

Know your 'why'. It's how we build communities

By [Amy Pieterse](#), issued by [Ginkgo Agency](#)

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While many of us may spend our lives chasing happiness, it's meaning that is worth pursuing. Finding our purpose can help us contribute to something beyond ourselves, and lead to positive change for others beyond basic needs.



[Shaygam Newman](#) didn't have a family. He spent his life finding odd places to sleep, unmoored from any sense of permanence or stability. But growing up, there was always one thing that kept him going – animals. Newman felt a connection to the dogs and cats of Hangberg, Hout Bay, who were often neglected, abused or astray. "In every community there needs to be a person who loves and cares for animals," he says. "I'm that person." His commitment to these creatures grew into a full-time operation, Shaygam's Shelter. Even when he had few means to provide for them, Newman took them in, offering them food and safety. He was driven by something that trumped all challenges and obstacles – purpose.

Purpose is our reason for being. It's the difference between a happy life and a life of meaning. Many of us spend our time in the irrational pursuit of happiness – a fleeting emotion subject to the vicissitudes of time and circumstance. It can often be accomplished by the meeting of basic needs, but it never lasts. Meaning, on the other hand, is a uniquely human condition. We can think about our lives in the context of past and future, and question the state of our own existence. Where am I going? What is the reason for my past experiences? What does tomorrow hold? Without a sense of purpose, these questions can devolve into a state of nihilism and despondency, for there is no avoidance of suffering. What carries us through both the joy and pain is the resolve to get out of bed in the morning and seek something higher than ourselves.

One person's purpose; a lifetime of change

[Magadien Wentzel](#) could have lived a life of power. He was a high ranking member of the 28s gang. But while he was in prison, a tornado hit Manenberg, where his family lived. The shock shifted Wentzel's perspective, and he chose to leave the gang at the risk of losing his own life.

Upon re-entering society, he struggled to land on his feet. People kept turning him away, never giving him a chance. So Wentzel began volunteering and eventually ended up at Streetscapes, a network of urban gardens created and run by homeless people. Here, he supervises the group, who have transformed a former dumping site into a place of abundance

and value. “I’m working with people that have nothing,” he says. “My sole purpose is to give them their dignity back, and I think we are achieving that goal.” Now following his own path, Wentzel has created a life rich in belonging and self-worth.

According to a [study](#) by the Stanford Graduate School of Business, a happy life is associated with taking, while a meaningful life is associated with giving. Meaning is often rooted in helping others and contributing to a worthwhile cause. For [Phuti Ragophala](#), retiring from her position as a school principal couldn’t stop her from teaching. She continued to tutor from her home, upskilling underprivileged children in reading and computer literacy. In a community of pensioners and orphans, Ragophala also taught subsistence gardening to ensure they would never go hungry like she once did. In her retirement, with nothing but time on her hands, she uses her hours to uplift a generation the best way she knows how. “When I see other people progressing, I smile. I get fulfilled,” she says. “I believe in service beyond self.”



Michaela Mycroft

Few understand this like [Michaela Mycroft](#). Born with cerebral palsy, she has lived in a wheelchair her whole life. Yet this has never hindered her. Mycroft’s activism began at the age of nine when she needed to raise funds for a new wheelchair. Her mission for the Chaeli Campaign turned into a foundation to support children with disabilities. For her efforts in challenging perceptions of ability and advancing inclusion, Mycroft was awarded the International Children’s Peace Prize. A few years later, at the age of 21, she summited Kilimanjaro in her wheelchair to raise funds for her ECD centre. Authentically herself, she is leading a life that is having a lasting influence for an entire community. “We need to be willing to put ourselves out there, and to stand up for our rights and believe in what we are saying,” Mycroft says. “As a collective, we need to acknowledge our power.”

What’s your why?

Sheltering stray animals, growing a garden, teaching young children, conquering mountains. An individual’s reason for being can have a ripple effect on a community, and subsequently a nation. If one person is given the chance to pursue a meaningful life, the impact is felt far beyond themselves. A life of meaning can hurt. It requires sacrifice, commitment and determination. But everyone deserves to live beyond basic needs. Having the motivation to continue is fundamental to being human. It’s not only a matter of surviving, but thriving. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl wrote: “He knows the ‘why’ for his

existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how.'”

We may not be born with an inherent aspiration or role. But it can be found and moulded. With inner resolve, we can transcend the limited pursuit of happiness. We can contribute, create change, improve another person's life. This is where connection and community are born. And this is how we strengthen ourselves against individual and collective challenges. Purpose. A reason to get out of the bed in the morning. A reason to make a difference. A reason to live with meaning.

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