

# The Soul's Legacy

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Discerning Your Life's Meaning  
and Passing It on to Your Loved Ones

I meet people where they sleep.

Homes, adult foster homes,  
assisted living facilities, nursing  
homes, memory care units.

Many breathe with aid. A  
concentrator often swooshes in  
the background delivering  
needed oxygen through a plastic  
tube into the cannula placed at the entry of their  
nostrils. A doctor has told them they have less  
than six months of life.

I am a hospice chaplain.

## Ministry Context



- In the past nine years I have journeyed with more than 1,000 folks who have died

- I visit 20 to 25 dying patients each week

- In my current job I see about 50 different people each month

- 250 of my patients die each year

- The most common issue I see is the existential pain caused by the loss of meaning

## Ministry Context



## Focus of Study

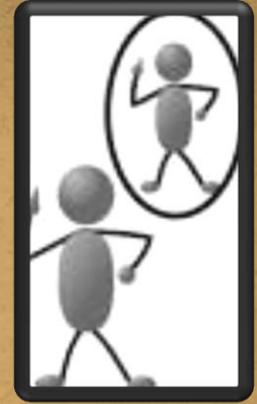
**I am working on the anxiety caused by loss of meaning at the end of life because I want to develop non-pharmaceutical tools for chaplains, ministers, and family members to utilize in alleviating this pain.**



# Hypothesis

**Preparing for the existential loss of meaning at life's end might be ameliorated by the creation of an ethical will and an ability to bless loved ones who will survive.**

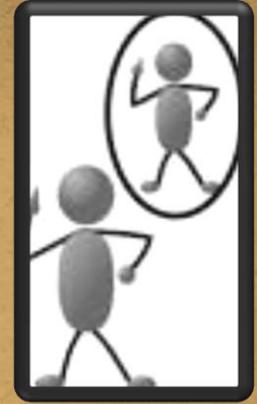




# Upon Further Reflection

The English word *reflect* has two primary meanings – to see ourselves as in a mirror, and also to look inward in a contemplative way.<sup>[1]</sup> In my own search for meaning, I've found the two to be intimately connected.

[1] Robert Solomon, "Lecture 16: Heidegger on the World and the Self," *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life*, (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, CD, 2000).



# Upon Further Reflection

Philosophers (particularly the existentialist ones like Heidegger and Sartre) believe it's impossible to know ourselves apart from being in relationship. The existentialists teach it is by getting feedback from others about who we are (*mirror reflection*) that we can then truly look inward to contemplate our being (*contemplative reflection*). "By linking ourselves (who can't be very objective) with others (who can be more so), we gain access to ourselves."<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, the only way I can truly come to know myself and create any sense of meaning is by being in relationship with others.

<sup>[2]</sup> David Biro, *The Language of Pain : Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 153.

# Warrants

- Meaning requires others.
- Healing requires a restoration of roles and relationships.
- Alleviating suffering involves breaking isolation.
- Non-pharmaceutical methods are preferred.
- As a Christian minister, I believe in working to help those I serve strengthen and or reconcile their relationships with themselves, others and God.





# Discerning Meaning Tools

*He who learns must suffer,  
and, even in our sleep,  
pain that cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
and in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom to us  
by the awful grace of God.  
- Æschylus*



## Soul Searching

### Soul Print Exercise

Make a Soul Print Box.

Put in five things that matter most to you.

Possibly the greatest value of the Soul Print box comes from the process of making it.

In spiritual searches, process is often the most important thing. Let's view your Soul Print Box as a treasure chest of sorts, which makes filling the box a treasure hunt. In a treasure hunt, the two words are inseparable – to find a treasure you must hunt for it, and if you hunt, you will surely find a treasure. The very process of “boxing” your soul print – pulling together the significant signs of your soul – will help reveal your soul print. If you take the time to search for your home for soul print articles, you will be making the time to search for your soul. And if you hunt, you will surely find.

What do you put in your Soul Print Box? Love letters, family heirlooms, photographs, favorite quotes, and your own soul print reflections on life. If any items are too big, represent them with an object or write them on a slip of paper.

Marc Gafni, *Soul Prints : Your Path to Fulfillment* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 24.

# Discerning Meaning Tools



## Soul Searching

### **Soul Print Exercise** *continued*

Another way to think of it is to imagine a hurricane is about to hit your home and you have just fifteen minutes to grab what is most important to you before you evacuate. What do you grab?

# Discerning Meaning Tools



## What's Your Story

### Dignity Therapy

- Tell me a little about your life history; particularly the parts that you either remember most or think are the most important.
- When did you feel most alive?
- Are there particular things that you would want your family to know about you, and are there particular things you would want them to remember?
- What are the most important roles you have played in your life (e.g., family roles, vocational roles, community service roles)? Why are they so important to you, and what do you think you accomplished within those roles?
- What are your most important accomplishments, and what do you feel most proud of or take most pride in?
- Are there particular things that you feel need to be said to your loved ones or things that you would want to take the time to say again?

# Discerning Meaning Tools



# Discerning Meaning Tools

## What's Your Story

### **Dignity Therapy** *continued*

- What are your hopes and dreams for your loved ones?
- What have you learned about life that you would want to pass along to others? What advice or words of guidance would you wish to pass along to your [son, daughter, husband, wife, parents, other(s)]?
- Are there important words, or perhaps even instructions, you would like to offer your family?
- In creating this permanent record, are there other things that you would like included?

Harvey Max Chochinov, *Dignity Therapy : Final Words for Final Days* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71.



## What's Your Story

### Fairy Tale Exercise

Write a fairy tale that describes your life. (This one is especially good if you have a particularly pressing problem right now.)

There will be three parts to your fairy tale:

1. The description of the problem. Do this using a symbolic language, using animal (wolves, bears, etc.) or other fairy tale characters (princesses, shoe cobblers, knights or kings). Let your current situation provide the inspiration, but as soon as you can, move away from your conscious awareness of the problem and let the story take over.
2. The magical intervention. Let your imagination come up with a magical solution—whether that's a potion, the arrival of a new character with special powers, a change in the weather, whatever comes to mind.
3. The happy ever after. Describe what it looks like when the problem is resolved.

This idea was taken from the work of Dana Gerhardt at <http://mooncircles.com/>

# Discerning Meaning Tools



## What's Your Story

### Haiku Exercise

The Japanese, in addition to leaving a formal will for survivors, developed a unique tradition known as *jisei*, death poems. These *jisei* are a way of writing a formal farewell poem to life. Of all the Japanese Death Poems, the *haiku* is probably the most well known. The traditional *haiku* is a very short poem, three lines long containing only 17 syllables in a 5-7-5 format. There are three essential elements to a *haiku*:

The haiku describes a single state or event

The time of the haiku is the present

The haiku refers to images connected to one of the four seasons

Here is an example:

My storehouse burned down –  
Now nothing stands between me  
And the moon above.

# Discerning Meaning Tools



## What's Your Story

### Haiku Exercise *continued*

One of the beautiful aspects of this tradition is that many Zen monks would begin to write a new *haiku* every day, because no one knows the actual day they will die. Here are two examples.

Dairin Soto (died in 1568 at the age of 89)

My whole life long I've sharpened my sword  
And now, face to face with death  
I unsheathe it, and lo –  
The blade is broken –  
Alas!

Dokyo Etan (died in 1721 at the age of 80)

Here in the shadow of death it is hard  
To utter the final word.  
I will only say, then,  
“Without saying.”  
Nothing more,  
Nothing more.

# Discerning Meaning Tools



# Discerning Meaning Tools

## The Blessing

### Blessing Exercise

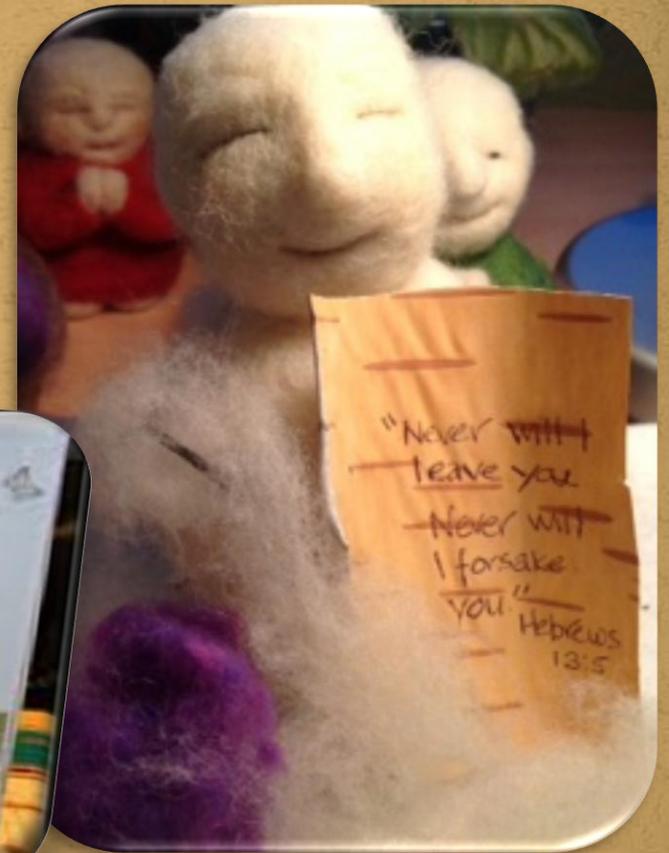
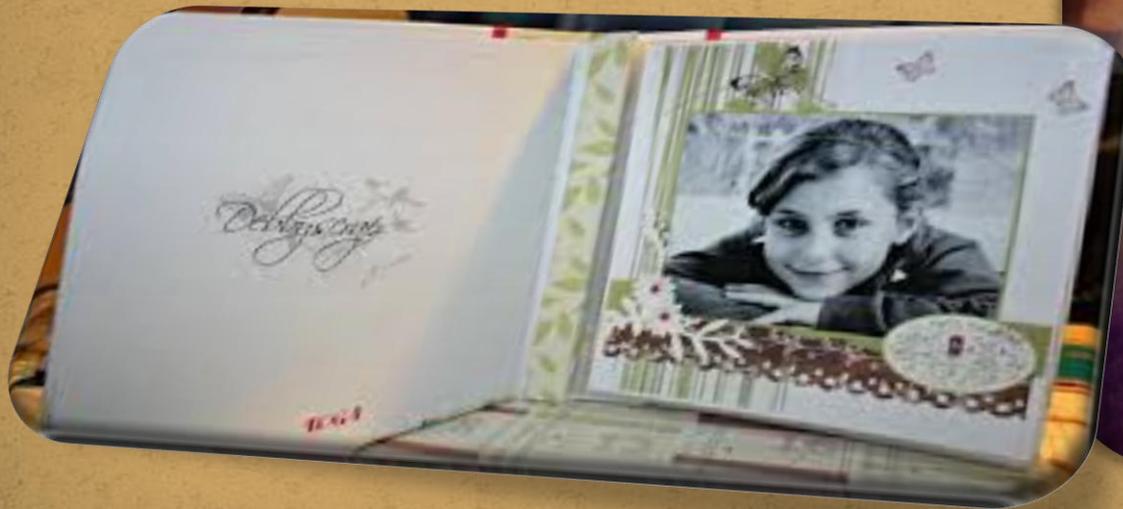
Think of someone you care deeply for and reflect on **one** characteristic or attribute they possess that enriches your whole social network / community. For example, maybe they are “dependable” always following through on their promises, or possibly they are “justice oriented” always looking out for the under privileged. The idea is to notice a beautiful trait in this person and then bring it forward in a time of sharing with that person. Plan to share what it is you see in this person that you admire and why. You can write something out or speak from your heart. What matters is that your sharing about them is authentic and honoring. Also, if you could find a small token (something from around your home, or a small craft you make, or an inexpensive, under \$5 gift) to represent this attribute you see in your loved one and give to them to remember this moment of acknowledgement.



## The Blessing

Blessing Exercise *continued*

It doesn't have  
to be in words!





**May you have the  
commitment to know  
what has hurt you, to  
allow it to come close  
to you, and in the end  
to become one with  
you.**

- Gaelic Blessing

# Contact

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