

SESSION 11 · SHORTER READING · ABOUT 10 MINUTES

WHYZMEN · SESSION 11

Cultivating Purpose

Anthony Burrow on why purpose is built, not found

Credit: Dr. Anthony Burrow, Cornell University, interviewed by Shankar Vedantam on *Hidden Brain*, “You 2.0” series (August 2021). Burrow co-edited *The Ecology of Purposeful Living Across the Lifespan* (with Patrick Hill, 2020). The episode is about fifty minutes and free wherever podcasts are.

Why it is here: Burrow supplies the research under three things this program has asked of you: that identity comes before mission, that a mission is not a goal, and that purpose is built rather than found. He also gives you a picture for the climb ahead: purpose changes how steep the hill looks.

1 · Languishing, and why it clusters at transitions

Vedantam opens with Benjamin Braddock drifting in his parents’ pool in *The Graduate* (“It’s very comfortable just to drift here”). Burrow’s term for it is **languishing** — not laziness but disconnection: “you can’t fully make sense of up or down, heads or tails... you can’t keep score of how to move forward.”

His key observation is that languishing is not random. It spikes at transition points — graduation, retirement — because “a lot of the identity contingencies, the ways we think of ourselves, are interwoven into the everyday life experiences.” When the work relationships end, the question “who am I?” arrives uninvited. This is Moynes’ Phase 2 described from the inside, with a mechanism attached.

One finding worth knowing: in Burrow’s daily-diary studies, people asked in the morning how purposeful the day would be consistently overestimated it. By evening, life had gotten in the way. Intention is not the same as a purposeful day.

2 · Meaning looks backward; purpose looks forward

Burrow separates two words the program uses constantly. **Meaning** is “making sense of the world as it’s happened or is happening.” **Purpose** is “aspiring or intending to accomplish something that’s ahead of you.”

This maps onto your Charter. Part One (story, values, strengths, faith, the Caring Shift) is meaning work: making sense of the road behind. From §2.0 on (your next chapter, your mission, A Tuesday in 2031, your first steps and your legacy letter) is purpose work: intention for the road ahead. Sessions 5–6 were meaning; Session 11 is purpose. The Meaning Audit is well named: a backward-looking instrument that feeds a forward-looking mission.

3 · A goal can be finished. A purpose cannot.

The distinction the whole episode turns on. “Goals might be thought of as intentions that can be accomplished... a purpose might be something like being a caring father. I can evidence it on a given day when I’m at my best, but it’s hard to imagine accomplishing it.” And the organizing role: **“A purpose might be an organizer of our goals, such that when I accomplish goals, it’s my purpose that tells me what goals I should be pursuing next.”**

The illustration is Andre Agassi — number one in the world, and desperately unhappy: “Every day is Groundhog Day, and what’s the point?” Burrow’s diagnosis: “If a goal can be accomplished, it does raise questions about what becomes of you once you’ve accomplished it.” Retirement is precisely that — the forty-year goal, accomplished. Men who ran on goals arrive at the finish line and discover the finish line was never a direction.

Agassi’s recovery is worth telling too. He did not leave tennis; he re-purposed it — realized people came to watch him, that he gave them joy, that he could be a role model. Same activity, new why. “Ownership meant feeling grateful for... the chance to start over.”

In your Charter: §2.1 My Mission is the purpose; §3.1 My First Steps and the 90-day checkpoint in §3.2 are the goals it organizes. That is why the Charter is built in that order, and why you cannot skip straight to the steps.

4 · Purpose cannot be crowdsourced

“The answer to the question ‘What is your purpose?’ is not something you can crowdsource... ‘Hey, tell me from your profile view, which direction does it look like I’m heading in?’ It’s an internal quest.” Many people who look fully self-directed from the outside “report symptoms of languishing” when asked.

This is why the Clearness Room forbids advice. Your brothers ask honest, open questions so that you hear your own answer. Burrow explains why advice would fail; the room supplies the discipline that keeps your brothers from giving it.

5 · Purpose as a keel

Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation*: “The more you know who you are and what you want, the less you’ll let things upset you.” Burrow’s data agree. On days people report stressors, distress rises — except among high-purpose individuals, whose “stressful days kind of look like non-stressful days for the rest of us.” They do not have fewer stressors (sometimes more); the stressors land softer. The same flattening shows on good days. Over a lifespan, Burrow argues, an even keel beats a mood that “bounces around based upon the experiences that are happening to you.” Purpose is not a cure for the turbulence; it is ballast in it.

6 · The hill study — our metaphor, in a lab

Volunteers wrote briefly about either a recent movie, a goal they had once they reached the top, or their sense of purpose. Then they climbed a steep hill and reported how steep it was and how much effort it took. For movie-writers, steepness and effort tracked tightly. For **goal-**

writers, likewise — “this hill is the obstacle between me and where I’m going to be in a few minutes.” For **purpose**-writers, the link came apart: the hill was just as steep, but it cost less. “I’m not thinking about what I’m going to do immediately at the top. I’m thinking about my general direction in life.”

For a program whose picture is Two Summits and whose first session is Basecamp, this is the finding to remember. Goals make the climb an obstacle. Purpose makes it the path.

7 · Purpose is visible — and it draws people

Tyler Stillman’s work: people who score high on purpose are rated more likable, more appealing to be around, and they have broader and deeper social networks. Burrow’s read: “It’s almost as if we can see that this person is heading somewhere... there’s a directionality to them,” while a man without direction is harder for the world to know how to connect to. Vedantam pairs it with W. H. Auden: “You need not see what someone is doing to know if it is his vocation, you have only to watch his eyes... that eye-on-the-object look.”

This is the link between the Fellowship Gap (Session 10) and the mission work (Session 11). Men often assume they need friends first, then purpose. Stillman’s data suggest it runs the other way at least as often: purpose is what makes a man findable.

8 · How it is measured — two questions

Burrow’s instruments are disarmingly simple: *Do you feel your life has a clear direction? Do you feel your daily activities are engaging and important?* Purpose is a subjective sense, not an objective fact — “simply feeling like your life has purpose... seems to be a strong predictor of health and well-being.” Two questions, asked at Session 11 and again at Session 15.

9 · The health profile

Purpose predicts longevity, lower incidence of heart attack and stroke, faster recovery from some surgeries, fewer psychosomatic symptoms, slower cognitive decline with aging and lower Alzheimer’s risk. Less familiar: purpose correlates with **lower impulsivity**. Offered a small reward now or a larger one later, purposeful people wait. “The long game that purposeful individuals might be playing.” A mission is what makes “no” affordable, which is the work of Session 13, The Essential Few.

10 · Frankl, and the why of survival

The episode plays Frankl himself: those most likely to survive the camps “were oriented toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future... a personal task waiting for them... or another person whom they were loving to be met again. The question was not just survival, but there had to be a *why* of survival.” Burrow adds the line to keep: “There can be a physical death... but before that, there can be a **psychological death** where a person sees nothing else out ahead of themselves.” Frankl’s two forms of the why — a task ahead, or a person to be met — map to Cause and Belonging in the Meaning Audit.

11 · Identity is the foundation of purpose

Burrow's own story: adopted, raised in rural Iowa, 4-H in Bremer County. At eight or nine he presented soil layers in a jar to adults at the county fair, took a red ribbon (second — “because I called it dirt and not soil”), and learned “that I had something to say... people might understand the world they're living in differently as a function of what I'm saying.” He still thinks of that fair before he lectures.

The principle: **“If we were to ask somebody, ‘What is your purpose?’ — the you in that sentence requires that they know who they are.”** This is the strongest outside validation the program has for its sequence — identity, story, values and strengths before mission. We did not ask the mission question until Session 11 because the *your* in “your mission” was not yet answered.

12 · Purpose is cultivated, not found — three pathways

Burrow “chafes” at *find your purpose*: “I just don't see the evidence... as if I just had the right flashlight.” Instead, purpose arrives by one of three paths.

Proactive — gradual, sustained engagement with something you keep returning to, “a snowball I kept pushing over time.” You often cannot say when it began. (Moynes' Phase 3, Trial and Error; Burnett & Evans' prototyping; the Buford Box.)

Reactive — an event calls you into it: a family member falls ill, a job ends. Reactive men know exactly where their purpose came from. Many WhyzMen participants are here; retirement itself is the event.

Social learning — you watched someone up close who had it. “You saw what it looks like to wake up in the morning and really go after it.” The cohort, the triad, and the facilitators who have made the transition themselves are this pathway by design.

Vedantam's summary of what the three share: none of them “involve someone sitting down on a couch and ruminating.” Purpose is found on one's feet. That is the argument for the Field Tests, and against the man who wants to figure out his purpose before he tries anything.

13 · GripTape — the champion who need not be an expert

Burrow studies GripTape, a program in which young people choose what to learn (build a bicycle, code, start a business) and pursue it for ten weeks with an adult **champion** who “cannot have an expertise in the thing the young person wants to learn.” The champion's job is to check in and ask, “What did we learn this week? What did you do?” — a captive audience for the learner's progress.

That is the WhyzMen triad, described exactly. Brothers are not consultants; they are witnesses who show up and ask what happened this week. Burrow's finding is that this is enough to move purpose, curiosity, contribution and wellbeing. Worth remembering when a triad member worries he has nothing to offer.

14 · Two closing images

Kendrick Lamar, “Good Kid” — Burrow’s reminder that some people’s “menu of possible selves” is constrained by their environment, and that “we all play a role in other people’s purpose development.” A church cohort is, among other things, one man widening another man’s menu.

Mae Jemison — her stated purpose is travel to the nearest star, which no current propulsion can reach. Burrow calls it “a trick”: naming a destination far beyond the horizon organizes everything we must build in the here and now. A Second Summit no man will fully climb is not a flaw in the metaphor. It is the point of it.

Where it shows up in WhyzMen

Session	What Burrow supplies
S1 Basecamp	The two-question self-check; identity before purpose; the hill study as the Two Summits explainer.
S2–S3	Languishing as the mechanism of Moynes’ Phase 2; purpose as keel, not cure.
S10	Stillman — purpose makes a man findable; networks follow direction, not the reverse.
S11 Mission	Goal vs. purpose; purpose as organizer of goals; why the Clearness Room forbids advice; three pathways; the Field Tests.
S13 The Essential Few	The morning-and-evening overestimation study argues for the 90-day checkpoint; the impulsivity finding is why a mission makes “no” affordable.
Triads	GripTape’s non-expert champion is the triad job description.

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