

When Life Feels Empty

*7 Ancient Practices to
Cultivate Meaning*

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Part 1

Signs and Symptoms



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A Tragic Story

ON SEPTEMBER 18, 2010, thirty-five-year-old Mitchell Heisman walked onto a university campus and ended his life. The details of the event are haunting.

The location: the steps of Memorial Church at Harvard University. The building was originally constructed in memory of Harvard graduates lost in the Great War, the “War to End All Wars,” World War I.

The time: eleven o’clock in the morning on the holiest day of the Jewish Calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In Jewish Tradition, this is the climax of the year, the day when God looks at the sum total of sins committed by the nation and forgives them.

On sacred ground, and in sacred time, sacred life is lost.

Heisman left behind a suicide note, and this “note” may be unlike anything before it. It was over nineteen hundred pages, an amalgamation of ramblings and emotions, and yet at times, philosophical insight. In it he states, “Every word, every thought, and every emotion come back to one core problem: *life is meaningless*.”¹

Heisman reflects on his dive into despair and pinpoints the precise moment his journey began. He writes, “The death of my father marked the beginning, or perhaps the acceleration, of a kind of moral collapse.”² The death of an earthly father would ultimately lead this young Jewish man to reject any notion of a benevolent God above.

In losing one father, he lost two.

The loss of God and ultimately any form of reality above makes a life where no distinction between heaven and hell can be made. All becomes chaos, and all becomes purposeless. Heisman explains, “If there is no extant God and no extant gods, no good and no evil, no right and no wrong, no meaning and no purpose: if there are no values that are inherently valuable; no justice that is ultimately justifiable . . . then destruction is equal to creation; life is equal to death and death is equal to life.”³

The world is a hell of a place to face without a father.

And this is the point where Heisman’s story intersects with ours. And by “ours” I don’t mean you or me, I mean all of us—the collective whole of our culture, because the signs that something is wrong are with us everywhere. The symptoms of our ailment are evident.

For two decades Americans have become more unhappy, more discontented, and more depressed than ever before. This is not just empty rhetoric; the research is clear. Suicide has gone up every year in nearly every state for the last two decades.⁴ Anxiety is up. Loneliness is up. All around, misery is up.

Without a remedy for this, people are running to anything that will help them cope. In 2023 there were over one hundred thousand deaths due to drug overdoses.⁵ This is more than five times the number just twenty years ago.⁶ Half the country says they are lonely.⁷ One in five young women practice self-harm.⁸

We are overeating, undereating, cutting, drinking, spending, popping, shooting, searching for anything that might help us face the emptiness before us.

Now, what is so bizarre about this is that as we become more unhappy and dissatisfied, we simultaneously participate in a greater and greater standard of living. The life we live is more comfortable than most people who have ever walked the earth could ever dream up.



Think about our standard of living for a moment. We walk into a grocery store and see more food in a single instance than some will ever see in their entire life. Think about the climate control we have at our fingertips. While we travel, if we feel the slightest degree of discomfort, we have the ability to fix it. If it gets just a bit too warm, we can flick a button and our car will begin to cool the entire vehicle. If we get too cold, we can heat it up.

And consider this: The water in our toilets is cleaner than the drinking water that millions of people have access to. We live in a comfort that our ancestors never dreamed of. Still, we are not happy. The standard of living goes up, yet our spirits go down.

So even though we experience the many benefits the modern world has afforded us, for many there is something that still does not feel right. Something is lurking deep in our gut. Despite living in the land of milk and honey, we can't shake the feeling that something is wrong at the center of it all. Like Heisman, we begin to contemplate ultimate things. Is it all meaningless? All without purpose? The possibility that our stories are authorless is frightening.

There are many opinions on the cause of our problem. Some will say it's social media. Others will point to Hollywood. For some, it's the breakdown of the family. Still others attribute it to failing schools and public education.

Certainly, these and many other factors are at play, but I'd like to talk about something deeper. Much deeper. *So deep* that we are nearly at the unconscious level, almost like the operating system of the mind. Because it is there, and precisely there, that something went very wrong.

CONFLICTING MESSAGES

Two messages currently broadcast around the clock in our culture. One message is loud, the other is softer. The loud message says, "You are a wonderful, amazing individual with purpose, meaning,



and value. The world is before you, so make the most of every day and be the person you want to be!” This positive, uplifting message sits atop a metaphoric ten-story building. The softer message sits at the base—not as loud but foundational, holding up the entire building. It says, “You are a product of random chance. You are nothing more than neurons, chemicals, hormones, and atoms. You have no soul. There is nothing beyond this life. No heaven. No hell. No loving figure above.”

Despite what is broadcast from the tenth floor, this foundation-level message speaks to the core of our being. It functions as an operating system. Our thoughts, feelings, and decisions are processed through it. Whether we like it or not, we live within the story it tells.

An experiment began roughly three hundred years ago in the modern world. The experiment sought to create a world divorced from God, religion, and anything other than the material world. In this endeavor, humans attempted to find ultimate meaning and purpose strictly from the physical world.

Despite the message that we tell ourselves—that we are special, unique, and have purpose—underneath that, at the foundation, at the operating system level, is the message that says we are alone in the universe. Our feet wander aimlessly without meaning on a planet that wanders aimlessly without meaning. We are here for a fleeting moment and then, death.

No matter how much we want to believe the message on the tenth floor, and no matter how much our pop songs, cultural slogans, and uplifting movies affirm that message, it is nonetheless built on a foundation that says otherwise. And we live within the confines of the narrative structure it gives us.

We want to believe in things like love, but however we may conceive of it, the foundational message says it does not exist. Love is just chemicals and hormones firing off in our body to create a



social contract between two individuals so that they might propagate the herd. Integrity, honor, virtue . . . those are just terms we use to describe animal-like behaviors that benefit the tribe. We may assign meaning to all sorts of things in our lives, but make no mistake about it: things like integrity, honor, and virtue are not grounded in anything real. This foundational message is all-encompassing and incredibly powerful.

What is the result of this loss? We lack meaning and purpose, and the signs of our sickness are evident. The foundational message cannot bear the weight of the whole building, and it will collapse.

When Mitchell Heisman lost his father, the pillars that gave structure to his reality began to fall. The loss of father rendered life meaningless. We, too, have lost a father, and that can make life unbearable.

The world is a hell of a place to face without a father.



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