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# "Or I May Live...": Meaning-Making and Mortality

Hannah Bright
*Dominican University of California*

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# "OR I MAY LIVE…"
# MEANING MAKING AND MORTALITY

**Hannah Bright**

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in

partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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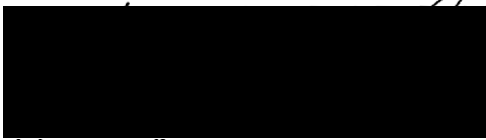<tr><td>Hannah Bright<br>Candidate</td><td>May 8, 2018</td></tr>
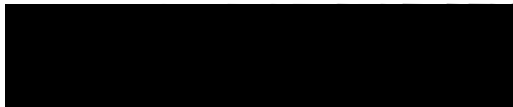<tr><td>Elizabeth Truesdell, PhD<br>Department Chair</td><td>May 8, 2018</td></tr>
<tr><td>Jennifer Lucko, PhD<br>Thesis Advisor</td><td>May 8, 2018</td></tr>
<tr><td>Shadi Roshandel, PhD<br>Secondary Thesis Advisor</td><td>May 8, 2018</td></tr>
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# Abstract

This project examined the ways in which dialogical processing of the fact of one's own impending death impacts meaning-making in day-to-day life. Taking a qualitative approach, the thesis builds from five in-depth interviews and follow-up surveys with students in higher education. In reviewing the role of death education in public school settings, the study concludes that an enhanced emphasis on love of learning, creative thinking and community engagement in public education is the most effective way for educators to support students in building appropriate skillsets to create meaning in their lives, as well as in the face of their eventual mortality.

# Acknowledgments

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I also want to pay special recognition to the participants of this study, whose voices are the substance of this project. I cannot describe how much I enjoyed sitting with each of you and having the honor to hear your wisdom and intention around the ways you live your lives. Thank you for learning with me.

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# Introduction

Despite the apodictic nature of the topic, when posited with the question *"what is the meaning of life?"* the average person does not have a readily retrievable response. Meanwhile, though largely regarded as an insoluble query, the answer might be simpler than originally perceived. In fact, it may be neatly embedded within the very question itself.

Making meaning is a distinctly human process. Indeed, in many cases it has been portrayed as *the* distinctly human process. Harvard professor and Developmental Psychologist Robert Kegan (1980) states, *"Human* being is *meaning making.* For the human, what *evolving* amounts to is *the evolving of systems of meaning*; the business of organisms is to organize" (p. 374). Our ability to understand and make sense of events, relationships, and the self throughout the course of our lifetime can be largely understood as the definitive measure of a "life well-lived."

Following an understanding of meaning-making as located in interpretation, and interpretation as negotiated by language and design processing, this study aimed to explore how intentional dialogical processing and semi-guided design activities focused on the awareness of the fact of death (including one's own) in a non-crisis setting could influence meaning-making in day to day life.

Meaning-making is a process of critical reflection. Scholar Sky Marsen (2008) presents an understanding of meaning-making as located in perception, perception as

located in body sensation, and sensory experience as negotiated by language and design. A phenomenological understanding of meaning recognizes the significance of subjective interpretation in creating meaning, but also argues for a certain degree of inherent qualities in an object that guide the interpretation process. Along with this idea, A semiotic perspective on meaning acknowledges textual and verbal language as critical factions of meaning-making (Marsen, 2008). Combining these two approaches, conversation and written processing emerge as central vehicles for facilitating the interpretive process of deciphering meaning from the inherent qualities of objects and experiences in our lives. The structure provided through these strategies offers a framework and shape within which to position a lifetime and more easily discern the sensory experiences which contribute to meaning. This phenomenon reflects the organizational quality of 'storying,' in that it highlights the ways in which the act of telling or writing out one's life helps to mitigate our conglomerate of sensory experiences into a meaningful narrative. Adams (2002) adds to this understanding of meaning as storying saying, "Perhaps the most revealing thing we can say about a life is that it can be told" (p. 76). He clarifies:

> *A life, as is the case with an experience or story, is a conceptually delineated structure of inherent meaning. It is a web of experiences, thoughts, plans, actions, memories, anticipations, social assumptions, and the like, all tied together and governed by a self-concept that embraces a normative constitution that is grounded in one's nature as a human knower-agent, plus an individually authored life plan" (p. 77)*

This quote highlights the reality that a "life" and the "telling of a life" are in fact synonymous with one another. The existence of our individual "life" and the meaning inherent to it are dependent on our own synthesizing and relating of the interpretations of our lived experiences into a story or "authored life plan."

Through the frameworks of Marsen (2008) and Adams (2002), interpretation and language processing are highlighted as critical avenues for meaning to emerge. The intersection of these ideas is in metaphor. Marsen (2008) identifies metaphor as, "a way in which humans understand their relationship to the world, and a basic cognitive process underlying the production of meaning" (p. 6). Building on this notion, Elzbieta Kazmierczak (2003) shows how *design*—taking forms as simple as graphic organizers like Venn diagrams or tables—is the vehicle that both guides the process and stimulates the communication between constructed, inherited, and reconstructed meaning. By using simple graphic tools to organize one's interpretation of one's life, more agency is afforded to construct meaning during the dialogical process. Through this metaphoric retelling of a life via design or discussion, an individual is able to better conceptualize, organize, and make meaning of the actual experience of living. In other words, using language to uncover emerging meaning with the aid of intentional design activities like pie charts can create more prolific environments for reconstructing understandings of challenging life processes, for example death, and the meaning of a day-to-day existence in light of it.

Apart from addressing the universal humanistic challenge to construe meaning out of our lives, all humans are levelled in our universally shared condition of impermanence, in the form of the eventual end to life. That is, in death. To be human is to make meaning, and to live is to inevitably one day die. Though modernly branded as morbid and taboo—a characterization that will be further addressed in the literature review—this second anchor of commonality in what it is to be a human, can serve as a fertile and cathartic ground to cultivate the initial shared condition of searching for meaning within a lifetime *(*Neimeye, 2000; 2012*)*. Meaning of death and meaning of life create a two-way

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relationship, through which each is informed and developed through focused interpretation of the other.

Despite consistent historical unification of these two heart sinks of humanity—meaning-making and death—in modern culture, a combination of ever-advancing medical technology and a perpetually disintegrating common belief structure have cast death—which throughout history has been a stable locus of shared community meaning making and engagement—as increasingly "invisible" to the average individual (Ramsay, 2005). This development has been mirrored by a growing socio-cultural emphasis on financial success over investment in humanitarian wellbeing and intentional time allotment for creative meaning-making, even at the cost of life (Tubbs, 1993). Money and the pursuit to consume at the margin of one's socio-economic capacity has led to a diminished prioritization of meaning-making as the primary occupation of a human life. These alarming progressions raise important questions about where our societal priorities are positioned, what it means to be a person in the modern world, and how this societal-wide decline in death awareness, creative expression through language and design, and meaning making are related. Despite the strong correlation in these cultural reprioritizations, as noted by Professor E.M. Adams (2002), the topic of meaning making as it relates to one's own limited lifetime/death has been almost uncannily ignored within the academic dialogue.

There is thorough documentation that meaning-making processes have proven beneficial for individuals to reconcile the deaths of other persons (*Neimeye, 2000; 2012; Edgar, 1994; Hymovitz, 1978; Auten, 1982; Yarber, 1976; Riesler, 1977*). Likewise, it is

well documented that developing a self-concept and "life story" is critical for well-being and personal satisfaction in a lifetime (Marsen, 2008; Adams, 2002; Nelson, 1989, Mirtz, 1993; Dyson, 1995; Miles 1985). In line with these findings, and short of our own squeamish discomfort at the very unfathomability of the idea, applying meaning-making processes to the topic of one's own death logically follows. In his work, "Our Attitude Towards Death," Hayden Ramsay clarifies that in confronting the reality of our own personal impending death, the main questions to raise are not whether we should or shouldn't fear death, but rather what effects should fear of death have on our choices? (Ramsay, 2005). This important interpretation points to the two-directional nature of the intersectionality of death awareness and meaning-making in life. While intentional meaning-making can help reconcile the "impossibly probable" nature of our own deaths, awareness and processing of the fact of one's own death can symbiotically serve as a stimulant to review the choices we make in day-to-day living—in other words, the ways in which we make meaning. The purpose of this research was to explore this relationship between mortality awareness and meaning making processes.

In line with a phenomenological approach to research, this study consists of a voluntary sample of semi-structured interviews with students within the Humanities and Education departments at Dominican University of California. The participants of this study are limited to a context of higher education. A qualitative approach is taken for this data collection due to the highly personal quality of the topic and the dialogical nature of exploring ongoing meaning and understanding within the lives of individuals. A multi-step process of coding was then used to distinguish patterns, discrepancies, and compelling findings within the collected data.

The findings of this study concluded that meaning-making processes in living and in face of mortality are fundamentally different. Furthermore, it revealed that love for the process of learning, the ability to express creativity, and an investment in community are the three most relevant ways to create a meaningful lifetime. In facing mortality, the primary emphasis shifts from learning, to application of learning through creative expression. The significance of community remained consistent, with the role of community connection shifting from joy through helping others, to community as a source of validation and recognition for individual intentions and expressions.

Given the unanimous relevance of the topics of mortality awareness and meaning making raised through this research, its significance spans a wide audience, with a particular focus in education and the applicability of these important conversations within our existing K-12 systems of learning and life preparation. Rare topics like these that intrinsically bridge cultural gaps and celebrate diverse solutions to universally shared challenges provide a unique opportunity for critical dialogue within and beyond the classroom. Focusing on the role of public education to prepare youth for life, this study matches the current emphasis placed on sex education (life creation), with an equal need for information and skill building that emphasizes meaning-making in life within the context of human mortality. The findings suggest that the most meaningful way to achieve this is through an educational emphasis on learning, creating, and community.

This project is founded in an attention to individuality, and it aims to examine a limited pool of indisputably universal conditions of being a person. Death is a form of suffering that every human encounters within their lifetime regardless of ethnicity, gender,

sexual orientation, religion, ability, and other salient factors of identity. Similarly, meaning-making is a cross-cultural human occupation that takes infinite forms revealing the breadth, depth, and variety of human voice and capacity for interpretation. Furthermore, creative expression is one of the most unanimously recognized intelligences that combat discriminatory education (Grantham, 2013; Kaufman, 2006). In this way, meaning-making and mortality awareness match each other as unique areas of common ground, with creative expression serving as a fundamental bridge. It is the hope then, that this study may be utilized as a resource for educators and policymakers to consider the benefits and drawbacks of implementing educational approaches that encourage critical reflection of how students make meaning in their own lives through learning, creative expression, and connection to their communities.

The scalable impact of conversations like these becomes apparent when we consider the ways in which individual beliefs and practices create the cultural systems that dictate much of our lifestyles. Marsen (2008) shows, "humans give meanings to observed behaviors and to felt sensations, and, over time, these meanings become codified into cultural and linguistic systems" (p. 6). This blunt elucidation of the relationship between individual meaning making and "codified" societal systems draws attention to the critical impact these conversations can have on working towards a more socially just world on a grand scale, by talking to individuals about the ways that they answer the question: *What is the meaning of your life*?

# Literature Review

## Overview

This literature review traces the three topics of death, creativity, and meaning making as they have been explored within the academic canon. The discussion of death begins with an elucidation of the general invisibility of death within modern western society, the potential role of death education in addressing that invisibility, and the speculative value of recasting the concept of death to mitigate suffering and stress within our culture.

Next, creativity is considered through three existing frameworks: 1) the ongoing struggle to define and understand what creativity is and is not, and how the search for that definition necessarily shapes and defines the reality of creativity for individuals, 2) the power of creativity's relationship to constraints, both actual and perceived, and how those constraints inhibit or support its fruition, and 3) creativity's potential application to present societal challenges and its ability to serve as an independent variable to encourage critical progression in the ways we construe meaning of life and death in day-to-day living.

The final section of this review looks into the role of meaning-making in human life. First, it highlights the potential deficit of meaning making in modern culture. Second, the review examines how humans can use the metaphoric processes of language and design to make meaning. Lastly, it considers the value of a society restructured with meaning-making at its foundation.

# Death

## Invisibility of Death

Despite being the one guaranteed inevitable event for every single person alive, death is a nearly imperceptible aspect of our current cultural climate (Yarber, 1976; Ramsay, 2005, Hymovitz, 1978; Mclure 1974). Our social belief systems around death are largely based in fear, denial, and avoidance. Death awareness is branded morbid, depressing, or taboo and a strong cultural narrative for adulation of youth pushes processes around death such as grieving, celebration of life, or processing of remains to the periphery of cultural customs. Moreover, rapidly developing medical technology creates a reality where most adults in the United States "have experienced few, if any deaths, since they were children and their grandparents died," leading to a reality wherein, "having little personal experience with death, they are often fearful and feel unable to model appropriate grief behaviors for their children" (Edgar, 1994). This coupled with, "the marked decline in the United States of families' participation in religious traditions leads to little to no eschatology being taught in the family environment," creating, "a void when there is a death experienced by both parents and children" (Edgar, 1994, 40). This reality, particularly when coupled with an unrealistic, often overly violent or romanticized depiction of death through the media—which operates under the added complication of an instant on/off switch—create a modern climate around death that is secretive, scary, and largely ignored. The extent of this reality is reflected in the pervasive denial of death in daily living.

Fear and anxiety over death are natural reactions to the unknown, but these states of mind are also largely shaped and created by the cultural mythology that we inherit from

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our society. Anne Auten (1982) suggests that, "our concepts of death have been culturally defined and influenced by a Puritan ethic that, for example, in the past frightened children into compliant behavior with talk of death" (p. 602). Furthermore, Ramsay comments that our materialistic and consumer-based culture has left us in a state of "panicked helplessness in relation to death, and that, "as a result, its effect on moral and practical life is out of control - sometimes foolishly small, at other times cripplingly large (e.g. in those who seek to evade or postpone death by cosmetic surgery, proposals to clone us for rejection-free organs etc." (Ramsay, 2005, p. 418). A dominant societal prioritization towards youthfulness, delayed aging, and denial of death leads to an unfortunate unpreparedness for many when the moment of their own death arrives. This deficit in proactive processing then adds to the sense of fear and discomfort around the inevitable circumstance. In a similar way, John Mclure (1974) highlights our cultural preoccupation with abundance and growth and prompts us to consider, "what the implications of such thinking are for the student in biology, with the repetition of the units which emphasize birth and seldom touch upon death. Everywhere there is a bringing into life—an addition, seldom a subtraction" (p. 484). This imbalance creates an unrealistic expectation and attachment to life and reinforces the sense of taboo surrounding death, causing further separation from death as a potential opportunity to create meaning.

Moreover, with increased longevity and the compartmentalization of the elderly into selected retirement homes, invisibility of death is further perpetuated for the average adult (Ramsay, 2005). Ramsay further points to the complication of our socially unjust climate around death avoidance, saying, "we do not learn to die in modern societies; they are predicated upon avoiding death for the rich and ignoring the deaths of the poor. Thus

we die alone, shamefully, counting it a mistake on our own or someone else's part"
(Ramsay, 2005, 422). This collective denial does little to mask the suffering around death,
and in many ways the lack of education associated with it exaggerates those same
discomforts unnecessarily.

In contrast to our currently inherited culture, and despite how normal the alienation
from death has become for most of us, historically death has held a very different
community role. Throughout history in various cultures the *ars bene moriendi*, the "art of
dying well," was part of "the moral and spiritual equipment of a good and holy life"
(Ramsay, 2005, 419). This shared cultural narrative helped individuals navigate their
relationship to death and find comfort in the common conditionality. Death has not always
translated to slaying of the individual, it has formerly been viewed much more respectably
and holistically. It carried significant meaning as an, "acceptance of the natural cycle, self-
sacrifice, the reaffirmation of the values in which one dies, peace, an opportunity for moral
reevaluation by the bereaved, [or] a final test in the virtues" (Ramsay, 2005, 420). These
more rounded interpretations of the subject situate death as a critical community locus of
meaning making, in contrast with our modern sense of distancing and alienation.

Societies have venerated certain deaths, and cultural beliefs about a "good death"
have provided both a sense of comfort and larger purpose for the individual, as well as a
more logical, integrated system for processing death within the larger societal structure.
While our diverse and integrated modern culture provides many dynamic benefits and
interesting intersections, a perspective offered by Alasdair MacIntyre worries that our lack
of, "coherent social structures, rituals, traditions or institutions that can give dying

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meaning," creates a climate where we continue to venerate the individual and wherein there is no 'good death' possible. He persists, "our deaths will continue to be meaningless removals of the individual from power and presence since we lack any generally agreed upon practices of making death - or life – meaningful" (Ramsay, 2005, p. 419).

Contributing to the arguably nonsensical quality of our cultural death avoidance, the benefits of death education and awareness are widely known (Edgar, 1994; Hymovitz, 1978; Auten, 1982; Yarber, 1976; Riesler, 1977). Many fear confronting the disconcerting fact of a certain death, when in fact the most notable result is greater appreciation and enjoyment of life (Hymovitz, 1978; Mclure 1974). Though some studies have reported failure of death education processes in large group settings (Bailis, 1977), the research regarding effects of death education largely show vehement increases in participant comfort, vocabulary, communication, and coping strategies regarding grief processes and mortality awareness, as well as daily well-being and sense of gratitude (Edgar, 1994; Endacott, 2010).

With all of this context in mind, our charge seems not to answer should we fear our death or not, but rather what sort of meaning can we derive from it? How should fear of death affect the choices we make in everyday life? (Endacott, 2010; Ramsay, 2005). This seemingly highly beneficial underbelly to the topic has been historically overlooked. With the exception of a boom of death education program development in the seventies, the dialogue has been predominately silent. This single surge subsequently died out relatively quickly; A cessation possibly clarified through the findings of the following study around

the fundamental differences of meaning making in life and meaning-making in the face of death.

**Death Education**

Today, many people receive death education from sources outside of a public-school setting (e.g., religion, hospice, or cultural practices, such as Day of the Dead rituals and celebrations). However, attributing the task of death education to these third-party sources overlooks a large segment of society. Despite historical claims for a need of public school death education, the initiative has been largely sidelined since the 1970's. While directly addressing the topic of death in the classroom may not be the most conducive avenue to aid in this deficit of understanding, it is essential for public school educators to find opportunities for education that supports healthy meaning-making surrounding death—such as through creative expression.

With lack of cultural consistency in family or religion, school emerges as the primary public platform where interventions in death education can take place. This association is logical if we consider that public education responds to the charge of preparing students for life. Death, as an integral and universal part of that process, thus logically falls within the social responsibility of schools (Yarber, 1976; Reisler, 1977). Leon Hymovitz (1978), a public school principal, argued that, "as death is an integral part of growing up, home and school must formulate a philosophy, guidelines for implementation, and strategies that prepare the learner from infancy to childhood, and from maturity to old age, for the role and function of the inevitable as a stage in human development" (p. 7). This refreshingly integrated perspective suggests that the role of education in our society might lean closer to development of meaning-making strategies,

over a traditional vision of providing skills such as rote arithmetic memorization. Though the question of death education in public schools seems largely obvious in light of this line of thinking, the debate of its inclusion has been largely silenced since an initial push in the 1970's.

There has been some debate as to what subject death falls under, as it is a naturally interdisciplinary topic, though it has been largely located within the humanities (Yarber, 1976; Reisler, 1977, Mclure, 1974). Concerns have been raised about the competencies of school teachers to handle such potentially sensitive topics (Gordon, 1977; Rosenthal, 1982). In an attempt to standardize the process, Hymovitz (1978) offered the following interpretation of what schools' goals ought to be in fulfilling the charge to humanize death for students:

- to teach that death and dying are part of life and living

- to help students to manage realistically the idea of their own death and the deaths of significant others

- to help implement necessary institutional and attitudinal changes through death education

- to appreciate the impact of death upon the human creative impulses in music, art, religion, literature, and philosophy

(p. 8-9)

This final point regarding the relationship between awareness of death and human creativity is of especially profound interest for this study as it examines the role of education in navigating death awareness and creative expression.

**Recasting Death**

Before moving on to the reflections and interplay that creativity has with death awareness, as a final introductory point on the topic of death invisibility and awareness, I would like to touch on alternative characterizations of death, and their potential to ease the burden of the inevitable for individuals. As a rare patch of universally common ground, death serves as an opportunity for solidarity and service (Ramsay, 2005). Some more biological recastings of death involve relating the event to the process of birth or to that of sex.

Ramsey (2005) references Christopher Hamilton's approach to avoiding fear of death by finding, "consolation in relating death to times in life when we actually relish extinction of consciousness, for example, sleep and sex" (p. 421). This is a compelling version of the life-end story as it offers some degree of agency, ownership, or possible desire in relation to the experience of death. This idea also mirrors Edgar et al.'s findings regarding "little deaths," daily losses in life such as deceased pets and changing seasons that help prepare us for the larger death events of our lives, building up, of course, to our very own. Hamilton shows how we already possess an inherent cyclic need for these types of events, and thus ought to view death as a phase in nature's larger cycles, accepting our role to step aside and create space for others. His idea that, "the temporary but repeated and welcome obliteration of the mind in life can in some way seem to find or seek its fitting completion in the total closing of the mind in death as part of a bigger cycle of growth and decay," provides a useful perspective for approaching fear of death through associating it closely with some of life's more traditionally blissful experiences (Ramsay, 2005).

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Alternatively, Hymovitz (1978) offers a soothing, cocoon-like interpretation of death as in relation to birth. He elucidates that, "when the infant lives in the mother's womb, his universe is pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying. Change represents a kind of loss, and in a way, a kind of death, when the baby leaves his mother's world to move into another. Similarly, the new experience into which he is born is warm, accepting, and loving" (p. 7). With this lens on the transition into life, it is much more accessible to envision death as a similarly natural and easeful experience. These two examples provide a window into the empowering process of exploring and redefining the 'impossible probable' experience of death's inevitability and foreshadow the role of meaning making as it applies to shifting perspective on mortality awareness.

The overarching vision of our distressed current relationship to our own participation in life cycles of creation and destruction prompts us to consider how this disconnect might be addressed. Ramsay (2005) presents: "If the fear of death is a universal human experience and we are not responding to it with the creativity and enlightenment of our ancestors, what changes could we make in our modern attitude towards death?" (p. 419). This quandary over the role of creativity in our meaning-making processes surrounding death directs attention to a similarly unnerving pattern of impractical and uncanny cultural beliefs about human creativity, or supposed lack thereof.

# Creativity

### Cultural Myths of Noncreativity

The most frequently cited reason behind a diminished personal sense of creativity in the average modern person is the utter conundrum of attempting to define the term

(Klein, 1982; Lloyd-Jones, 1970; Lena, 2010). The task to successfully identify, let alone research and examine creativity is a far-reaching saga that has been fraught with contradiction and debate for hundreds—if not thousands— of years (Albert, 2010). A secondary challenge on this point is that once the term is defined, the definition provided often provides unnecessarily confining understandings of what it means to be creative (Medeiros, 2014). There is a broad range of understandings about creativity and the role it plays in human lives. An interesting quality of the search to define creativity is that, more often than it is associated with a definitive term or definition, creativity serves as a reconciler between two sides of a dichotomy.

For example, when attempting to define the meaning of creativity, one must consider whether creativity is a universal attribute of humanity, or a selective skill pertaining to an individual. One must address the basic premise of universal versus selective creativity. Other definitions attempt to delineate the meaning of creativity by characterizing creativity by an understanding of product/process (Klein, 1982), 'big C/little c' (Medeiros, 2014), abandon/constraint (Symes, 1983), innate ability/practice (Lloyd-Jones, 1970), novelty/reinforcement (Lloyd-Jones, 1970), or as originating from either the individual or from the group (Lena, 2010). While no understanding is necessarily incorrect, and ambiguity runs deep in the dialogue, some definitions can provide troublesome points of focus for applying creativity in relation to meaning-making. For the purposes of this study, creativity will be understood as a foundational, and thus universal, human trait— such as the propensity to make meaning. Since every human being is inherently coming from a different set of circumstances, experiences, and genetic make-up, each person has

a unique perspective on the world. For this study, the base definition of creativity is the ability to share one's own unique perspective of life with others.

**Three Views on Creativity**

A biological view of creativity zooms in on Darwinian processes of trial and error. Natural selection is dependent on two elements: blind variation and selective retention (Boon, 2014). In other words, creative processes and evolution both function as systems of random selection (spontaneous inspirations, epiphanies, etc.) that are then selectively favored by circumstance (people in your society value your art). John Sweller (2009) argues that the evolutionary process is mirrored exactly by the cognitive basis of human creativity, with mutation equating creative inspiration as equally inexplicable phenomena within the evolutionary process.

In contrast, a sociological perspective on creativity examines the relationship between the individual and the group. Lena et al., provides a compelling perspective on creativity as striking a perfect balance between establishing individuality by producing novel ideas, while simultaneously acting with a certain sense of necessary conformity to a dominant group or culture (2010). This view of creativity emphasizes the fact that creativity must first be brought into existence through an individual, but that it must also necessarily be received and recognized by a community before it is legitimized. In this way, creativity is integrally related to social patterning (Lena, 2010)

Finally, a psychological take on creativity amplifies questions of motivation—such as whether extrinsic or intrinsic motivation is more commonly linked with personality traits that support creativity. Some studies have found that propensity towards creativity involves

incorporating a balance of being "curious and imaginative on the one hand and focused and productive on the other hand" (Boon, 2010, 45). This unique combination results in heightened frequency of instances of mental illness such as bipolarity and mood disorders among creative people (Boon, 2010). One article argues that the only specification drawing the line between insanity and artistry is whether or not a person's creative productions are recognized by cultural 'knowers'—individuals with the propensity to shape cultural trends—within their lifetime (Saltofte, 2011).

These three lenses on creativity exemplify its dynamic role in shaping human bodies, consciousness, and society and serve to help narrow down the purpose of creative expression as it relates to death awareness and meaning making throughout this study.

**Creative Constraints**

The second framework for examining the role of creativity as it relates to meaning-making looks at factors—both actual and perceived—which constrain creativity, and which, in different combinations, can both encourage and inhibit the creative problem-solving process.

The most common perceived constraints come in forms like the inner critic, deficit perceptions, and fixed mindset, and inhibit the creative process. These perspectives are based in fear, shame, and cultural conditioning and can create significant barriers for individuals to reach their personal creative expression potential

In contrast to the hurdle-effect of perceived constraints, and despite the fact that many associate creative expression with the fiery throws of uninhibited abandon, studies have shown that a balanced degree of actual constraints applied to a creative task can result

in increased creative problem-solving and more prolific outcomes (Medeiros, 2014; Haught-Tromp, 2017). This is because a certain amount of structure or a particular prompt can help challenge and stimulate creative abilities to apply to the specific challenge at hand. One example of this phenomenon occurred in a study where participants were provided greeting card poetry prompts. The findings demonstrated that participants who were given additional constraints (in the form of required words to include in their poems) wrote more original and intriguing poems than those who were left with utter freedom in their composition (Haught-Tromp, 2017).

The debate over the role of constraints in relation to creativity is a long and well-populated dialogue. While some perceived constraints might over-inhibit how we express creative individuality in our modern culture, evidence supports the position that small actual constraints can go a long way in amplifying the quality and depth of creative expression

**Creativity and Reform**

The third framework for understanding creativity in relation to meaning-making examines how individuals can apply creativity to combat institutionalized discrimination and narrow understandings of intelligence and value in education. A heightened cultural emphasis on creativity can cultivate progress towards equity and social justice through development of voice and meaning-making for individuals and groups.

Though there have been many studies looking into creativity as the dependent variable— an end affected by other factors such as constraints—there have been

surprisingly few studies done on creativity as an independent variable that can lead to new outcomes (Kauffman, 2017). By choosing to value creativity in the classroom, educators can challenge existing inequities that validate and value particular types of knowledge within traditional school settings. Creativity is a profound and natural equalizer. A study on "Self-Reported Differences in Creativity by Ethnicity and Gender," shows that increasing value placed on creativity can reduce stereotype threat (Kauffman, 2006; Grantham, 2013). The report found that, contrary to negative stereotypes regarding knowledge plaguing specific racialized populations in the United States, African American males and Native American students of all genders tended to rate themselves as comparably more creative than other ethnicities and gender combinations (Kauffman, 2006). The study suggested that the under-representation of minority students in gifted programs results from the fact that identification for these programs happens generally through standardized tests. Kauffman (2006) states that a "sophisticated creativity measure that incorporates multiple domains could increase fairness" (p. 1074). A reprioritization that focuses on creativity could level this critical field and create space for more diverse voices and intelligences to be recognized within public education (Grantham, 2013).

The role of creativity as a transformative force can be applied for both the individual and the society. The primary way that creativity manifests as a transformative form for the individual is in helping to develop voice (Mott-Smith, 2008; Lightfoot, 2008; Saltofte, 2011). One view of the role of education in social transformation offers, "schools provide each generation with social and symbolic sites where new relations, new representations, and new knowledge can be formed, sometimes against, sometimes tangential to, sometimes coincident with, the interests of those holding power' (Saltofte,

2011, p. 145). This relation to new knowledge creation also echoes the connection between creativity and meaning making. These interactions thus by extension have a creative potential for changing and extending cultural perceptions of the role of death and meaning in daily living

In discussing the interstitial spaces between classes in a school (ie. passing periods), Margit Saltofte (2011) says, "…such creative spaces give those students who may not be recognised by the teacher their own experiences of inclusion and of having 'a voice'. In doing so, the students explore different ways of knowing and of being a knower" (p. 149). In these ways, creativity is a critical vehicle for building space to include a new generation of diverse voices into the change-making conversation dictating the direction of our societal progression.

The impact of finding voice and community validation for the individual feeds naturally into the next level of reform for the educational system and society at large. Educational reform provides an important intersection for diversity and creativity. In his address titled, "Creative Defiance," Chaz Maviyane-Davies (2016) addresses how he has transformed constraint—in the form of the downfall of his home country, Zimbabwe's, entire social and economic structure—into opportunity to blossom creativity. He argues that, "We can only grow as designers through an enriched symbolism and visual language that is truthful and meaningful not only to us, but beneficial to a world that is running out of ideas other than those dictated by transnational opportunism" (p. 632). This view is significant not only because it reinforces cultural relevancy as an aspect of creativity, but also because it dictates the charge that creative force be used for the betterment of society.

# Meaning-Making

## Meaning-Making Deficit

Questions about meaning, "… have vexed human beings ever since they acquired the powers of self-transcendence and became to some extent masters of their culture, constructors of their institutions, authors of their own lives, and in general partners in creation" (Adams, 2002, p. 71-2). We make meaning in order to classify objects, manage relationships, reference our own physical form, and negotiate the agency of the self (Marsen, 2008). Throughout our evolution, this has been widely regarded as the defining feature that sets the conscious human animal apart from the rest of the kingdom—it is quite literally what makes us human. Meanwhile, the academic dialogue has been suspiciously silent regarding the central issue as it relates to our actual lived experience of the world. E. M. Adams (2002) points out, "Philosophers have given enormous attention to the value question but scarcely any to the phenomenon of meaning in connection with life" (p. 71).

In line with the pervasive cultural deficits we face in mortality awareness and creative expression, modern society similarly faces a severely depleted emphasis on meaning-making. In many ways, financial pursuits have replaced individuals' pursuits to make meaning. This reality comes into stark focus with the distressing reality of *Karoushi*, an epidemic in Japan of seemingly work-related sudden deaths wherein otherwise healthy young professionals working extreme overtime hours are having heart attacks and other sudden systemic failures. Walter Tubbs (1993) proposes that this, "stress-death is actually caused by the cumulative, long-range effects of working in a situation where one feels trapped and powerless to effect any change for the better, which in turn leads to attitudes of hopelessness…" (p. 869). With this interpretation, Tubbs suggests that a shift in societal

prioritization away from a focus on forms of meaning-making is so detrimental that it is in fact causing young people to drop dead in their tracks.

Humans make meaning in infinite colorful ways. This intense and varied search for meaning is what has resulted in the better part of literature, music, culture, religion and all other characteristically human facets of our existence. Among this breadth, two methods for meaning-making assert themselves as our primary outlets for formulating understandings of events, objects, and persons around us: language and design.

**How We Make Meaning: Language, Design, and Metaphor**

Language is a foundational way that humans convert their sensory experiences and perceptions into synthesized meaning (Marsen, 2008; Adams, 2002; Nelson, 1989, Mirtz, 1993; Dyson, 1995; Miles 1985). Phenomenologically, meaning looks at the importance of subjective interpretation in creating meaning, but also argues for a certain degree of inherent qualities in an object that guide the interpretation process. Applying a semiotic perspective to meaning making considers the ways that textual and verbal language act as critical factors, not only of organizing and communicating meaning, but of making it (Adams, 2002). When Adams (2002) points out that, "the most revealing thing we can say about a life is that it can be told," he is addressing the fact that a concept of a life and a telling of a life are synonymous. A "life," as a contained entity, exists only within the confines of the story we tell it as. Without this overarching narrative to provide important barriers, recognize the meaning of specific events, and organize the relationships around us, we are left simply with a collection of sensory experiences. This reality has strong implications for the power of the storying we do in relation to our lives and deaths. It makes a strong argument for exploring and manipulating language to impact the way we perceive

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the meaning of our lives.

Many studies point to the fact that language processing is critical for wellbeing, and that suppressing it can have serious detrimental effects (Neimeyer, 2012). Hymovitz (1978) states, "talk will resurrect pain, but any alternative to one who wishes to communicate is a torturous burden" (p. 14). With this statement, he is illuminating that though it is not always a pleasant, or simple task, dialogical processing of traumatic or significant events is a vital piece of personal process and meaning making.

In addition to language, design serves as an important tool for developing meaning. Kazmierczak (2003) explains, "Design draws upon the concept of diagrammatic reasoning, and proposes that all designs be regarded as diagrams of mental maps of individual and collective cultures" (p. 45). With this she shows how we might consider design in this context as the visual equivalent of language. By legitimizing one's story, image, or idea of one's life through an intentional visual design, one is able to better conceptualize the meaning of that representation and deepen understanding. She goes on, "Its focus on the diagrammatic nature of knowledge presentation necessitates the emergence of intelligent design as informed by a rational selection and a combining of visual syntax" (2003, 45). In this way, processing through design serves as an additional and complimentary form to verbal or written syntax as a method for meaning making.

Language and design unite under the concept of metaphor. Aristotle said, "midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace, it is metaphor which most produces knowledge" (Aristotle 1952, III, 1410b). In line with this characterization, Marsen (2008) illuminates the fact that "metaphor is ubiquitous as a cognitive faculty, but also it is closely

connected with awareness of embodiment and with sensory perception. Theories of art support this" (p. 6). This depiction shows metaphor as reconciler between abstract meaning or felt sensation and constructed communication that can be used to share information with another. For example, in explaining one's life in story form to a friend, the individual creates something entirely new and separate from their actual lived experience which is the 'story' or their life through this particular telling. This story then becomes a metaphor, through which the person can reexperience their life and also communicate it to others. Similarly, one might draw a timeline of their life on a sheet of paper and label significant decades or events. This graphic depiction then serves as a visual, tangible metaphor through which the individual might reevaluate their lifetime. This potentiality for growth afforded by this opportunity to assess and examine ones experience through a semi-structured metaphoric lens  demonstrates the value of metaphoric reasoning through language and design to manage meaning-making of physical lived experience (Marsen, 2008).

Design as a process to facilitate meaning connects back to mortality awareness. In their exploration of fear and anxiety surrounding death, Castano et al. (2011), discuss Terror Management Theory as, "a general theory of human behavior in which existential concerns occupy central stage" (p. 603).  The theory proposes that in order to manage, "the anxiety that derives from the awareness of the inevitability of one's death, individuals will imbue their universe with meaning and strive to place themselves in the center of that universe - or at least to get a decent seat" (Castano, 2011, p. 603). In this way, storying, or meaning making, is elucidated as the central remedy in buffering anxiety surrounding death. With this idea in mind, an opportunity is opened to instead embrace mortality's meaning within the cycle of life. Hymovitz (1978) clarifies, "death education establishes a

framework for our years, to give meaning, purpose and direction to our growth- to discern shadow from substance" (p. 17). It is within that discerning, that the meaning of life is revealed.

**The Big Picture**

This literature review aims to examine how drawing one's awareness to the topics of death, and intentional creativity can be used to build and uncover meaning in life. While the implications of this statement are strong for the individual, the impact on the larger society is equally significant. The experiences, beliefs and actions of individuals create the systemic structure underlying our society, and the results can be enlightening or damning. As Marsen (2008) points out, "…if we defined the human enterprise in terms of the enhancement of the meaningfulness and worthwhileness of our lives…we would generate a humanistic civilization in contrast with our modern materialistic culture that has been generated by our preoccupation with the acquisition of wealth, power, and possessions" (p. 10). This utopian view of a culture founded on creating meaning for life and death offers an alternative to the reality we live in, wherein consumerism has been the main driving force behind systemic structures.

This alternative reality illuminates the ways in which a nod to our own mortality does not disregard life, but rather elevates and invigorates it. In this way, death awareness is not only a beneficial and natural awareness to harbor, but it just might be the missing link in adjusting our societal priorities to reflect the culture of acceptance, clarity, and creative problem-solving that so many avidly attempt to cultivate. "As an ethical and moral imperative, we cannot fully appreciate life unless we know about death. When we are cognizant that death is the natural end of human existence and the contribution it makes to

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life, we abandon empty roles and expectations to dedicate each hour to grow and to live as fully as we can. (1978, 17). In this way, creative meaning making through metaphoric processes like language and design is not only a method for increased personal wellbeing, it is a powerful vehicle for social reform.

In acknowledging the deficit of appropriate death education for a large segment of the general population, and in light of the powerful role of the creative processes of language and design elucidated through the frameworks presented in this review, this study aims to address the gap in applying language and design activities to understand one's one mortality and to encourage an increased awareness of the purposeful meaning created within one's own life.

# METHODOLOGY

## Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore how awareness of the fact of one's own mortality through intentional dialogical processing and semi-structured design activities impacts meaning-making in day-to-day living. As a means to address this question the project aimed to examine the role of systemic structures and cultural values and how they impact meaning-making for individuals. The study also sought to explore which processes individuals found most fertile for cultivating meaning both in living and in facing their own inevitable mortality, as well as whether or not those meaning-making processes were mutually exclusive, identical, or interacting factors within an evolving relationship.

## Research Approach

The primary research question pursued in this study explores how intentional dialogical processing and creative design of one's own lifetime in relationship to death influences meaning-making in day to day life. Dialogic processing is a fertile opportunity for knowledge creation and personal process (Paris & Winn, 2013) and as such is the preferred method to fulfill the research goals put forth in this study. The dialogic process is central to this research as the data collected arose through semi-structured interview conversations between the researcher and voluntary participants.

The study is based on qualitative data. It is rooted in a constructivist worldview in that it is concerned primarily with the diverse and multifaceted ways in which human beings construct meaning out of their engagement in the world. Moreover, the research

recognizes the significance of context in shaping historical and social perspectives of individuals, the role of the researcher's own background in how findings are interpreted, and the nature of meaning as arising through interaction and dialogical engagement. The project also stems from a transformative approach as it applies an intentional sensitivity to historical and social power dynamics—such as the researcher/participant relationship—and validation of diverse understandings of knowledge.

This study aims towards a transformative worldview in its broadest aim to impact the emerging values and trends in our evolving culture so that we might, as a society, apply intention to the systemic structures we are codifying through our daily interpretations and social affirmations of how we prioritize time. In this way, the project aims toward an action agenda of challenging the, at best, complacent and, at worst, oppressive, societal belief structures and mythologies that limit the value we attribute to diverse forms of meaning making across human cultures and individual voices. In allowing space in the academic dialogue for the creative and powerful role of human understanding of meaning in individual lives to shape dominant social structures, this research aims to promote a more informed, equitable and celebratory perspective on the diverse realities of human experience and the unique strategies we depend on to navigate the process.

The study follows a phenomenological approach to qualitative research as it focuses on lived experiences of individuals surrounding the phenomena of death and meaning making in their own lives. It follows grounded theory in attempting to extrapolate a general theory of process by navigating these lofty philosophical topics through the views and

understandings of participants. In line with this approach, semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method applied for this study.

## Research Design

Considering the inherent sensitivity surrounding topics of meaning, life, and death, it was necessary that participation be 100% voluntary and preferred that participants have some degree of previously established familiarity with the researcher. For these reasons, convenience sampling was used to recruit voluntary participation of students and faculty from four graduate level courses at Dominican University of California—two from the Department of Education and two from the Department of Humanities. Following a brief in-class presentation, a sign-up sheet was circulated during a period in each classroom. Interested individuals were contacted with a follow-up email to schedule an interview date for January or February 2018 at a time and location of their choosing. Voluntary participation from additional persons outside of Dominican University was also included. An emphasis on the value of diverse voices for the study was acknowledged in recruitment. Ultimately, the voluntary nature of participant acquisition dictated the range of ethnicities, ages, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, genders, abilities, and other factors of diversity within the participant pool. The distribution resulted as follows:

| Participant | Age | Nationality | Self-proclaimed Childhood SES | Ethnicity | Gender | Current Course of Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mary | 34 | Swiss | Upper-middle | White | Female | Humanities MA |
| Rachel | 28 | American | Lower | White | Female | Nursing MA |
| Dan | 39 | British | Lower | White | Male | Humanities MA |
| Jonathon | 61 | American | Middle | White | Male | Humanities MA |
| Bryan | 25 | American | Upper | White | Male | Education MA |

At least one week before the scheduled meeting, participants were provided with consent forms and interview questions so that they could familiarize themselves and have time to prepare for the interviews as they chose. In this way, participants had an opportunity to brainstorm, write down their responses, and then proactively shape the interview based off of their own written responses if they so chose. In this way, they had an opportunity for an initial level of personal processing before engaging in the dialogic process of the interview.

During the actual data collection, voluntary participants were asked to conduct a 90-minute, recorded, semi-structured interview. The process consisted of three phases. First, two introductory design activities exploring divisions of lifetime and daily energy allotment, and preconceived ideas about death were completed using either blank sheets of paper or semi-structured design sheets consisting of either a circle or two dots to scaffold the creative design process (See Appendix A). These activities prompted participants to begin the process of critically reflecting on the ways in which they organize and prioritize their time—and thus how they create meaning in their lives both abstractly through a zero-sum vision of how they divide their moment to moment capacity for engagement (the circle diagram), as well as through a more overview-based understanding of how they allot their time over the somewhat linear structure of a lifetime (Point A/ Point B diagram) beginning with the present moment and ending with the eventual event of their own death. A wide variety of creative art pens, pastels, and pencils were provided for participant use.

The semi-structured interview was framed at the beginning and end with simple graphic organizer activities covering similar topics to those explored through the interview

questions. This structure was an intentional acknowledgment in light of Kazmierczak's (2003) understanding of creative design in this form as a means to organize experience and derive meaning from circumstance. The design activities were also included as an additional medium for participants to express their beliefs and record their reactions to the process as a means to cultivate a broader set of data that tapped non-linguistic forms of participants' knowledge and understanding.

Next the researcher and participant engaged in dialogical discussion of their responses to a series of open-ended interview questions on topics of meaning making and different aspects of participants' relationships to death, especially their own. This made up the main body of the interview. Questions were all selected from a predefined list, though different interviews focused on different questions based on the interests of both participants and the naturally dictating flow and time constraints of the interview.

Finally, participants were asked to complete two closing design activities that mirror the original opening ones. This final phase serves to illuminate shifts in understanding resulting from the dialogical process for both participant and researcher. It also aided in the process of reconstructing meaning and integrating the dialogical meaning making accomplished through the process of the interview for the participants in their lives moving forward.

Meetings occurred at the preferred time, date, and location of the interviewee to maximize participant sense of ease. Semi-structured interviews were recorded using computer voice recording software, a back-up iPhone recording, and direct dictation through included MacBook dictation software. Hand-written notes were also collected and

categorized according to the interviews they pertained to. Recorded voice memos, copies of all appendixes, and written notes were collected during interviews. These documents did not include names or identifying information of participants. A resource sheet delineating local resources to support individual processing of topics including grief management was provided at the close of the interview. In line with a humanized approach to research, an open line of communication was established between participant and researcher and all participants were provided the optional opportunity for an additional follow-up discussion in the weeks following the initial interview.

Dialogical processing through language and intentional graphic design are two of the most widely recognized appropriate and proactive approaches to process the important life topics of both meaning-making and death (Marsen, 2008; Edgar, 1994; Kazmierczak, 2003). The primary goal of this research was to provide participants with a safe and stimulating process and space to manageably work out some of their beliefs, fears, hopes, and intentions around the universally relevant life aspects of death and meaning-making. Every effort was made to ensure that participants were treated with the utmost discretion and sensitivity. Participants were offered the opportunity to keep copies of all of the materials used/collected during the interview, as well as given access to a copy of the recording for their session if desired.

## Data Analysis

A multi-step coding process was utilized to identify patterns, themes, and contradictions within transcribed interviews, interview notes, and graphic organizers. Once a preliminary coding was completed, an inductive-deductive process of reasoning was used

to move between emerging themes to further develop and recognize the key concepts of the findings in light of the primary and secondary research questions of the study.

## Positionality and Validity

Obtaining data is never neutral. The complexities of a researcher's positionality and perspective, as well as the many challenges of navigating power dynamics and relationships within the historical researcher-participant relationship are inherent in any research endeavor. With this awareness, throughout this research I have done my utmost to engage in constant reflexivity and consider the ways in which my personal background and positionality shape the relationship I have to the participants and data collected. A dual background in cultural anthropology and literature focuses my attention on power dynamics and potential sensitivities within the relationship of any two people, and in particular that of the participant and observer.

Entering this study, I am interested in the ways my experiences and perspectives influence my findings. In reflecting on my own positionality, I find a potentially very privileged ability to characterize my background in very different ways depending on the salient identity factors selected. For example, I am very aware of my privilege as an American citizen and white person, who has enjoyed access to quality education and safe, rural environments for most of my life. Alternatively, I can characterize myself through my low-income, high-risk upbringing, challenges as a women in a male-dominated society, and life-long negotiation with what it means to be a Jewish minority in different communities. These competing narratives challenge and inform each other to build the place from which I experience the world. Beyond these more widely-recognized aspects of

identity, I am also interested in the ways my identifications as an artist, an older sibling, and an introvert, among others, similarly shape my research. I have done my best to acknowledge the intersections of these various identity factors with this study.

This study draws on Paris and Winn's (2013) understanding of a "humanized approach" to research in that it views the research process as dialogical—existing in the space created between the researcher and observer—and privileges a view of the researcher "…as-participant-as-listener-as-learner-as-advocate." This role of the researcher is intrinsically intertwined in the findings of the study. This project functions under an assumption of mutual respect with participants as holders of knowledge and understanding, and the researcher as witness, operating under the privilege of observing and participating in interpreting that process.

With this view, it is the intention of this study to operate under an actively reflective, critical, and conscious mindset, with ready admittance to missteps and an eager acceptance to learn from experiences and move forward with intention. The objectifying or "othering" tendencies of research historically provide a sensitive and heated backdrop for the endeavor even to present day projects. That said, it is the hope of this study to focus on content that is indisputably relevant across factors of identity such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or gender. As a person, I trust my innate passionate curiosity, sense of intense urgency, and perpetually renewed interest in the topics covered—death, creativity, and meaning making—as indicators of the dialogue's significance within my own lived human experience, and by extension, hopefully that of others. As a researcher, I am

compelled by the potential of directing large-scale attention to such uniquely common ground.

In addition to these meta perspectives on the sensitive ethical issues that may arise, this study is intentional about the moment to moment experiences of participants. All participants in this study were established peer classmates or professors in relation to the researcher prior to the commencement of the research project. This initial equal footing, if not reversal in the case of a university professor, aids in addressing the established researcher position of power. Due to the sensitive topics explored, it also aids in removing one layer of formality or discomfort between researcher and participant in that the two already share a certain amount of common experiences and interactions with one another within a neutral context.

Furthermore, at the start of each interview, hot tea, cookies and chocolates were made available as a symbol of shared space, communal experience, safety, and celebration. Participants were encouraged to follow their own process in relation to the material and were offered additional resources and support should they want it.

Beyond these measures, this study aims to focus on consistent systems to support validity and reliability. Strong efforts were made to triangulate as much data as possible to identify emerging themes. Additionally, thick descriptions were attempted for the contexts and circumstances of data collection to provide readers with contextual information in which to situate findings. Counter points were included wherever encountered.

Finally, this study worked at including the participant as much as possible in the research process—beginning with the interview's closing feedback request (*Is there*

*anything missing in this interview/data collection process that you were expecting/would like to see included?)*; and continuing with member checking by providing a copy of the finished report to each participant to ensure their endorsement of the researcher's interpretations of their knowledge and data in its final form.

# Findings

## Overview and Introduction to Findings

Through ten hours seated mostly at university picnic tables in small groves of sunlit trees—though occasionally also in snug cream-colored rooms, sandwiched in amongst pianos and instrument lockers and attempting to talk over the gentle rising voices of a choir—this study has uncovered a body of understanding about the ways that higher education students negotiate the turbulence of meaning around their own lives and deaths.

The first section of findings in this study examines how systemic influences on meaning-making and societal climate surrounding death are perceived by participants. Then, the second section introduces the significant finding that meaning-making in life and death are of fundamentally different constitution. Finally, the third section delves into processes of meaning making and how they fundamentally differ in life and in preparation of death. This final discussion is further divided into three subtopics: learning, creative expression, and community. In creating meaning in life, learning was primarily emphasized. As death loomed hypothetically nearer, this emphasis shifted from learning, to seeking out opportunities to communicate knowledge learned through creative expression and connection with others. The role of community as a meaning-making force shifted from an emphasis on helping others as a source of joy and mitigating suffering, to others as a source of validation and meaning in the final creative expressions of living before close-approaching death.

# "When is the Me Time?"—System Influences, Societal Climate, and the Role of Meaning-Making

We have reached a degree of research and understanding within the social sciences where we can no longer ignore the significant impact of culture on the lived experience of the individual. To varying degrees, all participants of this study cited societal, community, or cultural structures that influenced their ability to make meaning. Though some structures, such as family and exercise routines, enhanced their abilities to make meaning, most discussed systems that made focusing on meaning more challenging.

The first five questions of the interviews poked at defining meaning-making for each individual participant according to their interests, desires, priorities, and actions. Questions ranged from the basic (*What do I most like to do*?) to the more directly metaphysical (*What is the meaning of my life?).* The nuances and patterns of these responses are discussed in the following findings section, entitled "I Think We Can Learn from Anything." Before addressing these specifics, this section examines a more relational understanding of how participants perceive systemic influences on their abilities to each practice their own individualized processes of meaning-making within their larger cultural context.

Reading is the primary way that Johnathon, a 61-year old insurance salesman and student of humanities, chooses to obtain new information and stimulate meaning in his life. Speaking of his daily scheduling and obligations, he lamented, "They become too much…when is the me time? When do I get to read?" With this statement, Johnathon points to the demands of a modern western lifestyle as inhibiting his ability to create meaning.

Similarly, 25-year-old education student Bryan remembers his early trauma in encountering the expectations of his society. In response to the question of when did he know he wanted to be a teacher, Bryan replied:

> *All I knew was that I didn't want to put on a suit and go into the city,*
> *you know? And that was in middle school. I kind of like almost saw into*
> *the future, and how I was. I was a good student. So I'm like okay, well*
> *what's expected of me? What do people expect me to do? And I felt like*
> *the answer was people expect me to: do good in school, put on a suit,*
> *and go into the city. And I was like Naw.*

Bryan's very understanding of what it means for him to make meaning is defined through opposition to the general climate of the cultural norms he inhabits. He goes on to describe the psychological impact of this social pressure:

> *So then it was a couple years of being worried. like what am I gonna*
> *do? Cause in my head, that's like the only option available, unless I*
> *wanted to just do something crazy, right?*

Of primary interest here, was Bryan's understanding that to choose a path in opposition to the dominant pressure of a cultural value system focused more on corporate definitions of success is not just devalued, but ludicrous to the extent of unfathomability. Discerning ways to make meaning is in itself a lofty task to undertake in a lifetime. Adding the hurdle of cultural antagonism makes a difficult process even more obscure. Bryan continues to describe the combination of luck, mentorship, and enduring systemic resistance that led him to his love of teaching and practicing ceramic art. He cites a final encounter in college with a teacher whose classroom structure Bryan found unconducive to creative development as the final catalyst that helped him realize that maybe he "could teach the class better" and encouraged him to pursue teaching art, one of his primary sources of meaning in life today.

Rachel, a 28-year-old nursing student, gets more specifically into the features of culture that challenge her ability to make meaning. She discusses the trouble with systems that:

> *...Make anyone feel like they're just a number in a factory and are not allowed to just be themselves. How we have to shut off so much of ourselves and our personality to fit the role for our job and how that can just suffocate the soul and how that just bleeds into everything. It's like frustration. So you feel like you can't be yourself which creates an internal conflict within yourself that causes tension in every relationship that you have.*

The destructive ripple effect pattern that Rachel discussed elucidates how participating in a set of priorities that does not have meaning-making as its fundamental point of origin can spread to diminish one's ability to make meaning even through alternative avenues such as through relationships.

In line with each of these perspectives, 39-year-old university employee and humanities student, Dan, discusses how he selected the administrative position he currently holds:

> *The meaning for me is all related to what I want to do...or who I want to be. I very specifically chose a day job that I can do easily. Not to belittle my job, but there are people who do jobs that they just really hate. And they do it for 40-50 hours a week, and it just sucks the life out of them. I think having a job that doesn't stress you out, that you don't hate frees me up, I think mentally more than anything, to then develop myself in what I do want to do. I don't come home bringing my work home, I just don't. I don't get paid a lot of money...but that's so much more important to me, doing a job that doesn't pay much but allows me to pursue what I really want to be.*

Both Rachel and Dan reference a particular feeling of "sucking the life" or "suffocating the soul," reflecting the close association that these participants maintain between the ability to focus energy in life on making meaning and the very source of existence. Further on in the conversation, Dan clarifies directly, "I don't want to work in a corporate environment

because I just hate that whole system. Just being near an educational environment, is just fantastic. Being around people who want to talk about important shit. That's reeaaallly important. And I wish everyone could do it." At this point, Dan went deeper into his system analysis in considering the privilege that he and I shared in that moment of participation in this research:

> *That's a system that I could complain about is the cost of education and how privileged you and I are to be sat here doing this. And it's sooo important. Everyone I've met, everyone I work with in class, I think is very aware of that. Which I think is very important. The fact that education isn't free or a lot cheaper, especially for nonwhite people and poorer people, just really sucks.*

The values that Dan brings into question here reflect a more complete picture of modern western culture in that they comment not only on the pressures of the career market as illuminated by earlier participant comments, but also on the educational systems that feed into that value system. This focal point is of particular interest to the dialogue put forth in this study in that education is exemplified as a primary resource center for creating meaning in lifetimes as environments for learning, community development, and creative expression.

As exemplified, all participants reported experiencing some degree of opposition to a life path focused primarily on making meaning from a more dominant cultural system of values. However, in contrast, four out of the five participants explicitly volunteered their beliefs that it was important and beneficial to give such topics thought. Expressing their gratitude and support of the process, three of the participants went so far as to send me, the researcher, thank you notes for the interview before I had time to thank them for their participation. Furthermore, in contrast to what the literature review, along with these preliminary findings suggest, all of the participants interviewed had indeed found time

within their system-inhibited lifestyles to give some degree of thought to the meaning in their lives. Granted that participation was convenience-based and voluntary, all participants provided clear and readily retrievable answers in regard to the first five questions of the interview around the meaning of life. It seems that despite the detrimental forces of a cultural value system that debases meaning making as the primary human endeavor, each individual had managed to squirrel away just enough attention and energy to divulge a reasonably comprehensive and congruent narrative as to how they make meaning in their lives. The answers to these foundational inquiries follow in the subsequent section.

## "And Then I Knew": How Individuals Create Meaning

A key finding of this study was that meaning-making in life and meaning-making in preparation for death are fundamentally different processes. An illustrative anecdote offered by one participant clarifies this distinction in light of weighing the consequences of critical life decisions, such as when and when not to succumb to addiction:

> *I was living in the canal and I was gonna go out and drink. Again. And I had my hand on the door, and I was gonna walk out, I knew where I was going, to the liquor store. And I suddenly had this thought. If I go out and drink again, I may die. Eh, Big deal. Or I may live…Fuck! Wait a minute, wait a minute…hold on a second…so I didn't. And I haven't had a drink since.*

Of critical important here is the participant's discernment that there is a significant difference in the meaning he is able to construe of circumstances when facing death, versus when faced with the ongoing meaning-making process of living. The participant continues:

> *So, the moral of the story is and the thing that I get to at different turning points in my life—when I decide to get married, when I decide to quit my job and start my own company, all these things— 'I can't live like this anymore.'*

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The final statement, "I can't live like this anymore," is presumably in contrast to an alternative declaration in the direction of "this cannot be the circumstances of my death." The shift evidenced by this perspective will be further discussed in relation to each of the following subtopics of Learning, creativity, and community.

**"I think we can learn from anything"—Learning as Meaning-Making**

One of the greatest evolutionary advantages of humans has been our distinguished ability to learn from one another. Learning is a foundational instinct and also a natural source of delight for many species of mammals and birds. Play, characterized as "the luxury of luxuries," is a distinct mode of learning. Play exists within a period of suspended time and space within the waking hours of the day (Bellah, 2011, xxi). In many ways, and in its more idealistic light, learning as an activity within the current educational system can be characterized in much a similar way. Learning in school settings involves partaking in experiential activities within an artificially constructed period of space and time to develop further understanding and knowledge. This fundamental relationship between learning and playing informs the following finding that learning is one of the principal ways that participants create meaning in their day-to-day lives.

All participants in the study cited learning as a source of meaning making. Many pointed directly to structured school participation generally in the form of their current higher education courses, while others noted avenues of learning including travel, hardship, and self-exploration. It is important to note that the specific population surveyed in this study consisted of 100% higher education students. This reality is reflected in the finding that all participants cited their higher education courses as a way that they create meaning regularly in day-to-day living.

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When asked to reflect on a time in her life when she felt amazing/fulfilled, Rachel described:

> *It was my craziest semester at [public undergraduate university]. I was taking like 23 units, nine classes. A couple were exercise classes, but still required my time and energy. One of the classes was a Buddhism meditation class. I often wonder if that was a key that made that quarter feel manageable. I took so much away from every class I took at [university]. Being busy, active, taking good care of myself and just learning so much. And then everything I was doing in that moment was allowing me to do what I wanted—to finish school quickly and move to Hawaii. I felt really productive and like I was able to understand more about myself, people, how society works, the ins and outs of everything. There were so many moments of bliss, of just like leaving class and being so grateful that I had the opportunity to be at that school, in California, understanding and recognizing my privileges and taking full advantage of them.*

The distinct characteristics signified in Rachel's narrative include an accelerated period of stimulating academic learning, purposeful action in personal development through exercise and meditation classes, the capacity to work actively towards her next life goal of moving to Hawaii, and the opportunity to reflect and appreciate the meaning making process as it unfolds. All of these finding, and this final point in particular, are interesting in that Rachel is creating meaning through the very action of learning.

Similarly, in response to a question about which structures help support her ability to make meaning, Mary, a 34-year old humanities student, reflected on her lifelong relationship to education:

> *I like to spend time on Reading, So, basically education is very important for me in any form. And I think we can learn from anything, not just in school. Spending time with family, and then sports also…more like yoga. Yoga helps me be in my body, but also in my mind. To look, like reflection?*

With further reflection, Mary revealed specific aspects of her yoga classes that helped support her ability to make meaning.

> *I feel it is more powerful with other people around. I know it's a very individual thing, and probably it depends, but for me I feel it's much more powerful to have that energy of all those other people who are there for the same purpose you are. And I also think it's good sometimes to have somebody helping you, guiding you…*

In addition to the value of learning focused on with the first portion of this statement, here Mary highlights the importance of community and of mentorship as they relate to the learning—and thus, meaning-making—process. Through her analysis, she shows the heightened capacity to learn in the company of other learners and teachers, namely within a traditional education setting. Mary continues:

> *I've been a student for 7-8 years. It definitely has changed who I am and who I have become—how I think and see the world. It changed a lot. How I value myself or my life definitely increased with education. Just getting the feeling that you are capable and useful, it's helpful for self-esteem. The actual process of learning…the participation in a class and guidance of a professor helped me to order my thoughts, to make them more logical. Make more sense of my thoughts. I was always a thinker, but with education and with guidance, the more I read, the more I know, the more I understand myself and my thoughts better and it helps me make sense of it. Hence meaning.*

In discussing the impact of education on her life, Mary examines its value in developing her sense of who she is, what her capacity to contribute to society consists of, and ultimately how she understands the meaning of her life. In line with these findings, Jonathon and Dan both cited learning as their primary source of enjoyment and meaning, with Jonathon emphasizing the value of reading, while Dan focused on the value of enrollment in traditional higher education degree programs. Dan, in response to the question *What do you most like to do?* stated directly, "I like to learn. I did the Master's because I like to learn. A lot of my friendships are based on that." Like Mary, with this statement Dan

interweaves the significance of community with the significance of learning as a lifelong pursuit of meaning.

In addition to these more mainstream understandings of learning, many of the participants reflected on travel as an especially lucrative source of learning and meaning creation. Dan noted travel as the time he felt most fulfilled in life, saying:

> *Going travelling, which was for almost a year…I look back now, I was 21, 22 at the time. Especially coming back and seeing other people who had never done that, like friends of mine. And that's when I really felt it. I thought everyone should do that, to have that feeling I had. Just sort of opening my eyes a bit wider, like culturally, that felt pretty amazing. Or maybe more looking back afterwards, because you can't really think about it in the moment.*

It is interesting here that Dan clarifies that the value in travel is located primarily in the experience's ability to "open his eyes a bit wider" and his action of reflecting and learning from the experience in hindsight. These features highlight, once again, how it is the process of learning that most directly impacts meaning making in these instances.

In further support of this finding, Mary noted travel as her most favorite thing to do, as well as distinguished it as of primary prioritization in the event she discovered she had one year left to live. In commenting on what about travelling she values, she said, "I need that input. It's funny, I'm afraid of change a lot of times, but then also that's what I really like about travelling. That change, that constant moving on, that constant something going on, that stimulation, you just never know…yeah, travelling." The value here is located in travel as a heightened locus of information, exposure, and stimulation. It is a concentrated learning experience. Also in line with this thinking, Jonathon noted that one

of the best benefits of the financial comfort he had solidified through his insurance career, was the capability to travel freely as he chose.

Given one year left to live, Dan, Jonathon, Mary, and Rachel all said they would prioritize some degree of travel.

In addition to formal education, and travel, the slightly more sinister source of learning which was referenced unanimously by participants was hardship. All participants referenced periods of hardship, the perceived values of which was confirmed by a similarly unanimous agreement that, given the opportunity, none of the participants would alter the hardships they had endured. Lived experiences spanned the duration of lifetimes and ranged from childhood abuse, domestic violence, and depression, to bullying, alcoholism, anxiety, and familial conflict. Despite the suffering caused by these realities, in response to a question exploring having the power to change any of one's past, present, or future life circumstances, the response from participants was a unanimous and resounding "No." Aside from joking responses like "having a Playstation 4," or "growing a few inches taller," the only adjustments suggested were small pieces related to relationships. These included "I'd like to be closer to my sister" and "I would have broken up with my high school girlfriend differently." Mostly, people chose not to change anything. One humorously reflective participant replied, "If I were to ask for more then I would just be an asshole. I am safe. I don't starve, I have good people around. I've had so many opportunities through my resources." Not one participant wished to change the significant experiences of hardship that they had endured. Reasons mentioned for this decision included, "Everything happens for a reason," "there's no value in instant gratification," and "They got me where

I am today." Overall, the value in learning outweighed the negative suffering associated with the experience, further highlighting the privileged position of learning as an avenue for individuals to construct meaningful lives.

The final interesting finding in relation to the role of learning, was its sudden inapplicability in response to more immediately impending death. Though four out of five participants discussed learning as their primary source of meaning in life, when postulated with the circumstance of having one year left to live, all four participants agreed that they would stop pursuing their formal educations. Travel was prioritized by some in the final year, but always dropped off within the tighter timeframe of three months to live. This finding is perhaps due to travel's previously elucidated value as a heightened, or accelerated source of learning, in order to acquire one final burst of learning before shifting into knowledge application in preparation for death.

Aside from its diminished applicability in the face of more immediately imminent mortality, learning through avenues including education, self-reflection, travel, and hardship serves as a key source of meaning-making in day-to-day life. In contrast, the event of one's death commands a seemingly independent necessity for a different type of meaning making, one applicable within, but also utterly separate from the endeavor of meaning making in life. This bridging source of meaning in face of both life and death, is creative expression.

**"You're just sort of buzzing"—Creative Expression as Meaning-Making**

Intrinsically linked with the process of learning, creative expression is a fundamental source of meaning in life. Beyond this role, acting as a unique vehicle for self-expression and application of knowledge, creative expression is also, importantly, a critical and primary source of meaning making in preparation for a more fulfilling experience of death.

In life, participants explained that the role of creative expression is to make meaning directly, to help mitigate suffering, and to aid in strategic problem solving in difficult life circumstances. Just as all participants noted experiences of hardship, every participant at some point in the interview talked excitedly and with passion about their chosen medium for creative expression.

Dan referenced a specific memory of finishing a day of filming, noting:

> *Feeling like you've made something, feels just awesome. Everything I've ever made has felt like that…I remember in particular, I made a short film in London, and it was grueling, absolutely grueling! It took hours, hours longer than we expected each day. And I was sat in the car with three of my friends that made the film with me. We were just so tired, and we were eating KFC, 'cause you need that kind of crap after doing that. And we were just smiling, like, 'how awesome was that?' Like 'I just need to fall into bed just making that.' So we haven't even seen what we made yet…you're just sort of buzzing…*

The euphoric feeling that Dan references in relation to creative expression here was shared by other participants, as well. For Bryan, the connection to creativity was a central theme to his daily life. He explained:

> *Art is a big thing for me as far as making meaning. Yeah, I feel like one of the reasons I became an artist, or do art so often is just exactly to make meaning. I really kinda don't know why sometimes, but like in the moment, you're feeling expressive or thinking about something... Even making pottery, which is mostly what I do. It's just that very basic concept of humans and where we've come, how we used to make ceramics back in the day and we're still making ceramics now, but it's different. My attraction to ceramics was the human history element and*

*making meaning, humans, and why we do what we're doing. I felt like*
*ceramics was a connecting piece.*

It is intriguing that in this spontaneous discussion of his creative medium, Bryan cited the connection to a historical, or even 'prehistorical' evolution of humans making meaning through pottery. Of primary importance to his experience of the art form in his present lived experience, is his consciousness of the ongoing history of clay mediums in human art. He further noted strategic driving such as changing lanes on the freeway or passing other vehicles and critical thinking as other ways that he channels creative expression in his lived day to day experience.

Rachel similarly referenced critical thinking, perspective changing, and problem solving as sources of creative expression, in addition to a strong emphasis on dance. A unique element she raised was the physical embodiment of creative expression, noting:

*There's the physical side of it…dancing I guess, is what I'm thinking.*
*Because you just have to embody something. For me, it's like you have*
*to allow yourself to be vulnerable because you have to feel whatever*
*you're feeling because whatever you feel is going to come out in your*
*movement. If you're angry, you're going to hit something hard, you*
*know, and be more jerky with your moves. Or if you feel sad…I'm more*
*flowy and soft with my movement.*

The physical expression of dancing here, enables Rachel, not only to identify potential emotions and information, but also helps her practice her ability to stay "vulnerable' with those emotions and to learn from them. Dance, as a form of creative expression, is the channel through which her meaning making can take place. She resumes, further clarifying the value of this expression:

*I think, the moments when I need those outlets the most is always when*
*there is a conflict, some internal thing that feels like it's attacking my*

> *soul, a hardship, or something I don't understand.  That's when I use*
> *my resources most…of writing, dancing, singing in the car…*

This relationship between creative thinking/expression and hardship resurfaced later in the interview when Rachel reflected on a difficult period of living with a domestically violent partner in an isolated area.

> *When I was in Hawaii, I was so scared and confused, and trying to*
> *plan how to get out. And I was just painting and listening to this song*
> *and was just thinking 'this is not going to be my life. I'm not going to*
> *stay to see what happens next, I'm not going to find out the next piece*
> *of this. I won't let this control me, take my life, I'm going to get the fuck*
> *out. So, I was just painting…I did two things. I painted a canvas black*
> *and whatever shape I saw, I went with that, and I ended up seeing a*
> *face…the stroke of the paintbrush was therapeutic, and I needed to*
> *keep my hand busy because if I was just sitting there thinking, I felt like*
> *he would know what I was thinking…*

In this situation, creative expression served in a practical sense to help Rachel gain perspective and empowerment to make an important decision. The role of creativity to help clarify meaning is revealed to include a pragmatic element. Rachel goes on to describe how this act of creativity directly impacted her ability to not only cope with her suffering, but also to take action to improve her life circumstances.

> *I went into the bathroom with my phone and texted my friend saying,*
> *'I'm not safe. Don't respond. I'll text you later. I'm deleting this*
> *message. I'm not okay.' I think painting and listening to music allowed*
> *me to have some peace in that moment, make a plan, and inform*
> *somebody that I needed help.*

This direct application of creative expression to mitigate suffering in day-to-day life is matched by an anecdote experienced by Mary.

> *In the most terrible of times in my life, you know, when I felt really low*
> *or depressed, I did really great things, ha great things! (she laughs) It*
> *was meaningful, powerful things, like writing. A lot of my greater stuff*
> *came out of absolute despair. And you know, when I started taking*
> *Meds for depression and stuff, I could not be that creative anymore. It*
> *kind of changed…The urge to be creative changes whether I'm really*

*sad or really happy. I feel much more when I'm sad. When I was really
depressed I felt like I was feeling the whole pain of the whole world,
and I couldn't take it you know? So, I had to push it outward...*

For Mary, the relationship between meaning making and creativity is not just solid, but mutually dependent and dialectical. The capacity to create meaning depends on her ability to process emotions through creative expression. She clarifies this relationship:

*I think it's all very closely tied together. For me, if I'm talking about
meaning, then there's automatically a feeling attached to it. I cannot
think or talk about the meaning of my life without any emotion.
Different ones, many emotions, it can be all kinds of things, but it's
definitely not emotionless. So, I think everything that has emotion—
which I think creativity has to do with emotion— is also part of
meaning making. So for me, it is all related. Meaning making,
creativity, emotions. I mean yeah, of course.*

This dialectical relationship between suffering and creativity deepens in significance when considered in relation to death. Creativity helps mitigate fear, stress, and suffering around death through expression of emotion and connection/communication with others. Consequently, in return, death provides the necessary constraint, impermanence and emotional depth to make possible the hardship, suffering, and emotions expressible through creativity. This relationship is exemplified by the enhanced emphasis participants placed on creative expression when considering the final months and days of their lives.

In line with his love of pottery, Bryan discussed his lifelong artistic project of tall, ethereal 'Tree Pots' that recognize and embody different members of his community. He discussed the role of recognition in relation to artists' works and their deaths, and emphasized that given a limited number of days, "There would be more balance. More Art. More locking myself in the studio for days at a time." Rachel, Jonathon, and Dan all focused on expressing their voice and intentions to significant people in their lives.

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Jonathon emphasized saying goodbye, preferably in person, or over the phone, writing his eulogy in poetic form, making his funeral arrangements and finalizing the memorial playlist with specific songs like, "Heaven," by the Talking Heads and Lou Reed's "Perfect Day." Dan expressed a hope to produce some "sage advice to say to [his] brothers," while Rachel hoped to clarify her intentions more thoroughly, stating:

> *I would get my family and all my siblings together for a presentation…I'd want them to hear from me what it is that I'm doing, that this is my intention. I would want them to know all of that. My closest friends…how they've shaped my life, how they've influenced me…If I died, I would want people to acknowledge where my heart was and what it was reaching for.*

As evidenced by these findings, there is a distinct crossover between creative expression and community, especially as the two avenues for creating meaning relate to the event of preparing for a meaningful transition in one's own death. In the following section, community is examined as the third locus of meaning-making in life, and as one of the primary sources of meaning creation in relation to impending death.

**"Family first type thing"— Community as Meaning-Making**

Family and close friends proved central to meaning making for all five participants of the study, both in life and in preparation for meaningful death. Dan summed up the primary finding related to community fairly succinctly with the statement, "I think everyone on their death bed would probably say they wish they spent more time with the people they care about." All five participants referenced relationships as sources of

meaning and substantial support in day-to-day living. All five participants also unanimously agreed that the focus of their last three months, and in particular their last three days, would be spending time with loved ones with general tones of gratitude, clarification, and celebration. In commenting on the funeral of his relative, Dan proposed, "Let's celebrate the person. Let's drink a shit ton of beer and think about the times that Uncle John made us laugh, 'cause he was a joker…and not get depressed about it." This sentiment of celebration, with a soberer tone, was reinforced by Jonathon. In comparison, and as exemplified by examples under the previous heading, others like Rachel, Mary and Bryan focused on conveying important messages and voicing their feelings and intentions through conversation, writing, or pottery.

The value of family and close friends to participants was further exemplified by the consistency in emotional response in discussing relationships during the interview. Given the nature of topics discussed, it is unsurprising that most participants showed some signs of emotional response at different points during the interviews, in forms ranging from crossed arms and distinct body language, to cracking voices or visible tears. The majority of these responses occurred concurrently with discussion of relations with family and friends.

Rachel grew emotional when reflecting on the ways her family has supported her, and specifically the role her brother has played in her growth and development throughout her life. She reflects:

> *Definitely family. My mom is letting me live with her, and feeds me, and*
> *I drive her car. So definitely family. And I think the relationship I have*
> *with brother. He's been a huge since support system for me*
> *since…maybe forever because he's my older sibling. I've been*
> *realizing how much he changed…like, he encouraged me to go to*

*college. Without that experience of him being like 'Hey, you should live*
*with me, my partner and, my friend,' (pausing to collect emotions) I*
*don't know where I would have gone. And then in my hardest periods*
*of my life he was there whenever I needed him. He was my voice and*
*helped me like…. He booked my plane ticket to get out of my situation,*
*and let me stay with him. And helped me communicate what I was*
*going through to my family so that they could better understand…*
*(choked up) And I think like yeah, so family for sure….*

This emotional reaction to the depth of emotion felt around loved ones as catalysts and foundations of meaning creation around day-to-day existence was common amongst participants. For Bryan, his loved ones have served as the inspiration for the meaning he creates through his art. He states:

*Relationships, family, family first type thing. People who are close to*
*me, my friends, they're kinda like, you know, the core pretty much what*
*I make my art about too. Like community. I make pottery and then the*
*art that I will make, I kinda have to plan for it…but basically they' re*
*gonna be these very tall vessels and each one is going to be*
*representing someone in my life, and just this concept of community…I*
*just really value community. And all my friends, I've been blessed to*
*have a lot of really tight homies…that have stayed around, we are still*
*close, and I can depend on them. That's really sort of priceless to me.*
*So, I think (voice cracking) they give me meaning. Without my friends*
*and family, I don't know what kind of meaning I would be able to make*
*or to think about in terms of art. So, I guess yeah I make meaning*
*through art but it's coming from this place of love for the people*
*around me.*

Family and friends are clarified here as the very "core" from which other forms of meaning are built upon and derived. In a final example of this type of community-based meaning, Jonathon—who maintained stoic composure throughout the interview process and denied emotion in relation to most questions asked, grew distinctly more impassioned at the prospect of harm coming to his children.

*We're all going to go. I don't sit and dwell on it. I mean, certainly if*
*it's a child, okay, and they get hit, they have an accident, get hit by a*
*car, that's just horrible, heart wrenching. Nobody can not be affected*
*by that. Fortunately I don't know many situations like that, but I know*

*some. Because there's just so much innocence, so much life, and it's*
*just not fair...I know some parents who have had kids ripped away*
*from them because of accidents or terminal illness. It's horrible,*
*horrible, because it's not fair. They've not had a chance to live life. If I*
*even contemplate the idea of the little ones getting hurt? I can't even*
*talk about it. I can't. My children dying? So, there are walls when the*
*idea death is ABSOLUTELY not, NOT permissible for thinking. We saw*
*this therapist for marriage counseling and she said 'what if one of your*
*kids died?' and I JUMPED out of the chair and said 'Don't ever say*
*that again! Don't. Just Don't. That's not going to happen, and when it*
*does, it does. So shut the fuck up! I love my children. I cannot imagine*
*what it would be like to lose one, I don't want to think about it, and I*
*don't have to. Maybe I'm lucky enough, I die before they go.*

Death is only perceived as a "fair' aspect of lived experience when an individual has had

the opportunity to learn a sufficient amount *and* been given the time or opportunity to apply

that learning in a meaningful way before death. Furthermore, the emotional reactivity and

attachment, exemplified by an individual who diligently clarified a position of general

apathy and indifference in facing the topics of the interview, proved conclusive in

clarifying the role of community to provide depth of meaning in life for all five participants.

The other significant way that community surfaced as a source of meaning in life

was through the joy and fulfillment that participants reported experiencing through helping

others to mitigate suffering through a variety of means. Mary and Jonathon both cited brief

encounters with acquaintances as holding particular significance for them. Jonathon

emphasizing his pleasure as providing witty comments and humorous banter in the form

of clever puns or white lies with classmates or work clients. Reflectively, in response to a

saxophone player entering the room to access a locker during our interview on a rainy

afternoon, Mary made casual conversation to reassure him that he was not interrupting our

recording and teased him in a friendly and encouraging manner about his skill as a

musician. After sending him off with a cookie from our snack tray and admiring the way

the rain fell around the fire escape outside our window, Mary used the encounter to elucidate her understanding of meaning making in her life:

> *For me, I don't know exactly. It doesn't necessarily need to be that I*
> *have to do something big in my life…it's just like little things,*
> *encounters like we just had, like where I am trying to be my best that I*
> *can and make other people happy…Again, like that harmonious*
> *thing…I just feel like, to be the best that I can, or to make this life*
> *meaningful, it is about the little things, like making someone smile….*

Similar to this joy founded in pleasant interactions with others highlighted by Jonathon and Mary, Rachel and Bryan touched on the meaning-making aspect of community centered around helping and empowering others in more extended relationships. Consistently throughout the interview, Rachel reflected on her relationship with her "Casa," a ten-year-old girl within the foster care and court systems, whom Rachel worked with as a personal advocate through a nonprofit volunteer organization. Rachel discussed the many ways that working with her 'Casa' positively impacted her life, growing frequently emotional at the mention of the relationship. One particular way she referenced the relationship, was to help her make meaning and see the value in her own suffering.

> *It's always the hard things that we learn from. And I see the frustration*
> *that I have with people who haven't suffered. Not that I want them to*
> *feel pain but that I think it just opens your eyes to a different realm of*
> *the world that nobody wants to live in, but. If you know what its like*
> *then you can help people, so I wouldn't change what I've gone through.*

As clarified through this comment, it is the applicability of her experiences to relate to and help guide someone else, that allows Rachel to make meaning of the suffering she has endured in her own lived experiences. Similarly, Bryan noted the aspects of teaching at a continuation high school that helped him make meaning:

> *To help out the youth. I feel like my job is not just to teach art, or to try*
> *to make people be artists—especially my job right now, with the*

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> *population I'm serving, Just kind of to support them, all these kids are in crisis. Feel like helping, giving back. In the end, I just hope to be an educator who has a lot of students pass through and I can have a positive effect or impact on many different people, generations if I live long enough.*

The purity of this form of meaning-making was exemplified through an anecdote shared by Jonathon wherein he discussed the heart wrenching experience of losing his girlfriend to another woman, his devastation, and the surprising events that followed when that very woman showed up on his doorstep in San Rafael. After a cheerful disclaimer regarding the length of the story, he states:

> *I'm in AA and I had a fight early on with my sponsor about this line in the big book that says, "He humbly offered himself to his maker and then he knew…"*

He goes on to comically dramatize the back and forth shared between himself and his sponsor about who does and does not understand the above phrase, then continues to link the stories:

> *One Saturday morning, at six thirty in the morning—I lived in the Canal—there's a knock on my door and it's the other woman. I say "What do you want?" She says, "She left me." And I'm thinking like 'yay!' But I say 'Really?' and she says 'Can I come in and talk to you?" So I brewed her a pot of coffee and we talked and we talked, and I had some errands to run, and we talked some more until about three o clock. I mean we just spent the whole day together, just talking. And at one point she says 'I gotta make a phone call.' And I was sitting out by the apartment complex pool. I had my feet in the water and I was just sort of sitting there. And all of a sudden, I just felt this warm glow just kind of rising up within me—coming from nowhere, I wasn't hungry, didn't have a cup of coffee, nothing like that, I just had this warm glow. And I knew.*

Bryan continues to analyze this feeling, explaining:

> *I took myself completely out of myself and helped another human being without any thought of who she was, why she was there, what was going on, I just was there.*

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It is these types of examples that most clearly highlight the value of community in developing a meaningful and fulfilling life. In contrast, community plays somewhat of a different role in relation to death, primarily that of audience as evidenced by examples under the previous heading that exemplified the value of voicing one's perspective and intentionality to loved ones in the final days of life. All five participants elected to spend their final months, and especially days, with family members and close friends.

As a final finding within this subheading, sense of community in relation to nature was a pervasive theme of meaning-making in life and death for participants. Bryan referenced "riding nature's energy" through surfing, while Mary said walks with her dog outside were some of her most treasured time spent. Dan and Rachel both emphasized the role of nature in helping them feel at ease, at home, and at peace, with Dan joking in a mocking voice, "Yes, I like to *do* nature."

In relation to death, and specifically in response to a question around how participants would design their own death, individuals mentioned different aspects of nature that appealed to their sense of meaning in that moment. While Rachel contemplated the pleasant potential of dying in the sun on a warm beach, or beneath a Redwood grove, Bryan speculated on the grand "epicness" of dying while out surfing, imagining:

> *I wouldn't mind dying at sea, or drowning in the ocean, or not being found. I just kind of think it's a poetic way to die…Maybe that concept of forever being in the ocean…everyone else thinking like oh yeah, the ocean took Bryan…*

The sense of integration referenced through both of these speculative anecdotes reflects the larger sense of belonging and meaning that participants felt able to derive from community,

in reference to both day-to-day living, and as a means to reconcile the irreconcilable in facing personal mortality.

# Implications

## Summary and Connection to Literature Review

In many ways, the findings of this study reinforced the themes presented in the literature review. In relation to mortality awareness, participants agreed that there was a general invisibility of death in modern culture (Yarber, 1976; Ramsay, 2005, Hymovitz, 1978; Mclure 1974). They also confirmed the common sense of fear and anxiety commonly held around death (Auten, 1982; Ramsay, 2005). Furthermore, they considered death a potential platform for meaning-making and growth (Edgar, 1994; Hymovitz, 1978; Auten, 1982; Yarber, 1976; Riesler, 1977; Mclure 1974).

Also in line with the literature review, this study found the definition of creativity to be varied and complex (Klein, 1982; Lloyd-Jones, 1970; Lena, 2010). Through their preference of using the graphic organizers provided over blank paper, participants also suggested that certain constraints were conducive to the metaphoric process of making meaning of their lives through dialogical processing and semi-structured design activities (Medeiros, 2014; Haught-Tromp, 2017; Mott-Smith, 2008; Lightfoot, 2008; Saltofte, 2011). The findings confirmed language and design processing as fertile avenues for creating meaning in life both through their direct success as the methods used in the interviews, as well as through participants frequent citations of both conversation and creative expression as means through which they create meaning regularly in their lives (Marsen, 2008; Adams, 2002; Nelson, 1989, Mirtz, 1993; Dyson, 1995; Miles 1985;

Castano, 2011; Kazmierczak, 2003). All participants agreed that meaning-making was of value (Marsen, 2008; Adams, 2002).

This study found that participants make meaning within a lifetime through three basic processes—learning, creative expression, and community connection. In various forms, these three vehicles empower individuals to cultivate meaning out of their lives in spite of cultural pressures to prioritize their energies otherwise. In contrast, in facing the fact of their own deaths, the importance of learning diminished, while creativity and community rose to take primary focus.

Consequently, the study found that creating meaning in life and creating meaning in preparation for death are fundamentally different processes. In life, the primary source of meaning resides in learning, playing, and gaining new understanding. While when confronting one's near death, the focus shifts distinctly to an emphasis on creative expression and voicing—namely *application* of the learning absorbed throughout a lifetime. In navigating meaning in relation to both life and death, connecting with community in various forms remains chiefly important. However, the role of community did shift from helping others to mitigate suffering, to community as a critical audience to validate and recognize creative expression of the individual.

In life, the role of community emphasizes a focus on belonging, commiserating over suffering, and enjoyment. In the process of preparation for death, the role shifts to provide recognition of creativity, voice, art, or social contribution—in short, an audience to validate an individual's creative expression or knowing.

The original research inquiry posited in this project was: *How does dialogical processing of the fact of one's own death impacts meaning-making in day to day life.* Given the distinction in the loci of meaning in life and death, preoccupation with mortality during day to day living does not necessarily impact one's ability to make meaning of that day to day existence. Until one reaches the less than three-month range, the source of meaning is fundamentally different. In life we rely on constant learning to create meaning, in death we seek a sense of closure or legacy by expressing our voice and intentions; connecting to others and being heard; or creating final creative expressions. According to the findings, it is the combination of a lifetime of learning and an opportunity to apply that learning (creativity), with recognition of others (community) in preparation of death that allows a person to feel accomplished, ready, empowered, and at peace in facing inevitable mortality.

In aiming to address the academic silence around death, as a universally shared condition of life, in relation to meaning-making in lived experience, this study clarified the nuances between meaning-making as it pertains to day-to-day life and meaning-making as it is adjusted to create meaning in death.

## Implications for Practice and Policy—Teachers, Credential Programs, and Politicians

Given the distinction just noted, death education in school settings is revealed to be largely irrelevant to helping people lead more meaningful lives or prepare for more meaningful deaths. Instead, the study reinforces that we, as a society, should be focusing on a cultural value system shift in education wherein the primary goals of public education prioritize 1) **developing love of learning**, 2) focusing on **creativity and creative thinking**,

and 3) providing opportunities/ environments for **community connection**. All of these updated values nest under the umbrella objective of education to prepare individuals to lead and experience more meaningful lives and deaths.

Death education has died out because one cannot be taught the meaning of death. Each person requires a lifetime of learning, creating, and connecting to develop their own arsenal of coping skills to apply when facing their imminent deaths. The cycle is completed through community in the form of enjoying recognition from those you love and feel loved by, or through the completion of a personally significant final expression of art.

While the implications of this study for the classroom teacher are reasonably clear—provide more opportunity for creative expression of thinking in multiple mediums, structure the environment to support community development and social-emotional learning, and above all else, make the primary objective of your classroom be to help your students develop a lifelong love for the *process* of learning—the study's strongest implication applies to policymakers who perpetuate a cultural belief that testing proficiency is a measure of a school's success; and to teaching credential programs that yield to meet the requirements of these unskillful objectives.

In step with this line of thinking, I believe that most teachers I have encountered in this lifetime already aim to help their students become creative, community-oriented life-long learners. This state of being, however is perceived as a happy byproduct of a curriculum focused on covering content and meeting state and federal standards. In order to support a cultural restructuring of this value system, teachers need to have the opportunity to *themselves* think creatively, build and engage with their personal

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communities, and learn new things while reflecting on their own relationship with learning over the course of their lifetime. Teachers are in a profound position of influence and many feel overstretched and resource-strapped. Allowing individual teachers the necessary time and support for personal development and growth as people would undoubtedly enhance their abilities to put thought and intention into the values they construct their classrooms around.

The focus of our current educational policy is how to come up with impressive numbers in an international competition for rote memorization of preexisting knowledge. This aspiration does not help us progress as a world community, as a nation, or as individuals. A colleague once told me that any teacher who loves their subject more than the subjects they teach, will never be a successful teacher. The findings put forth in this study show that we need a national narrative that acknowledges the primary goal of education as a system to empower individual civilians to lead meaningful and proactive lives. With this restructuring of our societal value system, we can move forward as a competitive nation of innovative, holistic, curious thinkers with valuable contributions to the progression of our global community.

As the dictators of funding and regulation, the primary weight of this cultural shift falls on policymakers. A change at the policy level would provide flexibility for teacher credential programs to reexamine the core tenants of their own training programs and offer new teachers the ability to reflect on their own values and motivations for becoming a teacher, while developing a skillset that aids in the development of the key learning objectives of community development, creativity expression, and love of learning. School

as a learning site can support meaning in life by putting forth curriculum that aims to provide resources, opportunities, and support to help individuals:

- o Develop a love for the process of learning
- o Learn about themselves and their communities
- o Cultivate community connection and social-emotional intelligence
- o Encourage creative expression through the appropriate balance of creative freedom and creative constraint

Beyond the demonstrated benefits this reprioritization would hold for individuals hoping to successfully navigate the primary human activity of meaning-making in both life and death, there are important implications for how these findings support social justice objectives at a societal level. First, as evidenced throughout the literature review, a focus on creativity in education would help mitigate achievement gaps and provide more voice for diverse voices/types of knowing in the classroom (Kauffman, 2006; Grantham, 2013). Next, reorienting the purpose of education from rote knowledge and skill acquisition, to an exercise in love of learning, creative expression, and community building would make education more cross-culturally relevant. Additionally, the flexibility imbued in these goals provides an opportunity to factor individuality into every learning opportunity, an achievement of utmost importance in recognizing the value of every individual voice and lifetime.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Though the population surveyed in this study had reasonable diversity in age, nationality, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexuality, it is significantly limited by the fact that all persons interviewed were white and enrolled in a higher education program. This study could be built upon by including the voices of people who are working class,

incarcerated, less educated, young, or elderly, as well as of more diverse backgrounds in ethnicity, sexuality, gender-identification, ability, and other salient factors of identity. It would be of utmost significance to explore how the findings of this study subsist or change in light of this further inclusion.

Future research could investigate the role and avenues of meaning making in different life circumstances than higher education. For example, looking into how people who are incarcerated make meaning, how meaning-making changes over the course of a lifetime, or how varying exposure to death and suffering effects the ways that individuals make meaning.   More examples of useful directions to take the research include looking further into different levels of constraint and impact on creativity, student perceptions of the learning process, or how community influences meaning.

# Conclusion

This study launched from an elemental understanding of meaning-making as *the* distinctively human objective and examined how the value systems perpetuated through our societal structures support and challenge this process as a predominant undertaking within a lifetime. The project then looked further into the ways that death, as a uniquely universal condition amongst living beings and an inherently structured constraint on the process of living might serve as a lens through which to look at the potential disconnects between our day-to-day lived experiences as individuals within our structured societies, and our primary human purpose to derive meaning. Beyond that, the research also aimed to incorporate creativity in the form of design and discussion as a platform to investigate the relationships between these vital human processes. In evolution from these ideas, the original research question pursued in this study was: How does dialogical processing of the fact of one's own mortality affect meaning making in day to day life? Consequently, the answer to this question—as evidenced by the findings and implications discussed—is: not very significantly.

This conclusion is due to the finding that meaning making in life is fundamentally different than meaning making in death. The research presented shows that it is not death awareness that supports meaning-making in life. It is the opportunity to learn and grow that creates meaning in life. In contrast, it is the opportunity to apply knowledge learned that creates meaning in face of death. Thus, developing a love of learning and creative thinking skills within learning communities (ie. education classrooms) is the best way to support

meaning-making both in mitigating experiences of suffering within a lifetime, and in the face of impending mortality at the end of life.

The third factor which surfaced as a critical element to foster meaning-making both in life and in death, was community. The significance of community to meaning-making remained consistent in both life and death, through the *role* of community shifted along an evolving trajectory of support, through validation, and onto recognition.

As Marsen (2008) discussed, the individualized meanings that humans attribute to their daily experiences coincide to construct "codified cultural and linguistic systems." It is this power of the meaning each person creates through learning, creating, and community connection that then multiplies exponentially to cultivate the structured value systems under which we all persist. For this reason, the findings evidenced through this research are of utmost significance for creating intentional evolutions of the cultural value systems that shape our educational institutions, and thus our future generations, and general global trajectory. This can be done by reorienting our educational measures of success from content-driven memorization of limited information, to focusing on the ability of individual learners to relate to their own process of absorbing information, to expand their ability to connect to those around them, and to manifest and create their own unique creative contribution to the evolution of the species. Through this evolution, honoring individuality and processes in learning environments surfaces as the critical avenue by which we as a global community might combat persistent threats of discriminatory education, systemic inequality and a cultural system that values wealth and status above the principal human endeavor to live meaningfully and with intention. In this way, educators and policymakers

must take it into their own hands to emphasize love for learning, creative thinking and expression, and community engagement as the three key objectives of education in moving towards a more socially just global society.

In balance with the influence of individuality to stimulate wide-spread cultural change, is the power of universality as a means to unite an increasingly disparate population under the impacts of current societal values under capitalism. Perhaps the single most significant implication of the relationship between mortality and meaning-making uncovered through this research project is the role of death as a key universal constraint on life to make the creative endeavor of living meaningful, as evidenced by the unanimous agreement amongst participants to not discount or avoid death given the supernatural capacity to do so.

As an infallible mystery, utterly unknown and yet of ever-increasing relevance to any living being still wrestling through the experience of life, death provides the necessary undefined potentiality for making meaning out of the mundane material of physical life in the first place. We, as humans, use fantastic processes like learning, creating, and connecting with other living beings to cultivate meaning out of our lives, and, in the end, it is the fantastical mystery of mortality—brimming as it is with an undefined depth of unimaginable possibility—that makes life magical, mysterious and ultimately, meaningful.

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