

Yesterday I was at a middle school in Ashland, Wisconsin, talking with a classroom of seventh-graders. I told them I was writing a book about the Four Hills, an Ojibwe story of life and its seasons, and that I'd written all of the chapters except one.

"I need your advice," I said. "What should the last chapter be about?"

Some of them raised their hands. I called on one, an Ojibwe boy.

"Tell why we are here," he said, "why we live."

Epilogue: *Mino-bimaadiziwin* (The Good Path)

To resurrect the past in forms already done is to negate survival. The same flower does not live, die, to live again. It lives, dies, and is no more. After death and passing it leaves a memory of loveliness and a promise of a renewal of that beauty in another flower in another spring.ⁱ

If everything in creation is bound to the circle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, what purposes do our own lives serve? Why do we walk the four hills of life? These ancient questions are as old as humankind itself.

Giving Expression to Our Visions

Ojibwe teachings say that we exist to live out and give expression to our visions, and that in so doing we find meaning and purpose in life. And because each of us has a different vision, it must be lived as we alone can understand it.

Some individuals have visions of being leaders, to become someone who unites people toward the common good. Others hold visions of teaching children, healing the sick, guiding the lost or troubled, and providing shelter. To live out their visions, these persons become teachers, mentors, school volunteers and administrators, or board members. They become healers, medicine persons, nurses, or surgeons. They become career counselors or work in chemical-dependency programs. They become welders, electricians, carpenters, architects, or house painters. At the same time most people also

try to be good wives or husbands, parents, grandparents, and aunts or uncles. Each of these roles is an important part of who we are. Our vision encompasses all parts of us.

Ojibwe teachings also tell us that to live out our vision, we must ultimately follow the Good Path, for life-meaning comes from living the values given to each of us at birth. The Creator realizes, however, that we humans often lose our way along the path of life. We sometimes forget our purpose for living. We may do some things poorly. We may feel we have failed or believe we cannot live up to others' expectations. Ojibwe teachings say we are allowed to wander seven, and sometimes nine, times away from our vision. But ultimately we must return to the main path.

Life's Meaning Finds Us

How do we find our unique reasons for walking the four hills of life? Viktor Frankl, a great psychotherapist, tried to answer this question. Frankl, a Jew, was a survivor of the Holocaust of World War II. He was a prisoner in four Nazi death camps from 1942 to 1945. His parents and other family members died in the concentration camps. Perhaps because of the depth of suffering he experienced there, he began asking questions about the meaning of life. Who could better ask these questions than one who had witnessed most horrific of human behavior, yet also saw that many who died in the camps did so with their dignity intact?

The genocide of the Jews bears striking similarities to what happened to Native people throughout the Americas following European colonization. Maybe that is why Frankl's ideas about finding life-meaning fit the Native perspective so well. His writings often focus on choosing one's attitude, committing to values and goals, fulfilling one's

tasks, discovering the meaning of life, and pursuing happiness. He said that we should not ask what the meaning of life is, because the meaning of life will find us.

Choosing One's Attitude

The Ojibwe endured a horrific period in history so their descendants could be here today, proud and strong. They lived through a time when the very meaning of who they were as Ojibwe people—their culture, language, and spiritual ways—were under assault, and they survived in spite of it.

The Ojibwe had to endure diseases to which they had no *immunity* (defense). These diseases (measles, small pox, influenza) sometimes wiped out whole villages, entire tribal nations. More often the diseases claimed the lives of the youngest children and the elderly, leaving a few older children and adults. Can you imagine how they felt as they faced diseases for which they had no protection or cure? Can you imagine how they felt as they watched as their relatives and neighbors suffered and died?

The Ojibwe had to endure losing most of their land and being forced onto reservations. Can you imagine how they felt when a government agent came to their homes and told them the home and land they lived on was no longer theirs? “We want you to move to _____ or _____,” the agent would say. The Ojibwe knew they were being asked to move to mostly swampy land, not at all good for gardening, maple-sugar making, hunting, or fishing. But they also knew it was useless to resist. The government was too powerful. How do you think they felt about that?

Soon, another agent came to their homes and said, “You can no longer practice your religion.” He told them how and to whom they could worship. They knew they were powerless to resist. How do you think they felt?

Then another agent came to their homes and said, “Your children will need to come with us. We will school them in our ways.” Can you imagine their heartbreak when they gave up their children to boarding schools?

The Ojibwe’s losses were great and their pain was deep. They lost many of their children and elders to diseases. They lost their land and their spirituality, and they lost their remaining children to boarding schools. Yet they didn’t let their losses defeat them. They did not give up. They did not lie down and die. They chose to be strong. They continued teaching their ways and practicing their spirituality in hiding. They chose their attitude—to continue to exist as Ojibwe people. All of the beauty of what it is to be Ojibwe they left to future generations who are here today, still strong in their ways, still proud. Still Ojibwe.

The current generation will choose the same attitude. Choosing our attitude will help meaning find us.

Committing to Values and Goals

We see good people everywhere in Ojibwe country. They set goals for themselves and others and live by a strong set of values. They are committed to helping others. They teach the traditional Ojibwe language. They visit or bring deer meat and homemade jam to elders. They work long hours fighting for treaty rights. They help people find good jobs. They counsel and heal. Most adults work hard to be good and loving parents. And

all deserve and expect nothing in return but respect. They live out the values of the Good Path.

Many young Native people are committed to values and goals. One Native youth, Jane, made a graduation promise to her mother: “I want to give her that gift, from me. And I’d like to do the college one, give her the college diploma as well.”ⁱⁱ

Another youth, Margie, set a goal to abstain from sexual activity as part of living her traditional ways:

Some of the girls don’t practice abstinence, but I do myself because I’m very traditional and in the traditional way we have to. They say your power becomes stronger when you are a woman and you’re still a virgin; and to dance, you have to be a virgin. That’s the one main rule. I am the only daughter in the family, the only granddaughter on both sides of the family, so it’s sort of my job to keep that side of the culture. And I do it very well.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet another youth, Werth-Kerish-Nah, set a goal for himself, his mentor, and his people about learning his language and becoming a language teacher:

I’d say in the last three years, my mentor has been my master because I’ve been teamed up in the master-apprentice program of the Yurok Tribe. It’s total immersion into the Yurok language so that I can learn it and gain

fluency over a period of time, and then I, in turn, maybe even get credentials and teach the language to other people.^{iv}

Committing to values and goals helps meaning find us.

Fulfilling One's Tasks

Each of us must accept responsibilities as we walk through life. Others come to depend on us—our children for love and *sustenance* (food, clothing, shelter), elders for companionship, and spouses or partners to share the joys and responsibilities of a family.

Sometimes we have little choice but to accept responsibility that is put in front of us because the task is something that must be done, and no one can do it but ourselves.

One man's auntie called upon him to become a traditional spiritual leader:

She told me, "We need a leader. Our Indian religion is gone. Nobody does it anymore. I been talking with some other ladies and men. You are a good man. You work hard. You have a good family. You get involved in the Indian way of life. You speak your language real good. We want you to learn the Indian way of worship. We want you to be our leader."^v

Meaning finds us when we accept responsibility. We see the hungry and we feed them. We see the poor and we help them. We see the lonely and we visit them. We see wrongs and we work to make them right. Each of us has unique responsibilities on each of the hills of life.

Discovering the Meaning of Life

We come upon a hungry puppy and we feed it. Once its appetite is satisfied, it licks our hands and wants to play. We feel its love. Because of our good deed, we have a new friend. We have lived a value of the Good Path: honor the elder brothers, the plant and animal beings.

We see Grandma struggling with her bag and chair. We help her carry the items to a place in the shade where she will sit. In so doing, we live two values of the Good Path: honor women and honor elders.

We see bigger boys teasing our younger brother about being overweight. The boys are bigger than us. “Don’t tease my brother,” we say to them, even though we are afraid. One of them calls us out to fight. We walk away because we know that fighting doesn’t solve a thing. In so doing, we live two values of the Good Path: have courage and be peaceful.

We give our last quarter to a friend who doesn’t have enough money for lunch. That is kindness, a value of the Good Path. We go to a feast and serve ourselves only what we need so that others have enough to eat. In so doing, we live the value of being moderate.

Our mother asks us to try harder in school, to pick up our grades. We promise we will and we do. In so doing, we live the value of keeping our promises.

All of this pleases and honors the Creator.

Living a value helps meaning find us.

Some of us grow up in difficult circumstances. Maybe our father is in prison. Maybe we are poor. Maybe our neighborhood has gangs or violence or drugs. Maybe we live with abuse. We are faced with choices. We can feel angry toward our father for not being there for us. We can feel ashamed because we have no money for good clothes or a better house. We can feel defiant as we join gangs or commit acts of violence, or take drugs. We might even feel guilty, that we are to blame if we are abused, even though in our hearts we know we are not. We feel pain and it comes out as suffering.

Sometimes suffering is a part of life. In the end, however, we are faced with another set of choices. We can choose to make it through all the bad times, no matter what. We can survive the hard times and go on with living. We can decide to make a difference by working to eliminate poverty, crime, violence, drugs, and abuse. We can teach or work in health care. We can work hard to be good parents to change our children's lives for the better. Our choices are our own, and most of us do it our own way.

Sometimes, even suffering helps meaning find us.

Pursuing Happiness

So many times, when people are asked what they want out of life, we hear them say, "I just want to be happy." But happiness is sometimes like a rainbow. As we run to stand in its beauty, it seems to move away from us. Just when we think we might catch up to it, the rainbow disappears.

We will never find happiness if we pursue it. Happiness, like all things sacred, finds us. We experience happiness when we choose our attitude, commit to values and

goals, fulfill our tasks, do good deeds, live our values, and sometimes even when we suffer. Happiness is the reward of living in a good way.

The Great Circle of Things

All of creation walks the four hills of life. Everything forms a circle. Stars begin as specks of dust, grow, twinkle, and eventually lapse into darkness. What remains of them is gathered by the great laws of nature and formed into stars again. The circle of things continues. Daybreak begins. The sun rises and travels across the horizon, then sets. Moonlight appears and fades. Daybreak begins again. The circle of things continues. Plants push their way through the earth and reach toward the sun. They seed, then wither with the seasons, and lay down on the earth to die. New plants grow from the seed. The circle of things continues. Animals give birth, while the old and injured and sick among them end their earthly existence. A fawn is born and grows, fathers new young, or becomes a mother to fawns. The circle of things continues.

Everything in creation walks this path. And the path forms a great circle, and within it are many circles within circles. One circle is our own, and everything else that exists before and after us.

All of the circles join in a great symphony. Everything in creation becomes its performers. The wispy clouds, the crackling thunder, the piercing sunlight. The splashing fish, the chattering birds, the soaring eagle. The chanting singers, the laughing children, the clapping elders.

The drum sounds the heartbeat of our earth.

The song is life.

And the Creator is the maestro.

ⁱ Johnston, 1976, p. 117.

ⁱⁱ Bergstrom et al., 2003, p. 135.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bergstrom, pp. 135–136.

^{iv} Bergstrom, p. 136.

^v Axtell and Aragon, 1997, p. 188.