Youth Purpose Project

Stanford Center on Adolescence

Conference Consensus Paper

'Exploring the Nature and Development of Purpose in Youth'

I. Executive Summary

Life-course plans and commitments begin to take shape in youth; yet little is known about these commitments, or purposes. While research suggests having a purpose in one's life benefits young people, few researchers have investigated what purpose looks like, how it develops, or how it helps guide youth in positive directions. A conference, which brought together people from different disciplines and backgrounds with unique perspectives on purpose, was held in March 2003. The goal was to explore the concept of purpose from a variety of academic viewpoints, all in some way relevant to the topic. We defined purpose as *a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self*. The daylong working conference produced a deeper understanding of purpose, its role, its sources and supports, its forms and types, and its origins. The following essay includes an explanation of the working definition of purpose along with points of consensus generated during the conference. This document draws on conference participants' expertise and intuitions about how their own research sheds light on purpose.

II. Background

Youth is a period during which individuals develop important life plans and commitments; yet very little is known about how youth develop these commitments, or purposes. How does purpose develop in young people, and how might it be fostered? Is there a distinction between constructive purposes and those that are destructive, and if so how can we help youth develop the former? What are the supports and obstacles, both internal and external, to purpose? These are all questions that invite investigation and which may help parents, communities, schools, and teachers better assist their children and youth to develop positively.

Our interest in these questions comes at a time when many people are concerned about the direction youth are heading, and whether it is toward positive or negative ends. This document is a report of a conference on purpose, held at Stanford University in March 2003, which was intended to build consensus and gather insights from scholars across fields who are interested in human development. These insights in turn will inform a research program on youth purpose, which will be undertaken at Stanford University but which will be part of a much larger project on purpose to be pursued by other researchers. We believe that the concerns about youth expressed here, although not new, are quite timely and warrant a special focus. Specific aspects of contemporary society, such as the proliferation of technology, recent news stories about young people engaged in destructive causes, or the thirst that many young people exhibit to make a difference in the world, make the challenge unique to our time, and suggest the development of youth purpose as a fitting subject of inquiry.

Practitioners and scholars have also identified purpose as an important asset in young people's development. For instance, identity theorists have marked adolescence as the

period in the life-span when people first begin to dedicate themselves to systems of belief that reflect compelling purposes. However, this dedication does not always occur; some people never find anything to believe in beyond self-preservation or self-advancement. Psychologists have observed that when young people find nothing to dedicate themselves to while growing up, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to acquire motivating belief systems later in life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). The result is a sense of "drift" that can lead to personal as well as social pathologies. Research has shown that the personal effects of purposelessness may include self-absorption, depression, addictions, and a variety of psycho-somatic ailments; and the social effects may include deviant and destructive behavior, a lack of productivity, and an inability to sustain stable interpersonal relations (Damon, 1995).

Our interest in youth purpose, however, is also triggered by a conviction that it plays a powerfully generative role in development. It is likely that purpose during youth leads to a number of desired outcomes, such as pro-social behavior, moral commitment, achievement, and high self-esteem. Theory and research on the emergence of moral identity during adolescence is consistent with this hypothesis (Damon and Gregory, 1997), but direct evidence remains scarce because the necessary studies have not yet been done. In fact, purpose has been seldom explored in the academic research literature.

One reason for the scarcity of research on youth purpose has been a historical focus on studying young peoples' deficits, rather than their strengths. The field of child and adolescent development has been slow to recognize the importance of purpose. Youth behavior, according to the major theories, is driven by a combination of factors of the following sort: genetic disposition; gender; congenital and birth effects; macro-level

social, historical, and economic conditions; cultural practices; early experiences with caregivers; birth order; sibling and peer relations; neighborhood and community composition; and schooling. Fortunately, a recent shift in academy psychology and youth development-and one that makes our present time particularly amenable to the investigation of youth purpose-has opened the doors for scholars to explore the positive rather than the negative sources of human motivation (see Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Today's scholars in the positive psychology and positive youth development fields reject the once prominent idea that young people's goals and values arise from basic drives such as hunger and sex, or from defense mechanisms such as sublimation and reaction formation. People can and do choose goals and values that promote higher purposes, such as purposes of creativity, morality, and spirituality. It is now time to study how young people come to choose and commit to these goals and values.

III. Stanford University Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project

The Stanford University Center on Adolescence is engaged in a multi-year study of youth purpose. Research efforts began with a comprehensive literature review of purpose tools and concepts. This review helped solidify an understanding of the way other researchers conceive of purpose and the role purpose plays in human development. In the fall of 2003, the Stanford team will begin an empirical investigation of youth purpose. First, the team will conduct a nationwide survey of approximately 400 youth between 12-22 years of age. The survey will be distributed to youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different regions of the country, and different city types. Based on the results, a subset of youth (approximately 40)

will be interviewed regarding purpose. Finally, a subset of the interviewees (approximately 10) will be selected for in-depth case studies.

Before delving into the empirical research, however, a conference was held to glean insights regarding purpose from other scholars. In March of 2003 fourteen researchers and specialists from a variety of fields gathered to participate in a working conference entitled, "Exploring the Nature and Development of Purpose in Youth." The interdisciplinary conference included faculty from psychology, religion, anthropology, and education departments. This conference helped the research team develop the appropriate survey and interview protocols and think about purpose from a variety of perspectives. What follows is a report of the findings from that conference.

IV. Conference Participants

Twelve researchers attended the conference as presenters. These scholars were invited because each had conducted research that provides insights into purpose, and which could inform future research on the topic. These attendees are featured below. Dr. Peter Benson is president of Search Institute, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a non-profit research organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of children and adolescents. Dr. Benson's research on developmental assets for children and youth identifies a sense of purpose as an important part of young peoples' positive identity development, which along with other assets, helps them thrive. Benson's research also explores the role of communities in helping youth develop purpose and other assets.

Dr. William Damon is Professor of Education at Stanford University and Director of the Center on Adolescence. Dr. Damon's current research explores how young people

develop character and a sense of moral purpose in work, family, and community relationships. He also examines how young people can approach careers with an emphasis on creative innovation, excellence, and social responsibility.

Dr. Robert Emmons is Professor of Psychology at the University of California-Davis. Dr. Emmons' research is at the interface of personality psychology and religion. His research on personal strivings is relevant to the investigation of the kinds of purposes young people and adults may choose, and what types of concerns are most important to them. Dr Emmons' research illuminates religion and spirituality as a source of purpose.

Dr. Jonathan Haidt is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. His research interests lie in the area of morality and emotions, and how both vary across cultures. Haidt looks at moral emotions, such as elevation and awe. These positive emotions may accompany, initiate, or support the development of purpose, while negative emotions, such as disgust, may turn people away from unworthy purposes.

Dr. Lene Jensen is Assistant Professor of Psychology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. and is a faculty member at the Life Cycle Institute. Dr. Jensen's research focuses on the relationship between morality and worldviews among children, adolescents, and adults and looks at how people's moral evaluations, reasoning, and emotions are both diverse and common across cultures. Dr. Jensen's work describes possible sources of youth purpose across different societies.

Dr. Richard M. Lerner holds the Bergstrom Chair in Applied Developmental Science at Tufts University in Boston, MA. Dr. Lerner investigates the fused relations

between individuals and contexts and how these relationships affect human development. His approach is useful for investigating how relationships between youth and their environments can have a reciprocal affect: some environments may help youth develop positive purposes, and these youth may in turn create purpose-enhancing environments.

Dr. Dan P. McAdams is Professor of Human Development and Social Policy, Professor of Psychology, and Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. He is also the Director of the Foley Center for the Study of Lives. Dr. McAdams has conducted a research program on generative adults-people who are creative and productive in their middle age. The concept of generativity is very close to the notion of purpose and sheds light on how purpose might develop in adolescence.

Dr. Daniel Perlstein is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California-Berkeley. Dr. Perlstein is an educational historian who has written about the relationship between democratic ideals and the governance, political organization, and pedagogy of public schools, and has a specific interest in racial equality and social justice within the American school system. His work focuses on historical social movements as sources of purpose for youth during the 1960's.

Dr. Robert Roeser is Assistant Professor of Education at Stanford University. His research focuses on how school impacts young people's psychological and academic adjustment. He has a particular interest in how academic achievement motivation and psychological adjustment are related in the school context and across development. This research provides insight into how schools and classrooms might be structured in order to help youth develop positive purposes. Dr. Roeser's understanding of Eastern

philosophy and religion also sheds light on how these philosophies view purpose and its development across the lifespan.

Dr. Richard A. Shweder is a cultural anthropologist and Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago. He has conducted research on moral reasoning, emotional functioning, gender roles and the moral foundations of family life practices in the Hindu temple town of Bhubaneswar on the East Coast of India. Dr. Shweder's work illuminates what purpose may look like across cultures, and the different forms it can take in different societies.

Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer is Professor of Education and Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also the Director of the Center for Health, Achievement, Neighborhood Growth, and Ethnic Studies (CHANGES) and Director of the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development (ISHD) Program and the W.E.B. DuBois Collective Research Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Spencer's research addresses resiliency, identity, and competence formation processes in youth of all ethnicities, but particularly among youth of color and those from low-resource families. Dr. Spencer's scholarship sheds light on how minority adolescents, and those from low-income areas, develop purpose.

Dr. Linda M. Wagener is Associate Dean of the School of Psychology and Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, and Co-Director of its Center for Research in Child and Adolescent Development. Dr. Wagener's interest is in exploring the relationship between moral and spiritual development and adolescent well-being. Her work is helpful in demonstrating how moral values and spirituality can serve as sources of youth purpose.

In addition to the 12 presenters, 20 participant observers (teachers, religious scholars, doctoral students, John Templeton Board of Advisor members, and other professionals working in youth related fields) also attended the conference and contributed to the discussion. Participant observers included:

- Judy Anderson, Guest of the John Templeton Foundation
- Kendall Cotton Bronk, Doctoral student at the Stanford University School of Education
- Kathy Davis, Administrator at the Stanford University Center on Adolescence
- Dr. Charles Harper, Executive Director at the John Templeton Foundation
- Mary Hurlbut, Student at Stanford University
- Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Associate Dean for Religious Life at Stanford University
- Dr. Pamela King, Assistant Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary
- Dr. Barnaby Marsh, Director of Venture Philanthropy Strategy and New Programs Development at the John Templeton Foundation
- Jenni Menon, Doctoral student at the Stanford University School of Education
- Michael Reagan, Member of the Board of Advisors at the John Templeton Foundation
- Kim Roots, Editor at Research News and Opportunities in Science and Theology
- Dr. Kimon Sargeant, Director of Research & Programs in the Human Sciences, Metanexus Institute on Religion and Science
- Dr. Arthur J. Schwartz, Vice President of Human Sciences at the John Templeton Foundation
- Dr. John M. Templeton Jr., President at the John Templeton Foundation

- Dr. Josephina Templeton, Spouse of Dr. John Templeton, Jr.

- Heather Wax, Features Editor at Research News and Opportunities in Science and Theology

- Mary Worlton, Director of Character Education and 6th Grade Teacher at Loyola Elementary School in Los Altos, CA

- Dr. Everett Worthington, Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University

V. Preparations for the Purpose Conference

In preparation for the conference, presenters were sent a working definition of purpose, which had been formulated at Stanford. Providing a definition was necessary because research on purpose has not always used the construct in similar ways. Indeed, many times this term has been used differently within the same work, nor has anyone attempted to draw boundaries between the related terms "purpose" and "meaning." The proposed definition contained important distinctions between these two words, distinctions that have been implicit in the way that researchers have used the two terms, and that also are consistent with our common-language understanding of these terms. For an operational definition of purpose to which all presenters could refer, the following was offered:

Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.

This definition was chosen because it highlights the following points:

1. Purpose is a goal of sorts, but it is more stable and far-reaching than low-level goals such as *"to get to the movie on time"* or *"to find a parking place in town today."*

2. Purpose is a part of one's personal search for meaning, but it also has an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self.

3. Unlike meaning alone (which may or may not be oriented towards a defined end), purpose is always directed at an accomplishment towards which one can make progress. This accomplishment may be material or non-material, external or internal, reachable or non-reachable: its necessary characteristic is not its concreteness but the sense of direction that it provides in creating an objective for purpose.

This preliminary definition is important in order to set a common point from which those concerned with youth purpose can build knowledge and consensus. It is around this definition that the scholars mentioned in this article organized their discussions of youth purpose.

Presenters were given the following 4 questions and asked to address one of them in a 15-minute presentation at the working conference. These questions were pertinent because they lie at the heart of what purpose is and provide a starting point for studying it:

1. *What kinds of purposes tend to inspire young people, either here and now (21st Century USA), or in any other historical and cultural contexts?*

2. *What role does purpose play in human development (during youth, adulthood, any and all segments of the life-span)?*

3. *How (and through what kinds of biological, cultural, educational, familial, spiritual, or any other kinds of influences) do young people discover purposes?*

4. *Are noble purposes acquired in the same manner as ignoble ones - and, indeed, is this a distinction that is important, and possible, to make?*

Lene Jensen and Richard Shweder spoke about the kinds of purposes that inspire young people (question 1). The second question, looking at the role of purpose in young peoples' lives, was addressed by Robert Emmons, Peter Benson, and Dan McAdams. Jonathan Haidt, Margaret Beale Spencer, and Robert Roeser discussed how youth discover purpose (question 3). Richard Lerner, Daniel Perlstein, and Linda Wagener presented on the fourth question, which explored the possibility of distinguishing between noble and ignoble purposes. A moderated large group discussion followed each presentation. Points of consensus emerged from the presentations and the discussions that followed. These points are outlined below.

VI. Points of Consensus from the Conference

Purpose in Historical and Cultural Contexts

The first question, about different kinds of purpose, spawned discussion around rites of passage, divine plans, callings, and the difference between purpose in traditional and more modern cultures. In reality, traditional and modern cultural practices may overlap in any society; there is likely a large diversity the world over in the way these practices are manifested across families, communities, and larger groups. However, here we make a demarcation between the traditional and the modern for the sake of simplicity. We refer to "traditional" as age-old practices common in societies

throughout history, but which may also be continued into contemporary times in some communities. These practices may be present in tribal societies and non-western, communal cultures, for instance. By "modern," we refer to more individual-oriented practices, dominant in contemporary, liberal democratic societies, such as the United States.

In traditional cultures, rites of passage tell youth what their roles are going to be in life and invest those roles with purpose. One of the key ways that traditional societies have imbued youth with a sense of their communal role is through adolescent rites if passage. Rites of passage are common in traditional cultures, and they often differ by gender. For girls, rites of passage often take place around the time of menarche and emphasize a girl's future role as mother and wife. Krobo adolescent girls in Ghana spend a three-week period of seclusion, during which time they are taught various ways of becoming a woman. Following this period of isolation they dress up and attend an "outdooring" ceremony where they publicly demonstrate various skills, such as dancing. Relatives, and perhaps more importantly, prospective suitors, attend the community-wide celebration.

For boys, the timing of adolescent rites of passage in traditional cultures is more variable, but most ceremonies involve tests of courage strength, and endurance. Rites of passage mark a boy's entrance into adulthood where he will fulfill what David Gilmore calls the Three Ps of Male Adulthood: provide, protect, and procreate.

Rites of passage reveal that purpose in these cultures is closely tied to roles, which in turn are tied to gender. Purpose often centers on one's responsibility to family and community, and in many cultures these communal responsibilities are further tied to spiritual, divine, or supernatural conceptions.

Purposes in traditional cultures are expected and shared by all members. The nature of any community is that the people within them, although often diverse in their approaches, share certain views of life and reality. These may be either implicit or explicit. While sharing this theme, many modern and traditional cultures may differ on the degree of explicit agreement about these purposes, however. One point of view, for instance, is to view modern pluralistic societies as particularly challenged to develop shared purposes, at least relative to more traditional societies.

From this perspective, purpose in traditional cultures seems natural and inevitable. The rites of passage and purposes that go along with them are expected and shared by all members in traditional cultures. An individual's purposes may vary based on his or her role within the society, however, relative to modern cultures; those within traditional cultures have generally shared an understanding of the structure of their society. All people have a role to fulfill within that society. Individuals fulfill their purpose by fulfilling their role, based on their age, gender, family position, profession, or other characteristics. For example, the first son of a healer might be expected by the others in his village to someday become a healer himself. His wife, on the other hand, might be expected to care for children. These purposes, while varying from person to person, are clearly understood by all who live in that culture, and can be contrasted with modern societies whose youth face a greater diversity of worldviews to choose from and available messages to adopt.

For traditional cultures personal and other-focused purposes are aligned. Many traditional societies subscribe to the idea of inherited qualities of excellence. According to this belief of natural telos, the unequal distribution of goods is a part of God's divine plan. The expectation in the community is that each person should have

the opportunity to realize the full potential of his or her natural endowment, whatever those endowments may be. It is also their expectation that the fruits of products realized by each person fulfilling his of her unique nature will be valued and esteemed by everyone in society. In this way a balance between the moral qualities of self-improvement and the moral qualities of community is achieved.

In these cultures it is seen as moral to live up to the obligations and duties associated with one's roles. Duty, hierarchy, and interdependence are positive qualities in this perspective.

Self-perfection in these cultures is often viewed as a master moral motive. In India, for example, self-perfection includes living up to the beliefs associated with one's position in society. In trying to achieve self-perfection a person is at once advancing his or her own moral career and advancing the goals of the society. Improving the self has indirect social benefits because the role structure is interdependent. If all people try to self-perfect, even if they are motivated by a concern for their own moral career, there is a benefit to the collectivity. Living up to one's own telos means the divine plan will be realized.

In Native American culture a similar notion was connected with rights of passage. Both girls and boys in these communities would undergo a Vision Quest Rite, in which they spent time in isolation and meditation. The aim was to encounter the divine, acquire knowledge or wisdom, and to discover and live in the divine will. Ideally the experience would provide an understanding of the path one was intended to walk. It was believed that the success of one's vision was related to the personal virtues that one possessed. Thus, the virtue of humility before the divine and the consequent opening of oneself to new knowledge during the experience was

considered to be key to a successful quest. By exercising virtue in the quest, personal power would be obtained in such a way that an individual would become a blessing to the community, especially the poor, young, and weak (Zirlott, 1999, pp. 216-220).

For liberal secular democratic societies, such as the United States, self-oriented goals and other-oriented purposes tend to conflict. In these cultures the idea that everyone has a peculiar and distinctive nature that they need to realize competes with a strong emphasis on equal and like prospects for all. In these societies, meaning tends to focus on the self. Social institutions, such as the media, promote an autonomous sense of life meaning. Billboards and advertising slogans read, "An intelligent world: Autonomy;" Ericsson, a cellular phone company declares, "Make yourself heard;" Acura's slogan is, "The true definition of Luxury. Yours;" the US Army is now, "An Army of One;" and Burger King jingles, "We do it your way." Messages about autonomy and self-focused goals pervade American culture. Unlike traditional cultures, American and other liberal democratic cultures fail to offer an easy way of balancing personal intentions with social purposes. An exception to this rule can often be found in religious communities.

A "calling" in the Christian sense is one way in which personal aims and social purposes   align. The Christian idea of a calling blends the focus on the self, the divine, and the community. It entails the notion that an individual has been blessed by God with a special vocation, and that the individual has a responsibility to use his or her gifts to benefit and help others.

Rites of passage in the contemporary United States focus less on community, spiritual, and family roles and more on gaining self-confidence and self-knowledge.

The Washington Ethical Society recently started a yearlong coming of age program, not unlike the rites of passage celebrated by traditional cultures. Youth participate in various activities and at the conclusion complete their own "vision quest," during which time youth are secluded in the Virginia mountainside. Following this isolation period a celebration is held.

This program emphasizes the self and the personal purpose of gaining self-knowledge and self-confidence for their own sake. The program director notes, "I really see changes in the young people who go through the program. By the end of the year they come out with a very strong sense of themselves." This contrasts sharply with the communal role of purpose in traditional cultures.

Youth in contemporary Western cultures receive diverse messages about purpose, and are encouraged to select their own. Youth in America receive a multiplicity of messages about purpose. Unlike traditional cultures, no one purpose is either expected or shared by adult community members. Some messages conflict. For example, female youth receive messages from a variety of sources (schools, churches, family, the media, etc.) that say they should grow up to be successful, competitive professionals, while also being nurturing, caring mothers. While there are many influences that affect young people's choices, youth are ultimately responsible for selecting their life paths.

Young people in Western cultures embrace a variety of purposes. Arnett, Ramos, and Jensen (2001) asked a socio-economically diverse sample of 140 people in their 20s two questions that shed light on purpose. Question 1 asked, "When you get to the end of your life, what would you like to be able to say about your life,

looking back on it?" and question 2 inquired, "What values and beliefs do you think are the most important to pass on to the next generation?"

Responses to these questions were coded in terms of Rick Shweder's three ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. Very briefly, the ethic of autonomy tends to capture values, virtues, ends, and means that focus on the individual. The ethic of community focuses on values, virtues, etc., that center on family and social purposes or social groups, and the ethic of divinity focuses on spiritually based groups or spiritual considerations.

Results suggest that most responses fall into the ethic of autonomy category. Discussing the first question and what he would like to say about his life when he gets to the end of it, one 24-year-old man said demonstrating the ethic of autonomy, "Probably that I had a good time, because if I'm having a good time, I'm happy, and that's pretty much what I've gathered that everybody wants to do is live a happy life. You know it's not going to be free from grief at all times, but I'd say just that I had fun. I'm a fun seeker."

Participants also spoke quite a bit about community purposes. They especially talked about family relationships, close personal relationships, and to some extent, ties to the broader society. A 27-year-old man said this is what he would like to be able to say about his life when he gets to the end, "That I made everybody happy in my family and did everything they would have liked to see me doing." Responses in the divinity category were relatively rare.

In India, and other cultures that believe in reincarnation, time scale is an important aspect of purpose.

For cultures that believe in immortal souls, the present and future are seamlessly linked together. One's current situation is thought of in terms of his or her actions and behaviors in the past. In such a timescale the first 5 years of life may seem trivial compared to where one's soul has been and the kind of moral career that must be taken into account. The present course of action has karmic consequences, as people reap what they sow in the future. Such beliefs are a recipe for incredible acts of efficacy and control because actions taken today may have ramifications far into the future. For example, young brides in India move into an extended family household and essentially enter boot camp. As the lowest rank in the hierarchy they serve the other family members. To a Western observer it appears as though the young woman is being victimized and exploited, but Indian women realize it is only a matter of time before they move up in the hierarchy.

The Role of Purpose in Human Development

Responses to question two, *what role does purpose play in human development*, generated discussion around the likeness between purpose and generativity, disillusionment as a result of not achieving one's purpose, and purpose as an indicator of positive youth development.

Generative adults strive to have a positive impact on the world around themselves, as do purposeful youth. Generativity is a psychosocial stage of mid-life development where healthy adults exhibit a concern for promoting the well-being of future generations. Generative adults are concerned with providing for, protecting, and passing on wisdom to future generations. They seek to have a positive impact in the long term, leaving a legacy of

the self that continues to be fruitful after one's active years have passed. Empirical research findings on generativity shed light on purpose.

Scholars interested in learning about generativity use a methodology that may prove useful for illuminating purpose. To study a sample of generative adults, researchers administer a number of measures which rank subjects from high to low on a generativity scale. Participants from different points on the scale are then interviewed. Interviews reveal narrative identities, or the way the adults think about themselves and their history. Interviews are not important for their veracity, but instead for seeing how subjects make meaning out of their experiences, and how they make narrative sense of who they were, who they are today, and who they may be in the future.

The life stories of highly generative American adults reveal themes that seem likely to emerge from narratives of purposeful youth. In relaying the tale of their lives, highly generative adults tend to open their stories with two themes. The first is one of early advantage; *I had something that other people did not have.* In some cases these adults were taken aside by role models and told they had promise. In other cases they had special relationships with people who helped them discover their own unique abilities. The second theme is the idea that whereas I was blessed, others suffered. Generative adults demonstrate a precocious sensitivity to others' pain.

As the narratives continue, themes of progress emerge. For highly generative adults there is a sense of linearity; things move upward, onward, forward. Setbacks occur but rather than being insurmountable, they serve as opportunities for learning and growth. Highly generative adults learn from the challenges in their lives.

When asked to project into the future, highly generative adults talk about goals and strivings. Unlike other adults, they have plans that involve growth, expansion, and improvement.

Highly generative adults often talk about their life's work in terms of a calling. These adults feel they have special talents that they are compelled to use for the benefit of others. Being generative is not always easy; it can involve sacrifices for one's children, for one's community, or for one's country. Despite this, these adults feel a duty to live their lives the way they do.

Highly generative adults also talk about a moral steadfastness that less generative adults do not mention. Often they will say such things as, "In my teenage years I got my values straight." Typically these adults talk about consolidating their value system, often connected to religion and often during adolescence. This moral steadfastness undergirds and supports highly generative adults' purpose in life and their generativity.

Generative adults tend to fare better psychologically than other adults. A growing body of research on generative adults suggests these adults are healthier than other adults. They are more likely to be involved in civic activities, more connected to their families, churches, political groups, etc. Generative adults have an efficacious sense of the self and an optimistic lens through which they view the world. They tend to believe that bad things can serve as learning opportunities and that good things will generally follow.

Just as generativity is a sign of mid-life well being, purpose is an indicator of positive youth   development.

Purpose can serve as a useful tool for parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other practitioners who work with youth for identifying positive youth development. While it can be fairly easy to spot youth who fail to thrive (by drug use, alcohol consumption, truancy, etc.), identifying children who are on the right track can be more challenging. Dr. Benson has identified purpose as a developmental asset that clusters with hope, meaning, efficacy, a positive view of the future, and an interest in spirituality. Purpose is an empowerment asset, which is a set of assets that relate to being embedded in caring communities. Some of the particular assets in this category are the sense that one lives in a community where young people are valued, are given useful roles to play in creation of community, and are given the opportunity to serve.

Purpose is also associated with thriving. Based on research on closely related topics, it is likely that purpose predicts resiliency, academic achievement, and preservation of one's own health. Youth with purpose are likely to make healthy decisions about their body, not because a nurse or pediatrician tells them to, but because they take responsibility for their own health. Theoretical and empirical literature also links purpose to spirituality, which is a virtue in adolescence, pushing young people in positive directions.

Purpose helps ward off poor mental health. It serves as a protective factor and is most strongly related to prevention of depression and attempted suicide.

When young people aspire to a great purpose, but lack the means to achieve it, disillusionment can follow. Purpose, by and large, plays a positive role in the lives of young people, but under certain circumstances it can lead to disillusionment. One can imagine a group of

young people who harbor lofty social goals, but lack the opportunity to realize those goals. For these young people, grasping the failure to act on their purpose could lead to disappointment.

How Do Young People Discover Purpose?

Themes and concerns emerging from a discussion of the third question, *how do young people discover purposes*, clustered around what sources and supports, both internal external, sustain purpose across individual and community experiences, and how the absence of these supports might thwart purpose.

Role models, heroes, and participation in mentoring groups provide youth with resources and opportunities to discover and commit to purposes. Youth need to have access to role models and mentors in order to find purpose. Mentors, teachers, parents, and other people in the community who work with youth are all potential sources of purpose. Often, these individuals can help stimulate young people's thinking about issues, scaffold them, and assist them in maintaining a focus on purposes they have chosen. A lack of access to role models who exhibit purpose is an obstacle; without narratives or role models, young people struggle to envision purpose. They cannot see how they can help other people or their communities. Good mentors therefore help kids to develop a sense of agency and a sense of control over their own lives, which helps them progress toward fulfilling their purpose. Young people also need exposure to heroes, who they can strive to emulate.

To these ends, youth may discover and find support for purpose through mentoring, service clubs, and church groups. Such groups provide social interactions and models of behavior for youth that inspire. Through these groups and through role models,

youth gain access to rich narratives that are both implicit and explicit, embodied in the life examples of mentors and through the foundational texts and philosophies of these groups. These groups also provide a context for participation through occasions of service where purposes can be practiced. One view suggests that purpose is a potential that already exists within the individual: contexts for participation allow purpose to be catalyzed and brought into the sphere of action. Church groups can be places where youth cultivate devotional practices and discipline which may help young people commit to and sustain a purpose. School can also serve as a promising source and support of purpose for young people when it successfully empowers them.

Youth need virtues and skills in order to follow through on their purposes. There are also specific virtues and skills that youth need in order to sustain a commitment to the purpose they choose. Young people need to be engaged if they are to live a purposeful life. Purposeful youth must be adept at identifying problems and skilled at coming up with creative solutions that they can enact. Short attention spans and a lack of persistence intuitively tend to work against sustaining a social purpose. Without the virtues and skills of intention, attention, devotion, and wisdom purpose is not likely to thrive. Young people need to be able to establish an objective, which requires intention; design and act on a creative solution, which requires wisdom; and maintain the attention and devotion to see a project through. Because of this, contexts that provide opportunities to youth for training in such virtues and skills are the most promising.

Environments that are rich in support and encouragement are optimal for the development   of   purpose. Young people need to be able to trust the world around them and they need to believe

they live in a society that values them. An unsafe environment is likely to inhibit the growth of purpose, as will negative stereotypes about young people. If youth are taught to believe they are social problems rather than social resources, purpose will be less likely to emerge.

In environments where adequate support and encouragement is not forthcoming, or in environments where youth do not feel safe, purpose is thwarted. For example, young people need to be free to live their lives as children and adolescents; too much pressure placed on youth to prematurely take on adult roles makes the development of purpose difficult. Similarly, overindulgence and a lack of responsibility and challenge may result in apathy and a sense of drift, both of which are antithetical to purpose.

Purpose develops in the context of inspiring ideologies, and is supported and initiated by moral emotions.
At the root of any purpose is a philosophy, idea, belief, or ideology. Purpose cannot develop in a vacuum, for young minds need inspiring material with which to construct their commitments. Having access to compelling sets of beliefs about life and about themselves creates foundations on which youth develop purpose. Ideologies are critical sources of purpose. Young people need to have contact with ideologies that empower, enlighten and inspire.

There is some evidence that intense moral emotions such as awe, admiration, and gratitude may help initiate the development of purpose. Emotions such as these may help the seeds of purpose to sprout, while the social and moral supports and influences can facilitate progress toward a goal. A sense of moral identity can support this development and create a more lasting contribution to its growth.

Evidence for the power of emotions comes from studying historical and more contemporary figures who have had changing emotional experiences, which inspired them to commit to new purposes. In the Mahabharata, an ancient Hindu epic, the warrior Arjuna undergoes an emotional conversion when the god Krishna allows him access to gaze upon the realities of the universe. In this experience, Arjuna is overcome with fear, trembling, and awe, and from that moment forward becomes a dedicated servant of Krishna, successfully winning the battle against his enemies. The sociologist Max Weber also described how charismatic individuals, like Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Hilter, and Mandela stirred the emotions of their followers, making them commit to their causes (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, pp 298-299). Some research also suggests that training in gratitude is effective in fostering purpose: young people who kept lists of things they were grateful for were more successful in achieving their goals and felt a greater sense of wanting to help others (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000).

Equally inspiring may be negative moral emotions, such as disgust and anger, created by unpleasant experiences. Adults who are generative, for instance, sometimes reflect more often than non-generative adults on negative experiences that might have affected them. They are sensitive to the suffering of others, and they construct narratives in which they see themselves as comparatively fortunate. Similarly, adult moral exemplars have been inspired to social purposes because they were outraged or unsatisfied with the state of the world, and set out to change it.

Shared purpose is essential for creating a sense of community. A community, by definition, is a group of people with a shared purpose. Businesses, for example, build community by creating mission statements and corporate visions that keep employees moving in the same direction. The military educates its new

recruits to collective purpose in order to achieve military objectives. Terrorists groups such as Hamas and al Qaeda use a common focus to unify groups of people into communities. All of these examples illustrate how shared purpose is at the heart of community. In each case, the stronger the shared purpose, the stronger the sense of community.

These examples also demonstrate that purpose has meaning to the world beyond the individual. For this reason future research will want to discover how individual purpose relates to shared purpose across communities of people, and society will need to grapple with how and when to build shared vision and a sense of the common good. In a pluralistic society negotiating such an undertaking will be a challenge. Additionally, we will want to ask, "How is the development of the individual's sense of purpose connected to the community's sense of purpose?"

The organizational and community development literatures offer two potential starting points. The first is a body of literature which explores how people working in the same place come to common ground. The community development literature similarly expresses the theme of building the common good within communities. These are both potential sources of knowledge of how shared purpose can be acquired.

It also appears that communities themselves can create or build shared purpose. William Damon, in his book entitled *The Youth Charter* (1997) discusses ways in which communities can instill common, social goals in its young people.

Noble Versus Ignoble Purpose

A fourth theme emerged around distinctions between noble and ignoble purposes and how they are acquired.

Distinguishing between noble and ignoble purposes is possible. The fourth question discussed at the conference revealed a number of insights into making distinctions between positive and less noble purposes. Participants discussed whether there is a difference between noble and ignoble purpose, between purposes that are constructive and those that reflect a desire to destroy, and what their developmental trajectories might be. Most agreed that there are a number of ways that noble and ignoble purposes are distinguishable. In fact, people constantly make such distinctions. Four common approaches in the sciences and humanities show how people have done this. Each approach has its strengths and limitations and each generates important questions.

Before discussing these approaches however, it is fair to site an alternate opinion to the one discussed here. There are indeed some thinkers who feel it is impossible to distinguish between purposes that are noble and those that are ignoble. Some arguments along this line state that purpose is a social construction and that the designation of purpose as noble or ignoble is a matter of interpretation, varying according to one's cultural or individual perspective. According to a purely relativistic view, a classification of purpose depends totally on social and political history and on one's construal of the social structure. While this view has its merit for understanding how historical, environmental, and personal transformations affect purpose and for describing how understandings of the good can appropriately evolve over time, a more general consensus is that a distinction is in fact possible. Most agree that there

are differences between noble and ignoble purposes and that distinctions can be drawn between them.

Noble and ignoble purposes can be defined by what is adaptive and functional according to empirical investigation. Empirical investigation is one way of defining which purposes are noble or ignoble. For example, through investigative methods, social scientists can show that certain purposes are associated with more positive developmental outcomes, like psychological health and well-being, whereas other purposes are associated with psychological distress. This is a common approach used by psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. As we note above, very little empirical research has directly addressed purpose to date so there is much work needed to be done in this area.

It should be acknowledged, however, that it seems possible for noble purposes to lead to psychological disillusionment in some situations. For example, we can imagine that African-Americans fighting for equal rights in the middle of this century likely experienced psychological distress when confronted with fierce opposition from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Consensus within communities or subcultures can determine which purposes are noble or ignoble. Through consensus of the majority of the people of a community or subculture, one decides what purposes are noble. An example of this is found in a recent movie called *Dogtown and Z-Boys*. The film follows the punk rockers of the 1970's skateboard movement. Set in Southern California, it is about a group of surfer kids with spare time on their hands and a love of skateboarding. The area in which they lived was

stricken by a severe drought and consequently, many of the swimming pools in their community were empty. These youth were not well invested in school or in other purposes that might normally be considered noble. Instead, they decided that swimming pools were a great place to try skateboarding. Through this subculture arose the noble purpose of developing skateboarding into a world-class sport. The results of these teenagers' sense of purpose can be seen today in the prevalence of sports like snow boarding, which is now an Olympic competition, and in public skate parks.

A problem with this approach is that often times the values and the purposes defined as noble within a particular sub culture contrast with purposes defined by a different subculture or the larger majority culture or look different across time. This point raises a very important concern: how can communities create a shared sense of purpose, so that purposes function to unite rather than to divide? Indeed, if purpose is to be understood both as meaningful to the self and as serving the common good, then developing common purpose within and across levels of social organization is a prime exigency of our time.

We can know which purposes are noble or ignoble by appealing to our own reason. By contrast, another approach is by appealing to reason and theory. According to this view, human beings can use theory and reason in order to distinguish the noble and moral from the ignoble and immoral; and these can in turn be tested empirically. This method has its roots in moral philosophy.

One rendition finds expression in the writings of the classical philosopher, Aristotle. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that human beings have the potential ability to recognize virtuous goals and to act in accordance with them. Aristotle was

also considered one of the first empiricists, as he believed that people could test out their theories by turning to what they observe in the world, and through reasoning about this information, arrive at what is true. The flip side of Aristotle's argument about human nature is that human beings also have the potential to feel attracted to and follow less positive purposes, so that their reasoning might not always align with what is true. Still, reason and systematic empirical investigation are important and helpful tools that people can use to discern noble and ignoble purposes.

The usefulness of these tools is shown in how scientists have applied modern renditions of Aristotle's view. Virtue ethics, or Neo-Aristotelianism, presents the argument that we can come to understand virtue by observing it in people who demonstrate virtuous qualities (Hursthouse, 1991). Scientific studies of people who have displayed a commitment to a purpose throughout their lives describe what noble purposes look like. From this research, observing the virtues of exemplars can evidence what is moral. By looking at people who are exemplars of noble and ignoble purposes we can in turn learn about what might be distinct about different kinds of purpose. For instance, one such study used values of humility and alignment between means and ends evidenced by exemplars to choose moral exemplars, then these exemplars were interviewed to see what these two noble characteristics looked like (Colby & Damon, 1992).

Distinctions between purposes are possible through appeals to higher sources of authority.

Finally, one can appeal to a higher source of authority in order to understand one's purpose. This is the method that has been used in many religious communities, where individuals appeal to God and religious texts as a source of guidance. In this case, a

sense of "calling" will define noble versus ignoble purposes. The idea of a calling unites one's sense of personal purpose with higher purposes. While this method has often been used in religious traditions, it is also present historically in appeals to political and philosophical ideologies, which can also take on the quality of a religious-like calling for individuals.

The problem with this approach, when taken alone, is also evident. What if an individual's sense of calling is destructive and the higher source of authority to which he or she appeals either in reality or through interpretation has damaging ends? There are many examples throughout the history of humanity that illustrate this problem, such as destructive movements that have been followed in the name of nationalism, religion, or other ideologies. However, there are also many examples of people who have used their sense of calling towards social and community betterment. Appeal to authority has therefore been a viable way by which people have chosen to distinguish between the noble and ignoble, although it must be used with caution.

The approaches featured here reveal a consistent perspective that it may be possible to distinguish between noble and ignoble purposes, however, making a distinction is not a simple task, nor is it foolproof or absolute. It is likely that using one or more of these approaches at a time may be the most reliable way to distinguish purposes. At the same, it is important to recognize that each method has weaknesses.

Teaching for Purpose

A final theme that emerged across questions was the transmission of purpose.

Purpose may be best learned in private spheres. In most cultures what is "good" is defined in the private rather than the public sphere.

Children primarily learn right from wrong from their families and churches rather than from larger institutions such as schools and the media. This suggests inspiring purpose should begin at home and in more "private" realms.

However, the distinction between noble and ignoble purposes is important; parents can serve as sources of both kinds of purpose. Some parents have inspired young people to raise money to provide safe drinking water to people in Africa, while others, such as the D.C. sniper, have taught their children to kill. Transmission of noble and ignoble purposes likely follows the same path.

The need for positive role models, mentors, and purposeful narratives underscores the need to set an example for purpose. "Virtue isn't taught, it's caught." Therefore, one of the most important steps adults can take to inspire purpose is to lead purposeful lives themselves.

Certain times in the life course present a natural opportunity for reflecting on purpose.

Simply allowing youth to reflect on their lives is likely to stir up thoughts about purpose. Certain times or milestones in young people's lives naturally lead to reflection. For example, nearly all college applicants must submit some kind of statement of purpose to prospective universities. Perhaps additional opportunities for reflection should be encouraged.

VII. Conclusion

Points of agreement about purpose exist. Research, theory, and intuition across disciplines suggest answers to the questions around cultural differences in purpose, the role purpose plays in human development, sources and supports for purpose, how

to distinguish between noble and ignoble purpose, and how to educate for purpose. In this document, built from the consensus of experts working on related topics, we have come closer to understanding what purpose looks like and how it may imbue young peoples' lives with meaning, helping them navigate the ups and downs of life, and contribute positively to the world around themselves. Yet, we have just scratched the surface. Clearly there are many significant issues and pressing questions to address with empirical and theoretical research. It seems likely that purpose will be an important and fruitful field of research for years to come.

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