



Perspective/Opinion

The journey to a meaningful life

By Karen Marcdante, MD, Professor Emerita

At the end of a long career, Dr. Marcdante looks back on her journey toward meaning...

It may be cliché, but like many, I chose medicine because I wanted to help people and make a difference. In other words, I wanted a career where I mattered, adding value to the lives of patients and, in turn, being valued for doing so.

I believe that by focusing on mattering, I have created a meaningful life. But what is meaning? To get started, I did what any curious person would do today. I asked ChatGPT if a life inherently has meaning or if meaning was inferred after one's life was lived. ChatGPT's last paragraph in the answer:

"Ultimately, whether life has an inherent meaning or not is a question that may never be fully answered. However, what is certain is that individuals have the ability to create meaning in their own lives, based on their values, beliefs, and experiences, and that the meaning of life is a deeply personal and subjective matter."

In other words, meaning is a journey.

It starts with family.

Reflecting on my journey, I realize how little moments instilled values and beliefs that led to meaning. I was fortunate to grow up in a large and loving family, with parents who managed to treat all 6 daughters as individuals, instilling values like kindness, curiosity, persistence, and honesty. And we never doubted that we were loved.

My dad, who's right leg was locked at the knee and 3 inches shorter than his left leg (from an accident at age 16), was middle management in foundries and never seen as disabled by any of us, just as a larger-than-life character who was known to interrupt a summer dinner with a glass of water tossed into someone's face – a sign that it was time for an all-out water fight.

My mom worked as a nurse full-time on nights when we were younger. She pursued an MPH and became a public health nurse once my baby sister was in school. She was the calm,

responsive parent who quietly instigated fun (and order) when we most needed it, managing our large family with fairness and forgiveness.

We all had assigned tasks, were expected to do our best at school, and were usually allowed to work out sisterly differences amongst ourselves. Both parents never failed to spend the time needed to answer a question, calm anxieties or offer their opinion. It is interesting to think back, cherishing the many memories of all little moments. Then, there were my 5 sisters, each with their own personality, creating numerous moments of both conflict and joy. We were close growing up and have remained so as older adults still sharing moments. They (and my husband) are amazing and supportive in ways both big and small as I, for the last 19 years, have traversed the medical world as a patient. Interacting with my family, growing as a person with them brings meaning into my life.

The work we chose has impact.

While my parents both worked (unusual at the time) to provide us with the basics, any extra required each child to contribute towards the goal. So, after starting as a babysitter at age 12, I worked as a camp counselor, store clerk, waitress, and hostess. Each role provided experiences that shaped my future approach to medicine.

The developmentally challenged children I worked with at camp made me realize that many special needs aren't met until an advocate strongly voices the issue. As a store clerk, I became aware that each customer had unique needs, responded to respectful service, and, for the most part, enjoyed having someone with whom to share a smile, even on the busiest of days. Being a waitress and hostess reinforced those values while also highlighting the importance of equity. People hoping to impress me with their importance in order to get an earlier table failed as I realized that everyone there had the same goal, waiting their turn to have a pleasant meal regardless of their career or disposable income. Working in the service industry also taught me how to use kindness and humor to help customers enjoy (or at least tolerate) the wait for their table.

Just like the many small moments in our family, there were numerous experiences in the restaurants that helped me through my medical training (and practice). Prioritizing tasks, managing conflict and teamwork are part of service whether in the restaurant business or in medicine. I'm not sure I realized it at the time, but all of these experiences prepared me to pursue a meaningful career, strengthening values and reminding me that nurturing relationships is key to any service role.

Important experiences – big and small – guide my journey.

Unfortunately, Mom, one of the most gracious, giving persons I have ever known, died when I was seventeen. I had just been accepted to college and was at the start of my journey to being a doctor. Looking back, it is easy to see how some of the experiences during those few months from my mother's diagnosis to her death impacted the doctor I became. My family's disgust

with the physician who came out of the OR and blurted out her cancer diagnosis in front of my 3 younger sisters with no real preparation, the lack of a real diagnosis until her autopsy, and the belief that controlling her pain would result in addiction (so wasn't provided) have all impacted my approach when dealing with similar situations. On the positive side, I cherish times when I rocked some of my small patients to sleep, when parents reached out for some solace, and when I was able to make a sick child giggle. I hope and pray that I met the needs of my patients' families as well as possible. I know that I didn't always succeed, but I tried to learn with each failure so I didn't repeat mistakes. I am forever grateful to my mentors and role models who helped me to trust in my curiosity, develop communication skills, and the ability to demonstrate compassion.

Helping others is still my goal.

For me, meaning in medicine didn't just come from patient care. Fortunately, I became involved in medical education and educational administration early in my career. I have worked with thousands of medical students and hundreds of residents and fellows. I know that, while not every learner remembers something I taught them, I had the opportunity to guide them as they become the amazing professionals they want to be. And being present as they walk across the stage at graduation brings me such joy. Watching these talented individuals pursue their own journey toward meaning adds to mine. Following some of them as they continue their journey, making real differences through patient care, research and leadership, furthers my sense of mattering. While my contribution may be small, being involved in teaching, curriculum and assessment design and educational scholarship adds to my sense of meaning and purpose.

So, while others have written of the many philosophical approaches to meaning and purpose, I agree with the synthesis created by ChatGPT, that meaning is the result of experiences that allow us to strengthen our values and beliefs. For me, it has been in the small, unexpected moments that my meaning becomes more explicit. Whether in the hilarious water fights of my youth or the moments of connection with my patients and their families, I have been blessed with relationships that allow me to create meaning. I hope that you, too, are so blessed and that you take note of the moments that create meaning in your lives so you, too, can look back at your life and relish the journey you are taking.

For further reading:

*Isaac & Ora Prilleltensy authored "**How People Matter: Why it affects health, happiness, love, work and society**". Cambridge University Press 2021. While it is not specifically about meaning, I find that without a sense of mattering there is no meaning.*

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