

Purpose, Meaning, and the Cult of “Why”

How the “Why” Movement Misunderstands Purpose and Meaning.

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Sep 26, 2025



1. Your “Why” is neither Purpose nor Meaning.

The modern obsession with “finding your why” has become a cultural script. Conferences, leadership seminars, LinkedIn carousels, and university marketing all repeat the same promise: once you identify your why, clarity follows and your life finally makes sense. What once belonged to philosophy or religion has been absorbed into branding culture. The idea’s public authority can be traced back to a single viral moment - Simon Sinek’s 2009 TED Talk and the book that followed - which **polished a complex existential problem into a single, highly marketable word**. But the popularity of the slogan masks its conceptual friability. The neuroscience invoked in its support is misleading, the psychology is thin, and the philosophical foundations are nonexistent. **Its simplicity is its liability.**

The core failure of the why-mantra lies in the **conflation of purpose and meaning**, two grammars of human life that serve different functions. **Purpose looks forward**: it is directional, teleological, and project-driven. It channels energy into action but is not inherently moral. As Hannah Arendt noted, purpose divorced from judgment can be catastrophic, because “motion” alone is not enough. **Meaning, by contrast, looks backward**. It arises from narrative, the slow work of making sense of what has happened, connecting experiences into coherence, and revising our interpretation as new events unfold. Meaning is retrospective, layered, and never final.

These grammars are not interchangeable. Purpose can exist without meaning, and meaning can emerge without purpose. To imagine that one single why can permanently anchor both is to misunderstand the structure of human life. Human experience is plural: projects shift, identities evolve, stories revise. The promise of a single, overarching reason-for-being erases this plurality and **leaves people unprepared for rupture**. When the expected clarity fails to arrive - or dissolves under stress - individuals conclude that something is wrong with them, not with the slogan itself.

2. The Price of Simplicity.

The appeal of the why-formula is **cultural** rather than **intellectual**. Social media rewards the short, uplifting, and easily shareable. Algorithms celebrate statements that require no effort. As a result, clarity becomes a fetish, even where clarity is impossible. Philosophy, by contrast, has never promised such simplicity. Heidegger framed existence as fundamentally ambiguous; Camus insisted that we face the absurd without collapsing it into false coherence. **Their work demands the courage to remain with complexity, not escape into slogans.**

This hunger for simple answers has broader social consequences. When certainty becomes a cultural expectation, **disagreement hardens into ideology**. If my why is truth, then yours must be error. Public discourse contracts into catchphrases, and nuance disappears. What begins as a personal desire for stability becomes a political demand for simplicity. **Certainty becomes exclusionary.**

The personal costs are equally significant. The cult of why establishes **unrealistic expectations for how a life should feel**. It suggests that a meaningful life must have a single governing theme, and that those who fail to discover one are somehow deficient. It produces two predictable traps: the person who clings to a prematurely chosen why long after it stops fitting, and the person who cannot find any why at all and feels inadequate.

The evidence is clear: **the people who navigate disruption most effectively** are not those with unshakable clarity, but those who can **revise meaning as life shifts**. After trauma, resilience correlates with flexibility, not certainty. **Revision, not essence, protects us**. Yet the why-mantra encourages the opposite: it urges people to settle prematurely on a sentence that will later constrain them.

3. The Impact on Leadership and Coaching.

The same critique applies to leadership and coaching. Leaders, eager to inspire, often reach for pre-packaged formulas. But influence depends on substance, not slogans. Research in persuasion shows that when stakes are high, people evaluate reasons, not rhetoric. Stylistic fluency without content can even backfire. **Organizations likewise cannot behave as individuals do**. Their “beliefs” are emergent, negotiated, and often contested; they do not possess an inner essence waiting to be revealed. Teams quickly sense when complexity is being flattened into clichés.

In coaching, the problem becomes acute. **The craft of coaching is narrative authorship**: helping clients experiment with evolving purposes, integrate experience into meaning, and inhabit unfinished identities. When coaches tell clients to “find your why,” they collapse narrative into slogan and purpose into essence. They reduce the work to branding. The result is a polished surface with no interior, a client performing an identity rather than revising one.

4. A Different Way of Living.

The alternative is not another slogan but a **different way of living**. Purpose does not need to be singular or permanent. Any project that gets a person moving is enough. **Movement allows adjustment; adjustment builds resilience**. Meaning does not need to be discovered like a buried truth; it is authored slowly, through reflection, connection, and reinterpretation. Life requires experimentation, openness, and revision. The ability to course-correct - without shame or self-reproach - is what makes a life durable. **Identity, likewise, is not something to be uncovered but something to be written**. It remains in draft. Each stage of life asks for new edits. To accept unfinishedness is to preserve the possibility of beginning again, which is the essence of a wide life.

This essay argues for **a shift away from essence and toward authorship**. Not a search for a single why, but a commitment to practices that sustain motion, cultivate meaning, and allow revision.