

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER  
SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND EXPANDED

# THE POWER OF PURPOSE



FIND MEANING,  
LIVE LONGER,  
BETTER

**RICHARD J. LEIDER**

Co-author of the bestselling *Repacking Your Bags*

An Excerpt From

***The Power of Purpose:  
Find Meaning, Live Longer, Better  
Second Edition, Revised & Expanded***

by Richard J. Leider

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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## Preface

# The Purpose Evolution

*Your purpose.*

*Your aim or goal.*

*Your reason for being.*

*Your reason for getting up in the morning.*

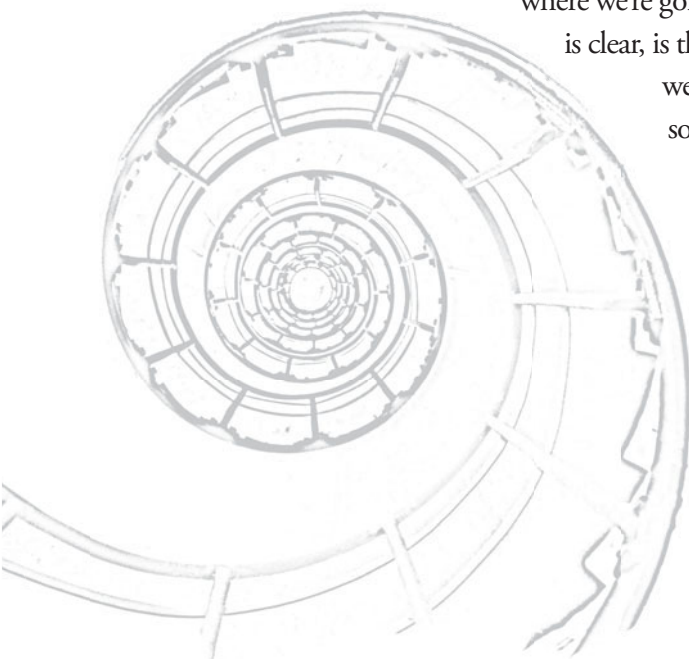
You may not have considered the first three items, but most of us have wondered about a reason to get up in the morning, at least occasionally. *The Power of Purpose*, Second Edition, is about that reason: to help you discover the purpose for your life.

What is purpose? Our purpose is an expression of the deepest dimension within us—of our central core or essence, where we have a profound sense of who we are, where we came from, and

where we're going. Purpose, when it is clear, is the aim around which

we structure our lives, a source of direction and energy, and the way the meaning of our lives is worked out in daily experience.

You have a purpose no matter what age you are, how healthy you are, or what your economic or social



situation is. Your purpose is the reason you were born, and it can be what gets you out of bed in the morning.

*Power* is the other key word in the book's title that needs attention. *Webster's Dictionary* defines power as the "ability to do, act, or produce." Only certain kinds of purpose have the potential to be empowering, so being deliberate about identifying our purpose is essential. What determines the power in purpose, ultimately, is the worthiness of the focus. Having purpose that provides real power requires a goal outside ourselves. Only when our focus—our purpose—is larger than ourselves can meaning be deeply savored and long lasting, not just a goal completed and then forgotten.

At our very core we need to matter. We need evidence to believe that we are good people and are evolving—becoming the best we can be. Naming our purpose helps us satisfy a basic need that we're being used for a purpose that we recognize as a worthy one.

Many of us say we don't have enough time to take care of our careers and our lives. Then before we know it, we're right! We are so busy trying to survive in an increasingly complex world that we don't have time to notice time passing. We do many things to answer the question *Why do I get up in the morning?* However, our busyness can also be a way of avoiding the question. In addition, it is an anxious way of living that can lead to unease and psychological and physical problems. And finally, we might end up asking, *What have I done with my life?*

## Find Meaning. Live Longer, Better

There is a better way. Having a reason to get up in the morning is associated in numerous scientific studies with better mental

and physical health and greater longevity. Purpose can add not only years to your life but also life to your years!

If you are looking for a reason to get up in the morning or asking questions such as these, this book is for you:

- I feel that I've missed my calling in life. How do I find it?
- I've successfully reached midlife. Is that all there is? What's next?
- I've been growing spiritually. How do I connect my spiritual growth with my work?
- I'm in a major transition (graduation, marriage, new job or job loss, divorce, illness, death of a loved one). How do I find meaning and direction?
- I have enough outer success. How do I find inner fulfillment?

This book was developed by interviewing older adults (over the age of sixty-five) about such deep questions, then combining their wisdom with my studies in the fields of adult development and counseling psychology. Specifically, I asked a cross-section of older adults this question: "If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?"

Three themes wove their way through all the interviews. The respondents consistently said they would

- Be more reflective.
- Be more courageous.
- Be clear earlier about purpose.

From these interviews, I concluded that purpose naturally resides deep inside the human soul. All people seem to have a natural desire and capacity to contribute somehow to life.

Each of us wants to leave footprints. And each of us has a unique purpose. Each is an experiment of one. We can learn from but not adopt the purpose of another person but must uncover our own. Each of us is on a quest to find our purpose, whether we are consciously pursuing the quest or are vaguely aware that something is missing.

Throughout history, humans have sought to make sense of their lives, searching for meaning through prayer, retreat, art, music, nature, community, gratitude, forgiveness, and multiple other ways. Traditionally, purpose was connected with the spiritual aspect of people's lives, and healers, priests, and shamans were the ministers who helped people connect with the sacred to restore bodies and souls to health and wholeness. Now science is increasingly validating what people have known all along: that purpose is essential. When it comes to life's inevitable breakdowns, purpose can provide a breakthrough. Purpose can give us the will to live. Without purpose, we can die. With purpose, we can live in dignity and compassion. Purpose dramatically affects our longevity and well-being, and it is the one thing that cannot be taken from us.

The twenty-first century shift to an accelerated, global, technology-driven world is a major transformation. Such periods tend to spotlight what does not change—what remains constant and nonnegotiable in our lives. Purpose is one of those constants. People of all ages are seeking a new perspective on how they fit into this evolving world. We are challenged to find relevant answers to the age-old questions of purpose and meaning. In this century, purpose has the marks of a movement—an inner-directed revolution. We could say that we are living in the purpose age.

In addition, many of us have come to acknowledge publicly what we privately knew all along: that surviving adolescence and early adulthood did not ensure a tranquil, jolt-free passage through the rest of our careers and lives. We change; our priorities and values shift; confidence grows, dissolves into doubt, returns; relationships evolve, break apart, reform; careers and lifestyles lose energy or take on new interest—all forming a complex life cycle. Thus, purpose is not discovered once and then we are done with it. It is reexamined at various points throughout the life cycle, typically during crises and major life transitions.

## Welcome to the Second Edition

I chose to write this book because of my deep personal belief that we live in an evolving spiritual world and that every individual in this world has unique gifts and a purpose to use those gifts to contribute value to the world.

This book builds on earlier editions of *The Power of Purpose*, expanding and deepening the conversation. It is based on twenty-five years of experiences with people of all ages who were engaged in the purpose quest. New stories about purpose have been added, and other material has been updated. In addition, the Resources at the back of the book have been updated for the many people who asked me how to use the book in seminars, classes, book clubs, and spiritual or study groups.

The book is organized in a way that makes sense to me, but everyone has different needs and interests, so you should feel free to follow any order you want to.



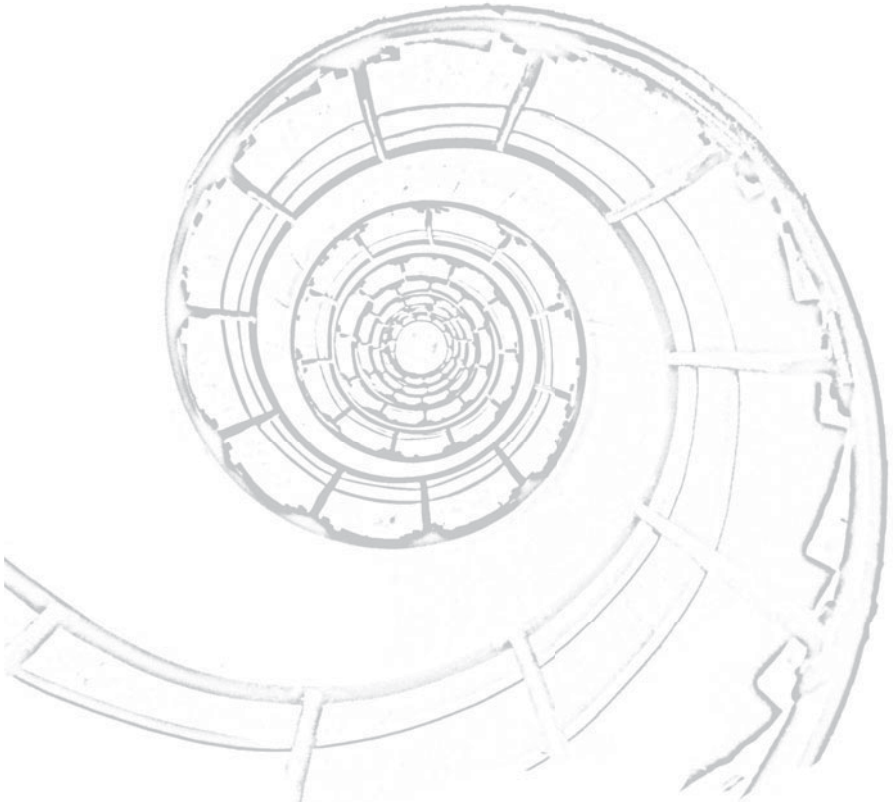
I believe that spirit touches and moves our lives through the evolution of purpose. That is my starting point for helping people to uncover their purpose. In a pluralistic society, not everyone will agree with that starting point. That's all right. Let me be clear, however, that my objective is not intended to express a religious point of view or to exclude people who don't believe as I do. Instead, this starting point is the very reason for my acceptance of the many differences among people. Because of my starting point, I believe that each person has a spiritual reason for being and that our world is incomplete until each one uncovers her or his purpose.

I hope that you will uncover your purpose—if I have found mine, this book will be a catalyst for finding yours.

Richard J. Leider  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

## Part I

# The Meaning of Purpose



## Chapter 1

# The Purpose Moment

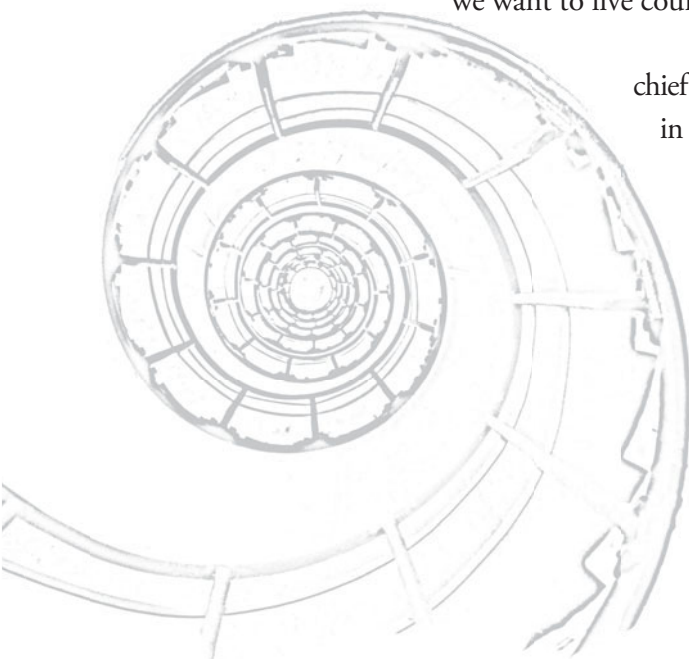
*I was just trying to get home from work.*

*Rosa Parks*

Purpose is fundamental to human life. It is what makes us human. Purpose is not only what makes us human, it is the one thing that cannot be taken from us. Purpose gives us the will to live or to persevere. It gives us a reason to get up in the morning. Purpose gives us courage.

Most of us want to know that there is a purpose to life—that our being here does mean something and that what we do matters. Most of us want our lives to matter, and we want to live courageously.

Purpose is one of the chief requisites for courage in life. A constant in the lives of people who experience a sense of courage is the “purpose moment”—moments of meaning. This chapter shows the importance of purpose moments to



the purpose quest and helps you to recognize and create such moments in your own life.

## The Power of a Purpose Moment

Rosa Parks had a purpose moment that ultimately changed a nation. She was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955. This single act of courage sparked a bus boycott that led to the integration of Alabama's bus system and paved the way for the civil rights movement in the United States.

The search for dignity is basic to us all. However, we often become deeply concerned about it only when some crisis forces us to confront it—an arrest, an illness, a death, a divorce, or a loss of job. We take life for granted until a crisis wakes us up and forces us to ask the big questions. Crisis is a catalyst for purpose moments. And purpose moments bring us face to face with the big questions, such as *What am I meant to do here?*

Flight 427 was scheduled to depart Chicago's O'Hare Airport at 4:50 p.m. on a hectic Friday afternoon. Bill was on his way to Pittsburgh to attend his first meeting of the executive committee of a college board of trustees. Just before flight time, above the din of a busy O'Hare, Bill heard a page that asked him to check with the nearest gate agent. He was instructed to call his office immediately, where he learned that his meeting had been canceled—the first such cancellation in eleven years!

Shortly before Flight 427 was to begin boarding, Bill turned in his boarding pass and made a quick exit to another concourse, where his assistant, Nancy, had booked him on a flight back to his hometown of Atlanta. When he called his

wife, Valerie, on his cell phone from his car on the way home, he was greeted by an outburst of tears and raw emotion. “Bill,” she sobbed, “you haven’t heard! The plane you were supposed to be on to Pittsburgh crashed short of the airport and no one survived.”

Bill was stunned. Of that purpose moment on the freeway, he said, “There was only this amazing calm, a sense of peace that settled over me and affirmed that God was holding me in the palm of His hand.” He arrived home to tears of joy and hugs that didn’t want to quit, while the television brought the bitter details of Flight 427 into their living room. Bill reflects, “I know my reprieve is temporary. My life has been extended for now.”

Bill believes that God had something more to accomplish through his life. On Monday after his narrow escape, he got a hint of what that purpose might be. At his insurance agency, where he was managing director, he was besieged by friends, staff, and agents, all expressing gratitude for his role in their lives. Bill was already the leader of one of the largest, most successful insurance agencies in the country, but at that moment he realized that his true purpose, from here on, was to “grow values-driven people.” That became the mission of his life and agency. Bill no longer postponed those critical coaching conversations but focused his newly precious time on coaching people to live in alignment with their purpose.

## What Is a Life Purpose?

Our well-being and quality of life depend on finding greater wholeness in life. The words *health*, *heal*, *whole*, and *holy* all derive from the same root. This reveals the obvious fact that

to grow whole is not just a challenge of money and health but a challenge of meaning as well.

Having a purpose in life—a clear reason to get up in the morning—is essential to growing whole. Imagine that you’ve decided to conduct your own personal survey by asking a handful of your friends, What is a life purpose? What do you guess the most common answer might be? Would it be similar to your own response or quite different?

At first glance, it might seem like the answer to the question is so obvious that it’s a waste of your time to even ask it. Don’t be fooled, however. There is wisdom in revisiting the questions that we think we already know how to answer. Our answers change at different phases of our lives and with changing life circumstances.

I’ve dedicated my professional life to exploring that single question. Consequently, I’ve had the privilege of asking thousands of people that question and many others. I’ve discovered that the majority of people answer the question What is a life purpose? in a very similar way. They may use different words, but the common thread weaving through their responses is this: “A life purpose is what I’m meant to do and be while I’m here on the earth.”

## Purpose Is What Makes Us Human

So, what is your individual purpose? Whether we explore this question publicly or privately, it is vital to our health, healing, wholeness, and our holiness that we do examine the question. Because what ultimately shape our lives are the questions we ask, fail to ask, or never dream of asking. It is our questions that shape our humanity.

If we had to name what makes life worth living, what gives it meaning and purpose, most of us would probably say it's the people we love. Relationships, along with work, are the core differences in quality of life at all ages. Whom we love and how we love them are in a way the core reasons we get up in the morning.

Yet the number-one issue in many people's lives today is loneliness. A sense of aloneness—a strong feeling of isolation or going it alone—affects almost half of us. We complain that we either want more time for friends or would like to have more true friends, versus acquaintances, because busy lives can result in an abundance of acquaintances and a poverty of true friends.

We can easily fill our lives with busyness. There is always more to be done, always a way to keep from staring into the mirror. If we're not careful, we can begin to mistake our busyness for meaning, turning our lives into a checklist of to-dos that can occupy all the waking hours of our days and leave us breathless, with our feeling of friendship left incomplete.

And always there is more to do. Our to-do lists will outlive us. The labors of our lives will be endless. For every person who summons up the focus and energy to step out on the purpose quest, there are many more who plod on, waiting—waiting for some magical, easy solution to their quest, waiting for a sign.

## Discovering What Matters

The Met Life Mature Market Institute (MMI) applied sophisticated market research to the philosophical question of purpose. The MMI team worked closely with me and used my purpose work as a foundation for the purpose model

in this study. The study, titled *Discovering What Matters*, explored with a researcher's eye for precision the way people prioritize their lives as they face challenges. This marriage of measurement to meaning produced unique, measurable evidence about the role purpose plays in people's lives. It revealed that regardless of age, gender, financial status, or life phase, the majority of people assign the most importance to meaning-related activities and, above all else, spending time with friends and family.

People with a sense of purpose in their lives were more likely to report being "happy" and to describe themselves as living the "good life." Having a sense of purpose was related to possessing both a "focus" on essential things today, and a "vision" of the future they wanted to enjoy.

The study showed that the concept of purpose, even the word itself, is something held in high regard by many, perhaps even most people. Some described purpose as giving them a general direction for their lives, while others even went so far as to allow it to prioritize the key choices required in their day-to-day living. And yet, many of the respondents might have found it difficult to honestly point to how they would use purpose in the daily choices they make.

But is purpose merely an esoteric idea that is nice to have, or a more powerful universal concept? Responses revealed that purpose was the differentiator between those who reported living the "good life" and those not living the good life. Eighty-four percent of those who felt their lives had purpose reported that they were living the good life.

A "Build-Your-Own" trade-off exercise was used to assess people's expectations of what their lives would be like with



respect to activities five years in the future. They were given a set number of “life points” to distribute among a range of activities in four categories: money, medicine, meaning, and place. Consistent with results from other parts of the study, respondents across all age groups allocated the most life points to meaning-related activities—that is, being with friends and family—with older respondents (aged sixty-five to seventy-four) focusing the most time on meaning-related activities.

It is clear from this research that mature adults are driven by the pursuit of meaning and purpose in their lives, and that the older people are, the more important living with meaning and purpose becomes. While there are certainly some differences among age, income, and asset levels, the consistent message from this research is that the circumstances that truly bring a sense of contentment, happiness, and satisfaction to life are fairly universal.<sup>1</sup>

## Everyone Else Has a Purpose. So What’s Mine?

An entertaining evocation of this purpose research is the musical *Avenue Q*, which is the twenty-first longest-running show in Broadway history and has won several Tony Awards, including the award for best musical. The show has also spawned other productions around the globe, including the one I experienced at the Gielgud Theatre in London.

The show is largely inspired by (and is in the style of) *Sesame Street*. Most of the characters in the show are puppets operated by actors onstage; the set depicts several tenements on a rundown street in an outer borough of New York City. However, the characters are in their twenties and thirties and

face adult problems instead of those faced by preschoolers, thus making the show more suited for the adults who grew up with *Sesame Street*. A recurring theme is the central character's search for his elusive "purpose."

I sat enthralled as the song "Purpose" was sung. The core message—"Everyone else has a purpose. So, what's mine?"—brought forth murmurs from the strangers sitting around me, as they chuckled over the lyrics, such as "Purpose—it's the little flame that lights a fire under your ass. / Purpose, it's like driving a car with a full tank of gas," and others. I left the theater that night feeling affirmed that purpose had truly arrived in the public discourse. From shows in London and Las Vegas, from youngsters and oldsters, the ever-elusive-purpose-in-life theme was finally on the marquee. *Avenue Q* was a purpose moment for me.

It is often a purpose moment that awakens us to our gifts and passions. Benjamin Jackson was running in a local 10K weekend race in which a number of wheelchair athletes were also participating. A postrace conversation with one of these athletes led Ben to an awareness of the challenges they faced in their normal day-to-day activities. Soon he explored the realities of wheelchair life at the college he was attending and at his mother's workplace. He began writing letters and lobbying his school's administration to provide funds for greater accessibility to athletics for students with disabilities. Ben went on to study architecture and now consults with organizations on making their buildings more accessible to people with physical challenges. Fulfilling work began with a purpose moment following a 10K race, and today it serves as Ben's calling.

Purpose helps us understand what is core to our life, what we care about in our actual day-to-day living. Our world suddenly makes sense to us.

## The Purpose Game

There are purpose moments that we could all take advantage of by extending ourselves into the world. When you want to give yourself a lift, you can play the “purpose game.”

Here’s how the game is played. Look around, wherever you happen to be, and see what or who needs your touch. For example, while driving, maybe you could let other cars in front of you while driving all the way to your destination. Another possibility is to tell your spouse or a significant other a new reason he or she is important to you. Or you could buy coffee for a friend for no reason; create an end-of-day celebration because you lived this day; get up early to write an e-mail or handwritten note of gratitude to someone.

The important idea is to play consciously in life, giving your gifts or serving others. You want to do little things that make you feel on purpose. We often put a lot of energy into doing the big things, but we want to feel on purpose “all” the moments of life. There are “purpose moments” everywhere, every day that we could fill up with ourselves. When we are watching, ready to play the purpose game, the possibilities are endless.

Make a list of purpose moments you could play tomorrow that would be unexpected and make you feel good. What are your favorite games of purpose?

## A Purpose Moment That Changed Me

One person who had a profound purpose-moment effect on my life was Richard Reusch, my college advisor. To this day, I can cite material from his lectures verbatim. Dr. Reusch required students to pick up their exams in his office so he could talk with each one. More than test grades were the subject of discussions in his office, however. At the end of my first semester at Gustavus Adolphus College, in danger of flunking out, I went to talk to Dr. Reusch before final exams. I can still smell the pipe smoke and picture his office, where he was surrounded by African artifacts collected in his forty years of work as the “Maasai missionary” in Tanzania.

“I’m really lost,” I told him. “I want to stay here, but I’ve really screwed up my life. What should I do?”

Dr. Reusch didn’t ask about my courses but simply asked me to tell him something about myself. “About myself?” No other professor had ever asked me that! A magical hour later, I left his office with a vision for what I wanted in school and in life. Somehow, Dr. Reusch made the hour almost a spiritual experience, and I knew something special was intended for my life.

Twenty years later I traveled to Tanzania and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. I was astonished to learn that the crater at the summit is named Reusch Crater. Dr. Reusch climbed Mount Kilimanjaro sixty-five times, helped to establish its exact altitude, and discovered the crater now officially named after him. He knew twenty languages, and he wrote books on religion, history, and geography in German, English, and Swahili.

Richard Reusch came to Minnesota and taught church history, comparative religion, and fencing at Gustavus Adolphus. His archive files are stuffed with letters of appreciation from young people, from parents of students, and from Maasai leaders in Tanzania, who said, “Come, please, and help us again.”

He concluded his ministry, or service, at St. John’s Church at Stacy, Minnesota, of which he still was the pastor when he died. Two weeks previously, he had announced his resignation date. That date became the occasion of his funeral.

Dr. Reusch used to say that a miracle occurred when a need and a solution converged. That day in his office I witnessed a miracle, thanks to a life memorably lived. He was one of the most purposeful people I have ever crossed paths with.

Purpose is the recognition of the purpose moments in life and the courage to choose a life that is aligned with that purpose. Purpose defines our contribution to life, moment to moment. It may find expression through family, community, relationship, work, and spiritual activities. We receive from life what we give, and in the process we understand more of what it means to “show up in the moment.”

Look ahead. How old do you think you’ll live to be? Imagine you’re that age. As you look back on your life, what would you like to be able to say is your legacy? How did you become the person you were destined to be? What might you do to create purpose moments so that you can look back over your life with no regrets?

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