdom being shared.)
- **"Introduce children to potential mentors."** With the seeds of interest(s) identified, we can support our kids by introducing them to mentors who may be able to support them with practical steps and knowledge.
- **"Encourage an entrepreneurial attitude."** This one is awesome and we'll talk about it in more depth in a moment. Whether they actually start a business or not, the entrepreneurial spirit of having a vision, making plans, being willing to take risks and deal with setbacks is a HUGE asset for all of us as we craft lives of meaning and purpose.
- **"Nurture a positive outlook."** Optimism is essential. We want to cultivate a positive view of life and respond to challenges with a "You can do it!" attitude rather than a "Oh, no!" attitude.
- **"Instill in children a feeling of agency, linked to responsibility."** Agency is a sense of empowerment—the idea that we have the power to positively affect our environment. We want to combine that with a sense of responsibility—that we can and MUST use our gifts in service to the world around us.

How're you doing with each of those?

Strengths? \_\_\_\_\_

Weaknesses? \_\_\_\_\_

Ideas you can implement today? \_\_\_\_\_

## HOW TO CULTIVATE AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

**"One of the defining features of highly purposeful youth is their entrepreneurial manner of pursuing objectives. For the highly purposeful..., entrepreneurship was a stronger common factor than usual measures of success such as school achievement. Although these youngsters generally did well enough in school, few of them were valedictorians or all-A students; but virtually all were superb entrepreneurs. As a predictor of later success in life, I would place my bet on strong entrepreneurial capacities.**

**Cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit means encouraging the following attitudes or dispositions: (1) The ability to set clear goals and make realistic plans to accomplish them; (2) an optimistic, can-do attitude; (3) persistence in the face of obstacles and difficulties; (4) a tolerance—or more, even an appetite—for risk; (5) resilience in the face of failure; (6) determination to achieve measurable results; and (7) resourcefulness and inventiveness in devising the means to achieve those results."**

Cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit.

That's where it's at.

*"From gratitude springs not only an enhanced appreciation for our own blessings but also a desire to pass such blessings along to others—the heart and soul or purpose."*

~ William Damon

Again, we're not talking about necessarily focusing this energy on a business per se (alho many of the exemplary youth did and that's awesome), but a SPIRIT of entrepreneurialism with which we approach whatever social or civic challenge we're going after.

Let's take a quick look at those 7 attitudes:

(1) **The ability to set clear goals and make realistic plans to accomplish them.** Note both the *clear* goals (specificity of the target we want to hit is rule #1 of goal setting) AND the realistic plans to accomplish those goals. We're not looking to help kids become "Dreamers"—we want to help them live on Purpose. That requires both concrete goals and a plan to go about achieving it one baby step at a time.

(2) **an optimistic, can-do attitude.** This is a given but we gotta believe we can do it or we won't go for it. Hence, our need to cultivate this optimistic attitude in little things throughout our day-to-day lives.

(3) **persistence in the face of obstacles and difficulties.** Obstacles and challenges will arise. We rub our hands together and enjoy 'em. William talks about the growth mindset here. (Thank you, Carol Dweck.)

(4) **a tolerance—or more, even an appetite—for risk.** Being willing to stretch and go for things that aren't guaranteed while working within the framework of a realistic plan and embracing the fact that setbacks are inevitable—especially when we stretch—is key.

(5) **resilience in the face of failure.** We will fail. That's part of the deal. We persist through little failures and we are resilient in pursuit of our goal with bigger setbacks.

(6) **determination to achieve measurable results.** Again, concrete, specific goals that we can measure are key.

(7) **resourcefulness and inventiveness in devising the means to achieve those results.** The essence of the entrepreneur! Using limited resources and creative plans to make things happen.

How can *you* help cultivate this spirit a little more in your kids's lives?! Here's one really powerful way:

## **A WORTHY MANTRA: "YOU CAN DO IT!"**

**"Parents can help their children develop entrepreneurial capacities by encouraging them to take on challenges and healthy risks. When voiced frequently enough, indeed as a type of parental mantra, a single four-word sentence will go a long way in sending the key message about tackling formidable tasks: 'You can do it!' In one form or another, this kind of parental urging is a good character-building exercise. Seeking challenges, and overcoming timidity, are habits that can be acquired very early in life. When children learn to thrive on challenges rather than to avoid them, they learn a good deal about what it is possible for them to achieve."**

Our ability to meet challenges is one of the most important skills we can develop.

**Carol Dweck** puts it this way in *Self-theories* (see Notes): *"The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort, and they persist in the face of obstacles."*

One of the themes of the book is that we are often too indulgent and protective as parents—unintentionally creating *timidity* in our children in a time when courage and self-confidence is more vital than ever.

William tells us: We need to encourage our kids to take on challenges and healthy risks.

One way to do that? Make *"You can do it!!"* your new four-word mantra. :)

*"You can do it!!" "You can do it!!" "You can do it!!" "You can do it!!" "You can do it!!"*

*"Our study results convince me that anyone can find purpose and pursue it with rich benefit to themselves and others. But, as I have pointed out, support is vital along the way."*

~ William Damon

*"Everything we say and do around children registers. A child's character is formed through a succession of moment-by-moment communications and interactions with the people closest to them, and even something as simple as regularly expressing a positive outlook on life can make a significant difference."*

~ William Damon

And... Embrace your OWN challenges. Rub your hands together. Get excited about them.

As [Angela Duckworth](#) shares in [Grit](#) (see Notes): "Author and activist James Baldwin once put it this way: 'Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.'"

So.... How do YOU respond to challenges?

Newsflash: That's how your kids are being trained to respond. :)

After reading Dweck and Duckworth and others, I've deliberately found little "micro-occasions" to celebrate little challenges. Just yesterday Emerson and I had fun putting a new flapper in the toilet. (Laughing but I had no idea what a "flapper" was until he became interested in toilets. :)

Anyway, I'm not the most mechanically-inclined guy on the planet so even little things like that can present "challenges" for me. So, I celebrated it. "Oh, this one's challenging. AWESOME. I love challenges. Let me slow down and think about how to do this. FUN!!"

Whenever he hits a roadblock doing something (whether it's at the park or opening a jar or whatever), we have fun saying, "Oh! A challenge. Awesome. You get to try harder and test different strategies. That's GREAT!"

I'll now be adding "You can do it!" :)

Here's to helping our kids (and ourselves) live lives of deep meaning and purpose as we optimize and actualize.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

P.S. "You can do it!"

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you'll probably like...

[Noble Purpose](#)

[The Power of Ideals](#)

[Flow](#)

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[Grit](#)

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## About the Author of "The Path to Purpose"

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## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).