

## Session 1: Introduction: “Building Your Bridge”

### Prior Reading

David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, pp. xi-xxxiii.

*Having read through the introduction to Brooks’ book, what stands out to you? Was there a particular line or idea, maybe even a key word for you? Was there a story that sticks with you? Was there something that gave you pause? Think about this in preparation for this week’s session.*

### Personal Inventory

*In preparation for the first session, you’ll also want to write your personal inventory, focusing on what a life worth living looks like to you. No one else will see this; it’s for your own self-reflection and you can choose how much to share in the course. One way to go about this inventory is to ask yourself a series of questions in relation to various stages of your life and messages within our culture:*

- What did “a life worth living” look like in my family growing up?
- What did “the good life” look like in my high school days, in college?
- What did “a life worth living” look like in my first employment?
- What does “a life worth living” look like in my current workplace?
- What does “the good life” look like to my friends?
- What does “the good life” look like on social media and in commercials?
- What will/does “a life worth living” look like in retirement?
- What is my definition of “a life worth living”?

### Quotes

*Read through the following quotes, selecting a few that most appeal to you. Reflect on what they say to you and why you selected those particular quotes.*

“No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life.”  
-Friedrich Nietzsche

“It has been said that 90 percent of people seem to live 90 percent of their lives on cruise control, which is to be unconscious.”  
-Richard Rohr

“Where is the Life we have lost in living?”  
-T. S. Eliot

“In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a dark wood where the true way was wholly lost.”  
-David Whyte paraphrase of Dante

“Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?”  
-Mary Oliver

“Their story, yours, mine - it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.”  
-William Carlos Williams

"It seems to me the challenge, and the trick, is to find wholeness among infinitude."  
-Jonathan Rosen

"Ask me whether what I have done is my life."  
-William Stafford

"Spirituality means to me living the ordinary life extraordinarily well."  
-William Sloane Coffin

"I want to argue that you can't understand the place and time you're in by immersion; the opposite's true. You have to step out and away and back and forward, and you have to do it regularly. Then you come back to the here and now, and say: Ah. That's how it is."  
-Alan Jacobs

"We may have won the battle for life and liberty, but the pursuit of happiness still eludes us. We keep chasing it, but it keeps running faster than we can."  
-Jonathan Sacks

"The life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me."  
-Parker Palmer

"The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible"  
-Vladimir Nabokov

"One great question underlies our existence. 'What is the purpose of life?' After much consideration, I believe that the purpose of life is to find happiness."  
-Dalai Lama

"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement, [to]get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."  
-Abraham Joshua Heschel

"The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed."  
-Søren Kierkegaard

"In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"  
-Rabbi Zusya

“We breathe for the sake of breathing, eat and drink for the sake of eating and drinking, we take shelter for the sake of taking shelter, we study to satisfy our curiosity, we take a walk for the walk. All that's not for the sake of living, it is living. Life is a sincerity.”

-Emmanuel Lévinas

“If the unexamined life was not worth living, was the unlived life worth examining?”

-Paul Kalanithi

“The question ‘What is the meaning of life’ might be called the Holy Question, in analogy to the Holy Grail: Its pursuit is noble and everyone should want to find an answer, yet few people expect that one can be found.”

-Jonathan Haidt

“We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.”

-Marcel Proust

“Seasons is a wonderful metaphor for the movement of life, I think.... The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all—and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.”

-Parker Palmer

“When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.”

-Tom Stoppard

“It is neither intelligence nor consciousness, but rather *self*-consciousness that makes human being different.”

-Jonathan Sacks

“It is almost impossible to state what one in fact believes, because it is almost impossible to hold a belief and to define it at the same time.”

-William Carlos Williams

“It's easy to convince people that children need to learn the alphabet and numbers.... How do we help people to realize that what matters even more than the superimposition of adult symbols is how a person's inner life finally puts together the alphabet and numbers of his outer life?”

-Fred Rogers

"It is possible to live without meaning, just as it is possible to live without music, a sense of humor, or the courage to take a risk. But it cannot be seriously argued that the loss of meaning is not a loss."

-Jonathan Sacks

"It is a terrible and terrifying thing to know what you want to be and then realize you're the only one standing in your way."

-James K. A. Smith

"In the last resort, man should not ask, 'What is the meaning of my life?' but should realize that he himself is being questioned."

-Viktor Frankl

"That last thing is what you can't get.... Nobody can get to that last thing. We keep on living in hopes of catching it once for all."

-Jack Kerouac

"There is much evidence on several levels that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task is to build a strong 'container' or identity; the second is to find the contents that the container was meant to hold."

-Richard Rohr

"We are meant to have, and do have, a very different life from the one we usually experience."

-Marilynne Robinson

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive...so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

-Joseph Campbell

"If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

-Howard Thurman

## **Questioning and Wrestling (Q and W)**

*The first item below is your personal inventory, followed by some of the larger questions we will wrestle with in our session. Take a few moments to reflect on these in preparation for group discussion. Questions from the readings are also listed for your consideration. The other questions listed will make more sense after the plenary session.*

### **Personal Inventory**

Whether you wrote out an inventory or simply worked through the questions, what did you come up with in your own reflections on a life worth living throughout the various stages of your life?

### **Living the Questions**

What makes for a life worth living? How do you decide? Is it the same for everyone? How might a person's social location (gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) impact the definition of a life worth living? Can it change over time? How has the pandemic affected your thinking on these things?

### **David Brooks Reading**

What do you make of his two-mountain scheme for looking at life?  
Does it resonate with you and your journey? Where are you at present?  
Why do you think he posits happiness with the first mountain but joy with the second?  
What do you think about his emphasis on society, not just individuals?  
What about his notion of giving oneself away?  
What do you make of his six levels of joy (physical, celebratory, emotional, spiritual, transcendent, moral)? Do you think of the latter one as the "highest layer of joy"?

### **Voss's Three Ways of Conduct**

Do you think of navigating your life in terms of the traditional model, in other words, sort of inheriting a definition of what your life will look like?  
Do you consider your life as more situational, almost stumbling onto the way of life you live now?  
Or do you consider it more strategic, actually taking time to think and reflect on what your life is ultimately about?

### **Pew Research on Happiness**

If the Pew study found family the most important factor in what makes life meaningful, along with the following other possibilities (career, money, faith, friendships, and hobbies), how would you have answered? What besides family and friends makes life meaningful for you?

### **Quotes**

Which of the quotes in this week's handout caught your attention? What are your thoughts on those quotes to which you were drawn? Were there quotes that troubled you?

### **Suggested Further Reading**

*If you decide to read more on the topic of the good life, here are some suggested titles, including one short story.*

David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*

Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*

Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*

James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine*

E. B. White, "The Second Tree from the Corner"