



[David Brooks](#)

What's Your Purpose?

Every reflective person sooner or later faces certain questions: What is the purpose of my life? How do I find a moral compass so I can tell right from wrong? What should I do day by day to feel fulfillment and deep joy?

As late as 50 years ago, Americans could consult lofty authority figures to help them answer these questions. Some of these authority figures were public theologians. Reinhold Niebuhr [was on the cover of Time magazine](#). Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about everything from wonder to sin to civil rights. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book called "On Being a Real Person" on how to live with integrity. Other authority figures were part of the secular priesthood of intellectuals. John Dewey advocated pragmatism. Jean-Paul Sartre and his American popularizers championed existentialism. Hannah Arendt wrote big books on evil and the life of the mind.

Public discussion was awash in philosophies about how to live well. There was a coherent moral ecology you could either go along with or rebel against.

All of that went away over the past generation or two. It is hard to think of any theologian with the same public influence that Niebuhr and Heschel had. Intellectuals are given less authority and are more specialized. They write more for each other and are less likely to volley moral systems onto the public stage.

These days we live in a culture that is more diverse, decentralized, interactive and democratized. The old days when gray-haired sages had all the answers about the ultimate issues of life are over. But new ways of having conversations about the core questions haven't yet come into being.

Public debate is now undermoralized and overpoliticized. We have many shows where people argue about fiscal policy but not so many on how to find a vocation or how to measure the worth of your life. In fact, we now hash out our moral disagreement indirectly, under the pretense that we're talking about politics, which is why arguments about things like tax policy come to resemble holy wars. Intellectual prestige has drifted away from theologians, poets and philosophers and toward neuroscientists, economists, evolutionary biologists and big data analysts. These scholars have a lot of knowledge to bring, but they're not in the business of offering wisdom on the ultimate questions. The shift has meant there is less moral conversation in the public square. I doubt people behave worse than before, but we are less articulate about the inner life. There are fewer places in public where people are talking about the things that matter most. As a result, many feel lost or overwhelmed. They feel a hunger to live meaningfully, but they don't know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all.

As I travel on a book tour, I find there is an amazing hunger to shift the conversation. People are ready to talk a little less about how to do things and to talk a little more about why ultimately they are doing them.

This is true among the young as much as the older. In fact, young people, raised in today's hypercompetitive environment, are, if anything, hungrier to find ideals that will give meaning to their activities. It's true of people in all social classes. Everyone is born with moral imagination — a need to feel that life is in service to some good.

The task now is to come up with forums where these sorts of conversations can happen in a more modern, personal and interactive way. I thought I'd do my part by asking readers to send me their answers to the following questions: Do you think you have found the purpose to your life, professional or otherwise? If so, how did you find it? Was there a person, experience or book or sermon that decisively helped you get there? If you have answers to these questions, go [the website for my book, "The Road to Character,"](#) click on First Steps and send in your response. We'll share as many as we can on the site's blog called The Conversation, and I'll write a column or two reporting on what I've learned about how people find purpose these days. I hope this exercise will be useful in giving people an occasion to sit down and spell out the organizing frame of their lives. I know these essays will help others who are looking for meaning and want to know how to find more of it.

Mostly the idea is to use a community of conversation as a way to get somewhere: to revive old vocabularies, modernize old moral traditions, come up with new schools and labels so that people have more concrete building blocks and handholds as they try to figure out what life is all about.