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## The Meaning of Academic Life

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

# The Meaning of Academic Life

*Linda Serra Hagedorn*

The title of my presidential speech may be unusual, perhaps even presumptuous, but undeniably it is intriguing. After all, the question of the meaning of life is one that has been debated and studied over the centuries and by some of the most respected and finest minds that ever lived. Socrates pondered the meaning of life and concluded that it is the “considered life” or the “chosen life” that brings meaning. All of the major religions of the world contemplate life’s meaning (Paloutzian & Park, 2005), and it has been highlighted as the central topic of psychology (Baumeister, 1991; Wong & Fry, 1998). It has been shown to have discriminate ability to predict psychological distress (Debats, 1999) as well as happiness, purpose, and overall well-being.

Albert Camus (1981), the 20th century Nobel Prize philosopher, stated: “I have seen many people die because life for them was not worth living. . . . I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (p. 70). Leo Tolstoy (1980), the famous Russian author, and Victor Frankl (1992), neurologist and psychiatrist, have also identified the meaning of life as the most important question ever pondered.

Psychologists have identified important outcomes related to the meaning of life; Frankl (1978) and Jung (1933) identified the lack of meaning and purpose to life as the root cause of all neuroses. Other psychologists have

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linked depression, substance abuse, and suicide to the inability to find meaning, comfort, and joy in life (Beck, 1967; Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986; Seligman, 1990). Studying the related concept of purpose in life, Viktor Frankl reported that 55% of neuroses were largely due to a response to emptiness and a lack of purpose in life (1963; see also Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Others have confirmed that living without meaning, goals, or values induces stress and unhappiness (Debats, 1999; Yalom, 1980).

In seeking truth in this area, eminent psychologists have explored the topic through interviews with those who have been assumed to possess the answers. For example, Will Durant (1932) sent an invitation to more than 100 respected individuals of his time to describe how they found meaning in their lives. Included in the published responses were those provided by Mohandas Gandhi, Bertrand Russell, and George Bernard Shaw. Here are the responses of Gandhi and Bertrand Russell:

M. K. Gandhi: "My consolation and my happiness are to be found in service of all that lives, because the Divine essence is the sum total of all life." (p. 84)

Bertrand Russell: "I am sorry to say that at the moment I am so busy as to be convinced that life has no meaning whatever. . . . I do not see that we can judge what would be the result of the discovery of truth, since none has hitherto been discovered." (p. 106)]

A prisoner serving a life sentence responded:

Confinement in prison doesn't cause unhappiness, else all those who are free would be happy. Poverty doesn't cause it, else the rich would be happy. . . . Happiness is neither racial, nor financial, nor social, neither is it geographical. . . . Reason tells us that it is a form of mental contentment and—if this be true—its logical abode must be within the mind. (Convict #79206, Sing Sing Prison, quoted in Durant, 1932, pp. 140–141)

In 1991, the staff of *Life* magazine produced a later version of Durrant's work with quotations from more than 650 esteemed people of that era (Friend and Editors of *Life*, 1991). In the style of *Life* magazine, its version also included a grand array of photographs that added visual richness to the topic.

Most recently and in a similar vein, Richard T. Kinnier and his colleagues published an article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 2003 that used the Durant (1932) and *Life Magazine* (1991) methods of gathering data on the meaning of life. Defining eminent people as those that are respected by a large number of individuals, Kinnier and his colleagues interviewed 173 eminent individuals from around the globe. They coupled their collection with those from earlier works and using grounded theory and discovery-oriented procedures identified the 10 top themes that emerged as the reported meaning of life:

1. The meaning of life is to love, help, or serve others.
2. Life is a mystery.
3. The meaning of life is nothing more than the opportunity to live—to enjoy life.
4. There really is no meaning to life; life is meaningless.
5. I live to serve or worship God and/or prepare for the next (or after-) life.
6. Life is a struggle.
7. I live to contribute something that is greater than myself.
8. The goal of life is to be self-actualized—to evolve through the pursuit of truth, wisdom, or a higher level of being.
9. The meaning of life is my own creation.
10. Life is absurd. It is a joke.

Studies linking meaning in life to the field of education are practically non-existent. An exception is a recent article in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* in which authors Kiang and Fuligni (2010) studied high school students, finding a link between “self-esteem, good academic adjustment, and healthy social relationships” (p. 1253) and a sense of meaning in life. They also reported that the presence of meaning mediates students’ adjustment with ethnic identity. Thus, they conclude that ethnic identity positively affects adjustment through providing or enhancing meaning.

I argue that delving into our own meaning of life, purpose in life, and happiness directly harmonizes with the theme of the 2011 conference: “Meeting the Challenge of a Changing Future.” Indeed, we live in challenging times from almost any perspective. Politically, financially, socially, or technologically—change abounds. We must change or, as Alan Deutschman (2007) charged, die. It is in assigning meaning that we are able to withstand change and challenge.

For academics of all stripes, life and work are inextricably intertwined. Our work is a vocation. For truly if we do not find meaning in the life of the mind, in assisting protégés and students to find the pathway to their vocation, our vocation deteriorates into a mere job; and happiness and purpose in life likely falter.

According to the literature it is job-related stress, specifically stresses related to time commitments and sense of community that are the chief causes why academics plan to leave the profession (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998). For women and faculty of color, it may be that “chilly climates” or lack of collegiality contribute to feelings of discomfort and spur leaving (Rothblum, 1988). While I acknowledge these reasons, perhaps we can explore a path similar to that taken by Vince Tinto (1975) who borrowed a conceptual framework from Durkheim’s study of suicide. Tinto hypothesized that students dropped out of college because of a lack of engagement with the academic and social aspects of education just as people contemplating suicide dropped out of

life because they no longer felt engaged. I take this one step further and ask whether faculty members leaving academic life are no longer engaging in the academic environment. It may be that health no longer allows long hours, or it may be that technology has passed them by and they feel inadequate in mentoring and working with students at the “cutting edge.” Or it may be due to a nagging feeling that they are no longer contributing to the field and not finding purpose. We might hear the disenchanted say: “I have lost my zest. I give up. I no longer find happiness or meaning in what I am doing.” When meaning ceases, the work no longer intrigues, enchants, and nourishes the soul. In short, it is time to stop.

I first became interested in this topic as I wrote for Bill Tierney’s “21st Century Scholar” blog. I pondered the academic life and interviewed a number of colleagues to ask why they had become an academic. I purposely interviewed colleagues by rank to get a picture of academic life as an assistant, associate, and full professor. But perhaps the most interesting blog was the last one that focused on my interviews with emeritus retired faculty. I presented my findings with a figure that showed the overall importance of health, family, and purpose. The three were not orthogonal but rather existed in a nested fashion where the most positive responses were from those with good health, strong family ties, *and* a purpose in life. The positive emeriti faculty were busy and felt productive. They kept a current identity and did not identify only as retired faculty but rather as consultants, highly sought experts, or as one person said “a content grandparent.” All felt that they continued to contribute, to have a purpose, and remained engaged.

As a body of researchers we explore questions—important questions. And today we will investigate one of life’s *greatest* questions. Thus, I stand before you presenting what is arguably one of the more significant talks of my career while I challenge myself to study the most significant of questions. Thank you for joining me as we look deeply at ourselves and our colleagues at how we attach meaning to our academic lives.

In total, we will analyze three basic areas: meaning of life, purpose in life, and happiness. All ASHE members who participated in the ASHE online survey over the summer and who are present at this ASHE Presidential Address received their individualized scores just prior to this meeting. For those ASHE members who did not participate or did not complete the entire survey, I have created and distributed worksheets to allow the simulation of taking the survey. While scores calculated today will not have contributed to the findings, the worksheet allows the calculation of scores and a means to compare how the scores fit in the analysis. (See Appendix for the worksheet.)

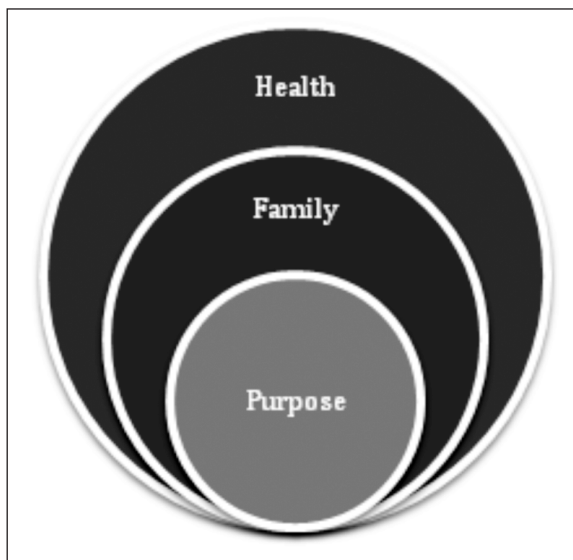


Figure 1. Nesting of positive responses.

## RELATED MEASURES

### *Purpose in Life*

Meaning of life and purpose in life are closely related. Whereas “meaning of life” may be more philosophical, “purpose in life” leans more to the personal. Individuals sharing similar meanings of life may see their purposes in life as very different. For example, a rabbi, a teacher, a veterinarian, a soldier, and a store clerk may all share the commitment that the meaning of life is to help others; but each of these individuals will act upon his or her view of life very differently. Whereas the soldier may serve others through acts that protect the country, the veterinarian serves others by promoting the good health of loved pets. However, having a firm belief in the meaning of life does not guarantee that one finds a personal purpose in life. Thus, I present the “purpose in life” scale as distinct from the “meaning of life” scales.

A quantification scale for the Purpose in Life was derived by Crumbaugh and Maholick in 1964 and tested for validity and reliability. Each of the 20 items asks respondents to provide a rating on a unique continuum such as “bored to enthusiastic.” I included this scale in the ASHE survey, using a 10-point sliding gauge with higher scores indicating higher reported levels of personal purpose in life.

## **Happiness**

Aristotle (384 BC– 322 BC) is credited with being among the first to have reported a direct relationship between happiness and finding meaning and purpose in life, which he phrased as: “Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, sec. 7). Indeed happiness is not static; it is dependent in part on one’s stage of life, current personal events, mood, and serendipity. In fact people’s general state of contentment is highly dependent on personality. To quote Aristotle again; “Happiness depends upon ourselves.”

Perhaps Michael Argyle could be crowned as the contemporary “father of happiness.” Argyle authored the *Psychology of Happiness*, now in its second edition (2001). This tome with its 35 pages of references is a testament to the complexity of the construct of happiness. While it is impossible to simply state the premises and conclusions of this 274-page work, suffice it to say that Argyle found that happiness increases with age and that a consistent predictor of happiness is positive social relationships. The book describes and uses many scales and measures of the construct without really recommending one; however, Argyle is a coauthor of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). The OHI is a product of psychologists from Oxford University that was devised as a broad measure of happiness and which has been validated across numerous samples in the United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, Israel, and Taiwan (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Hills and Argyle (2002) tested and presented the validity, reliability, and psychometric properties of the Oxford Happiness Project. I included the items from the OHI in the ASHE questionnaire as our measure of happiness. The survey employed a 10-point continuous sliding scale measuring agreement in which 1 = “not at all” and 10 = “absolutely.” In accordance with the directions for coding the inventory, I scored negatively coded items in reverse, then summed the items. High scores are indicative of greater happiness.

## **Sample**

Similar to Durant (1932), *Life Magazine* (Friend et al., 1991), and Kinnier and colleagues (2003), I have chosen a domain of eminent individuals for my research on the meaning of life. For this research the eminent individuals are members of ASHE. In May of 2011, I sent a request and a link to an electronic survey to all ASHE members (1,904 members). To allow for subsequent interaction and participation, I asked ASHE members to include some identifying information; specifically the name and location of their high school as well as the year of graduation. I posited that this relatively unobtrusive information would uniquely identify you but would not be sufficiently specific that I could identify you. I have calculated scale scores and have printed them and enclosed the results in sealed envelopes to enable

you to see your personal comparison with the aggregate scores of your fellow ASHE members. I also promised those who were unable to attend ASHE or hear the presidential address in person that, upon request and provided with the necessary identifiers, I would send the scores after the conference. These procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my institution. For those who did not participate or who did not include the information that would allow me to retrieve your scores, I urge you to use the distributed worksheet that will allow you to score yourself against the norming data from participating ASHE members. If you are reading this address, the worksheet as well as scoring rubric are included as an appendix.

Following two reminder emails, I received responses from 700 ASHE members, for a 38% response rate (after correcting for bounced-back addresses).

### INSTRUMENT

The complete instrument consists of 61 items but employed skip logic for some of the items that pertained to specific respondents (for example, faculty versus students versus administrators). The skip logic reduced the number of items to between 51 and 53 for an individual respondent. In addition to the items pertaining to meaning of life (Kinnier et al., 2003), purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholic, 1964), and the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Hills & Argyle, 2002), the survey also included demographic questions and five short-answer questions to allow respondents to provide a more detailed response.

Table 1 provides the basic demographics of the sample. The response was approximately two-thirds female and one-third male. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 86 years of age with a mean age of 42 years. More than one-third (36.7%) of respondents were graduate students while 39% were faculty. Thirteen percent identified as administrators.

#### *Student Characteristics*

As anticipated, the majority of students were doctoral students (94.2%), but 14 or 5.4% were master-level students. More than half (58.6%) held an assistantship and more than three-fourths (77.4%) attended full time. The majority of students (80.2%) attended public institutions while 18.3% attended private, not-for-profit institutions and two student members reported attending a private, for-profit college.

#### *Faculty Characteristics*

Table 2 provides details for faculty rank and institutional type distribution. The vast majority (93.8%) of faculty are employed full time. A large proportion are employed at research universities (60%) as opposed to other Carnegie types. Most respondents are employed in public institutions.



**TABLE 1**  
**SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS**

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>African American /Black</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Other</i>
Faculty (n = 273)	63.0%	36.6%	11.4%	4.4%	11.0%	0.7%	78.4%	5.5%
Students (n = 257)	67.7%	32.3%	13.6%	9.3%	16.0%	1.2%	68.1%	9.3%
Administra- tors (n = 91)	60.4%	38.5%	7.7%	3.3%	5.6%	0.0%	80.2%	5.5%

**TABLE 2**  
**FACULTY DEMOGRAPHICS**

<i>Faculty Only</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Associate/ Com- munity College</i>	<i>Bac- calaureate</i>	<i>Master</i>	<i>Doc- toral</i>	<i>Research</i>
Full (n = 70)	77.1%	22.9%	0.0%	5.7%	12.9%	15.7%	65.7%
Associate (n = 68)	77.9%	22.0%	0.0%	0.0%	8.8%	25.0%	66.2%
Assistant (n = 107)	84.1%	15.9%	1.9%	1.9%	10.3%	29.0%	56.1%
Lecturer/ clinician (n = 6)	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	83.3%
Adjunct (n = 16)	50.0%	50.0%	6.3%	6.3%	12.5%	31.3%	43.8%

### ***Administrator Characteristics***

Administrators responding to the survey came from a wide range of positions including president, provost, dean, associate dean, and department chair. All of the administrators reported working full-time. Similar to the faculty, the largest number reported employment at research universities (46%) at a public institution (63%).

### ***Meaning of Life Items***

Participants were asked to enter a rating for 10 statements concerning how they personally approach life and attach meaning to it. The survey was designed to allow respondents to slide an indicator to the number that is the most true for them. The gauge allowed a continuous display from 1 to 10 allowing respondents a flexibility that was not bound by integer response. The scale ends were marked as 1 = “not at all” and 10 = “absolutely.” Table 3 provides a ranking of responses as well as measures of central tendency for the items.

### **MEANING OF LIFE SCALES**

Based on the fact that the meaning of life themes were developed from quotations made by eminent people resting on no true theoretical framework, I created three conceptual scales. (See Tables 4 and 5.) Although all three scales have the same range (1 to 10), the distributions are different. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4.) Hence, the interpretation of the raw scores will also differ.

### ***Scores***

I urge you to compare your scores to the averages posted. Remember that the response range is from 1 to 10 and is measured on a continuous scale. Also included on the distributed sheets are the percentile ranks that indicate the percentage of ASHE members with a lower score. Percentile ranks range from .01 to .99. I also provide the percentile ranks with respect to reported role, so that students can see their percentile rank with respect to the entire sample as well as the percentile when the sample was constrained to only students. The same procedures were applied for faculty and administrators.

Table 5 provides “meaning of life” scale scores by respondent type. It is important to note that the range is very wide within each of these scales. I make no claim that these scores have the psychometric properties to “type” people. In other words, it was never the intention to categorize respondents into groups but rather to provide the scores and to let the individuals interpret accordingly. A one-way ANOVA by role (student, faculty, or administrator) did identify one statistically significant comparison within the “create own meaning” score ( $F 4.272, df = 2, 615, p < .05$ ). A Tukey post hoc test found that students had significantly higher scores than faculty ( $p < .05$ ). A check for gender differences also produced statistically significant findings. Women had higher “serving others” and “create own meaning” scores than males. (See Table 6.)

With respect to age, the sample was divided into four groups: 35 years or less, 36 to 50 years, 51 to 65 years, and 66 years and over. (See Table 7.) The comparison indicated that the only statistically significant difference by age

**TABLE 3**  
**CENTRAL TENDENCY SCORES FOR THE 10**  
**“MEANING OF LIFE” ITEMS BY RANK**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	<i>Rank</i>
I live to contribute something that is greater than myself.	8.41	1.67	1
To love, help, or serve others.	7.95	1.67	2
The goal of life is to be self-actualized—to evolve through the pursuit of truth, wisdom, or a higher level of being.	7.46	2.17	3
The meaning of life is my own creation.	6.31	2.73	4
Life is a mystery.	6.03	2.46	5
Life is a struggle.	5.03	2.3	6
The meaning of life is nothing more than the opportunity to live—to enjoy [life].	4.94	2.56	7
I live to serve or worship God and/or prepare for the next (of after-) life.	4.46	3.25	8
There really is no meaning to life; life is meaningless.	1.80	1.69	9
Life is absurd. It is a joke.	1.65	1.58	10

**TABLE 4**  
**ITEMS IN MEANING OF LIFE SCALES**

Life is to serve (Serving others)	I live to contribute something that is greater than myself. I live to love, help, or serve others.
Life is one's own creation (create own meaning)	The meaning of life is my own creation. Life is a mystery. The meaning of life is nothing more than the opportunity to live—to enjoy life.
Life has no meaning. (cynic)	Life is absurd; it is a joke. There really is no meaning to life; life is meaningless. Life is a struggle.
Range is continuous from 1 to 10	

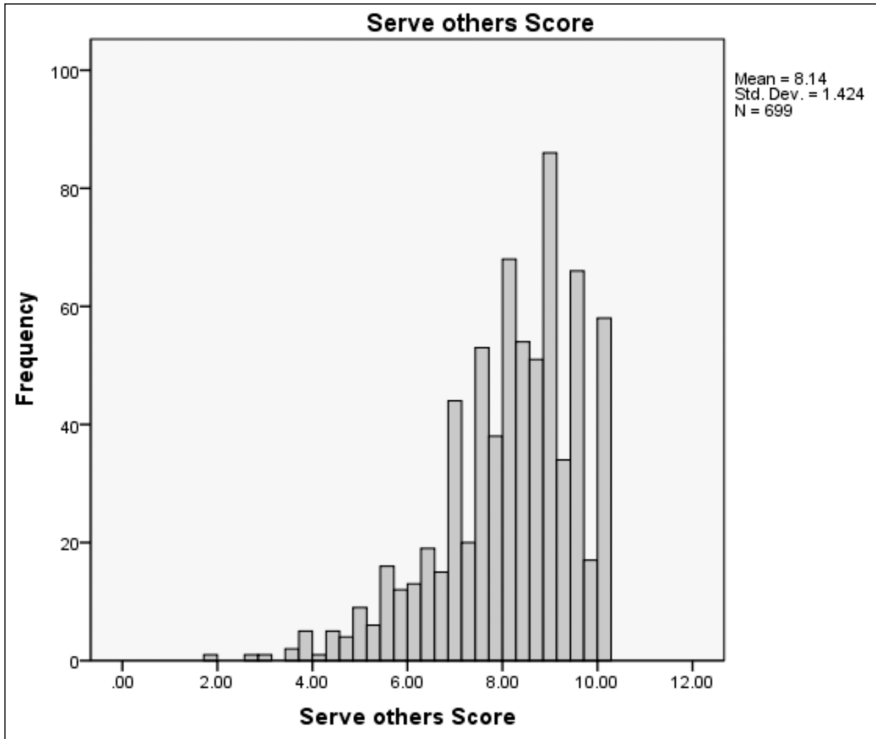


Figure 2. Distribution of “serve others” score.

**TABLE 5**

**SCALE SCORES BY ROLE (STUDENT, FACULTY, ADMINISTRATOR)**

Scale scores	Mean Total Score (s.d.) Range	Faculty (s.d.)	Students (s.d.)	Administrators (s.d.)
Serve others	8.14 (1.42) 1.76–10.00	8.08 (1.48)	8.29 (1.28)	8.21 (1.45)
Create own meaning	5.73 (1.70) 1.00–10.00	5.56 (1.63)	6.00 (1.81)	5.59 (1.60)
Cynic	2.95 (1.41) 1.00–9.78	2.90 (1.35)	3.06 (1.46)	2.83 (1.39)

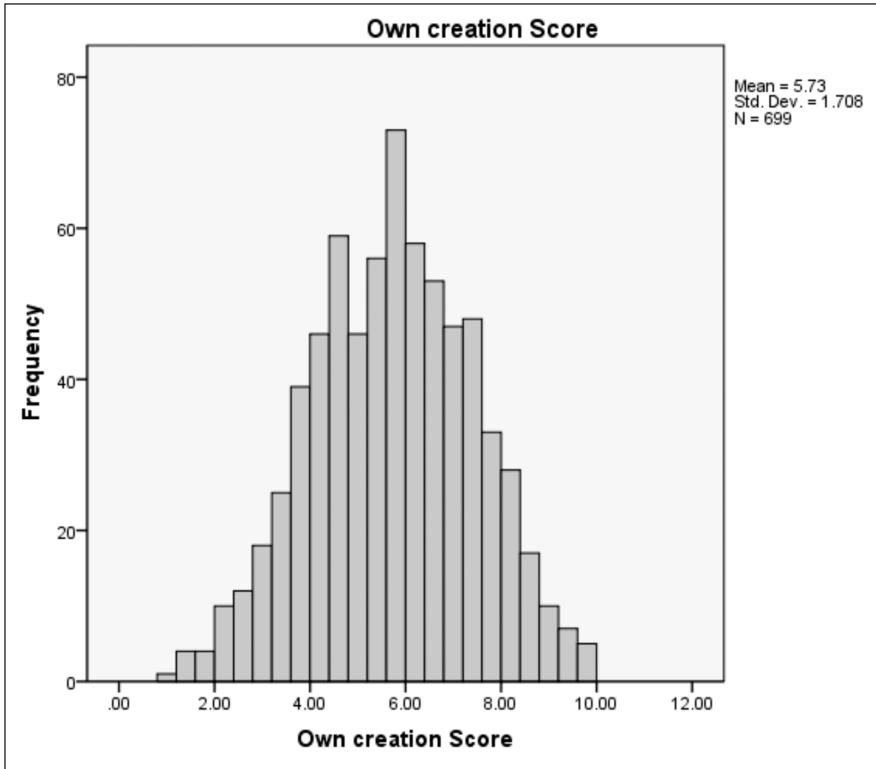


Figure 3. Distribution of “Create Own Meaning” Score.

**TABLE 6**  
**MEANING OF LIFE SCALE SCORES BY GENDER**

	Males (n = 237)	Females (n = 441)
Serve others	7.97 (1.43)	8.32 (1.36)**
Create own meaning	5.44 (1.80)	5.90 (1.64)**
Cynic	3.03 (1.28)	2.91 (1.48)

\*\*p < .001

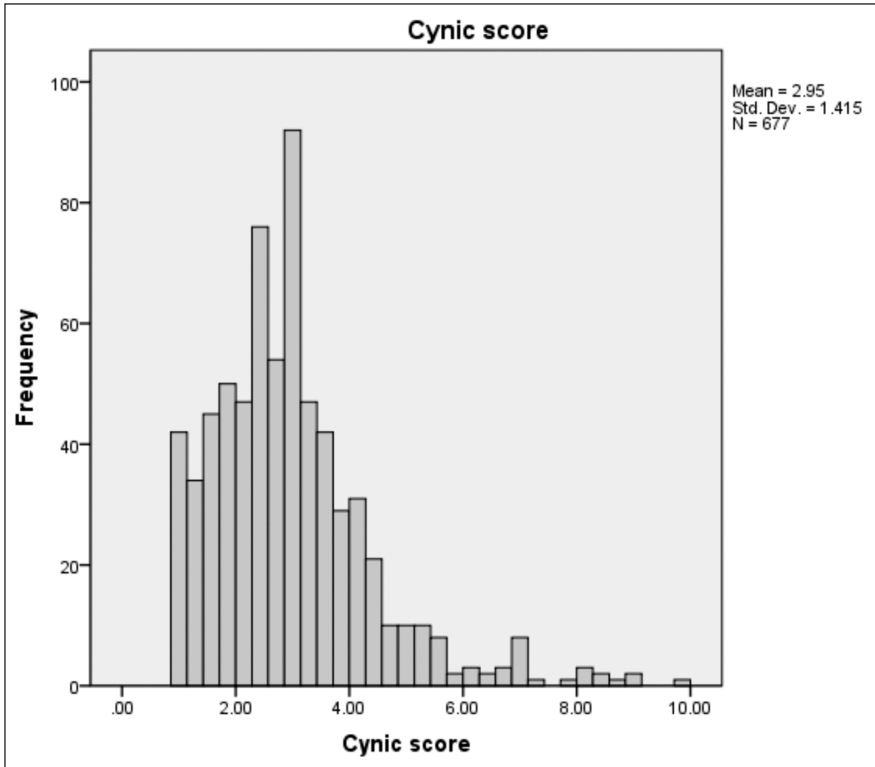


Figure 4. Distribution of “cynic” score.

**TABLE 7**  
**MEANING OF LIFE SCALE SCORES BY AGE**

	<i>Serve Others</i>	<i>Create Own Meaning</i>	<i>Cynic</i>
35 years or less (n = 232)	8.26 (1.29)	6.58 (1.50)	3.10 (1.40)
36 to 50 n = (271)	8.25 (1.38)	5.71 (1.77)	2.97 (1.45)
51 to 65 n = (131)	8.05 (1.54)	5.61 (1.54)	2.73 (1.35)
66 and over n = (50)	8.00 (1.50)	5.03 (1.84)	1.93 (0.70)

concerned the “cynics” score. The more senior of the sample (over age 65) were statistically less likely to be cynical with respect to the meaning of life ( $F = 4.429$ ,  $df = 3, 650$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

### PURPOSE IN LIFE SCORES

I derived the Purpose in Life (PIL) scores from the sum of the 20 items in the Purpose in Life Test as described by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964). Similar to the Meaning in Life items, these items were presented on a continuous scale ranging from 1- to-10-point continuous scale that allowed the respondent to slide the indicator to the exact location desired. The overall scores ranged from 60 to 197 with a mean of 153.7 ( $s.d. = 19.5$ ). Higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived purpose in life.

In order to explore group tendencies and differences, I performed exploratory analyses. Analysis by role (student, faculty, or administrator), gender (Table 8), and race (Table 9) showed no real differences. But age (Table 10) revealed some very interesting and statistically significant differences ( $F = 9.132$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Specific pairwise comparisons are provided in Table 11. The pattern of increasing purpose in life by age is highly intriguing.

### *Happiness Score*

The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire consists of 29 items. For our ASHE survey administration, I provided each item with a 1-to-10 scale, to be measured with the sliding indicator. The happiness scores showed very little deviation by group or gender (Table 12), age (Table 13), or rank (Table 14). But the patterns, although not statistically significant were interesting. Hence, it appears that the move from student to faculty or from assistant to associate does not necessarily bring a boost in happiness.

I next turn to some of the more personal areas of life such as marriage/living with a partner and children. Yes, being with a spouse or partner does seem to make a difference in happiness ( $t = 2.004$ ,  $df = 678$   $p < .05$ ). But parenthood did not produce significant differences. (See Table 15.)

### *Putting It All Together*

I hope that, through comparisons of your percentile ranked scores, you might have learned something of interest about yourself and your ASHE colleagues. The next question is: How do these constructs interact? First, I looked at the correlations and found that, while there are some moderate correlations (see Table 16), these entities appear to represent separate constructs. I challenged myself to tie these constructs into a temporal or more causal equation but encountered the proverbial “chicken or the egg” problem about what comes first. Does happiness cause purpose in life? Or does having a personal theory of meaning predict personal purpose?

**TABLE 8**  
**PURPOSE IN LIFE SCORE BY ROLE AND GENDER**

	<i>PIL (s.d.)</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Students	151.7 (20.5)	151.2 (18.6)	152.0 (21.5)
Faculty	155.8 (19.1)	152.4 (18.8)	157.8 (19.0)
Administrators	154.9 (17.7)	153.0 (16.5)	156.2 (18.5)

**TABLE 9**  
**PURPOSE IN LIFE SCORE BY ETHNIC GROUP**

Asian (n = 42)	153.0 (14.8)
African American /Black (n = 81)	154.6 (21.5)
Latino (n = 82)	153.5(19.7)
White (n = 490)	153.1 (19.4)

**TABLE 10**  
**PURPOSE IN LIFE SCORE BY AGE GROUP**

35 years or less	149.3 (21.1)
36 to 50	155.0 (18.2)
51 to 65	157.7 (19.1)
66 and over	168.7 (12.8)

**TABLE 11**  
**PAIRWISE COMPARISON OF PURPOSE IN LIFE SCORES  
BY AGE GROUP**

	<i>36 to 50</i>	<i>51 to 65</i>	<i>66 and Over</i>
35 years or less	*	*	*
36 to 50	*		*
51 to 65	*		
66 and over	*	*	

\* Indicates statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ )



**TABLE 12**  
**HAPPINESS SCORE BY GENDER**

	<i>Happiness</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Students	200.5 (30.8)	198.7 (25.4)	201.4 (33.1)
Faculty	200.8 (31.9)	198.8 (31.0)	202.0 (32.5)
Administrators	199.4 (29.9)	203.0 (29.4)	196.9 (30.5)

**TABLE 13**  
**HAPPINESS SCORE BY AGE GROUP**

<i>Age</i>	<i>Happiness Score</i>
35 years or less	199.5 (31.0)
36 to 50	199.0 (30.6)
51 to 65	203.9 (31.0)
66 and over	218.3 (32.9)

**TABLE 14**  
**HAPPINESS SCORE BY FACULTY RANK**

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Happiness Score</i>
Adjunct	202.4 (35.2)
Lecturer/clinician	228.3 (21.21)
Assistant	198.8 (34.5)
Associate	198.2 (32.5)
Full	206.4 (26.8)

**TABLE 15**  
**HAPPINESS SCORE BY FAMILIAL STATUS**

	<i>Happiness</i>
Not married or partnered	195.8 (38.1) *
Married or partnered	201.4 (31.6)
Not a parent	200.5
Parent	200.3

\*p < .05

**TABLE 16**  
**BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF CONSTRUCTS**

	<i>Serve Others</i>	<i>Create Own Meaning</i>	<i>Cynic</i>	<i>Happiness</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Serve others	1	.049	-.066	.231**	.323**
Create own meaning	.049	1	.154**	-.002	-.047
Cynic	-.066	.154**	1	-.316**	-.309**
Happiness	.231**	-.047	-.316**	1	.570**
Purpose	.323**	-.047	-.309**	.570**	1

Ultimately, I hypothesized that having a strong purpose in life is the key. Contentment or happiness contributes to the atmosphere of purpose. I further hypothesize that meaning in life affects the way we see and interpret our purpose. To test this theory, I performed a simple causal analysis—a multiple regression where I used the Purpose of Life score as the dependent variable and the happiness score and the meaning of life scales as the independent variables. I did not add any of the demographic variables, as I have found only minimal differences by group and hence did not see the need to add these variables as controls. The analysis with just these few independent variables was statistically significant ( $F = 107.73$ ,  $df = 4, 668$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).<sup>1</sup> Table 17 provides the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients. The four independent variables explained 39.2% of the variance in the Purpose in Life Score. A histogram of the residuals (see Figure 5) revealed no deviation from basic data assumptions.

These findings indicate that the strongest predictor of purpose in life is having a higher score on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. But also predictive is having the conviction that the meaning of life is to serve others. Conversely, those with a more cynical view towards the meaning of life were less likely to have a high purpose in life score.

What is the meaning of life for ASHE members? For many it is serving others. It is also related to being in one's own driver's seat and creating meaning. Yes, there are some members of ASHE who question the orderliness and meaning of life. Some may not see a grand plan or even that control is possible. But interestingly, regardless of how a particular ASHE member views meaning, the great majority find happiness in family and in personal relationships.

<sup>1</sup> Due to violations of the assumptions of normality, "the cynic" and "serving others" scores were normalized.

**TABLE 17**  
**REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR PURPOSE IN LIFE**

	<i>Unstandardized Coefficient— B (S.E.)</i>	<i>Standardized – Coefficient Beta</i>
(Constant)	62.306 (6.35)	***
Meaning of life—serve others	3.414 (.493)	.215***
Meaning of life—create own meaning	-.354 (.395)	-.027
Meaning of life: No meaning (cynic)	-2.052 (.508)	-.131***
Oxford Happiness Score	.347 (.023)	.485***

\*\*\* p < .001

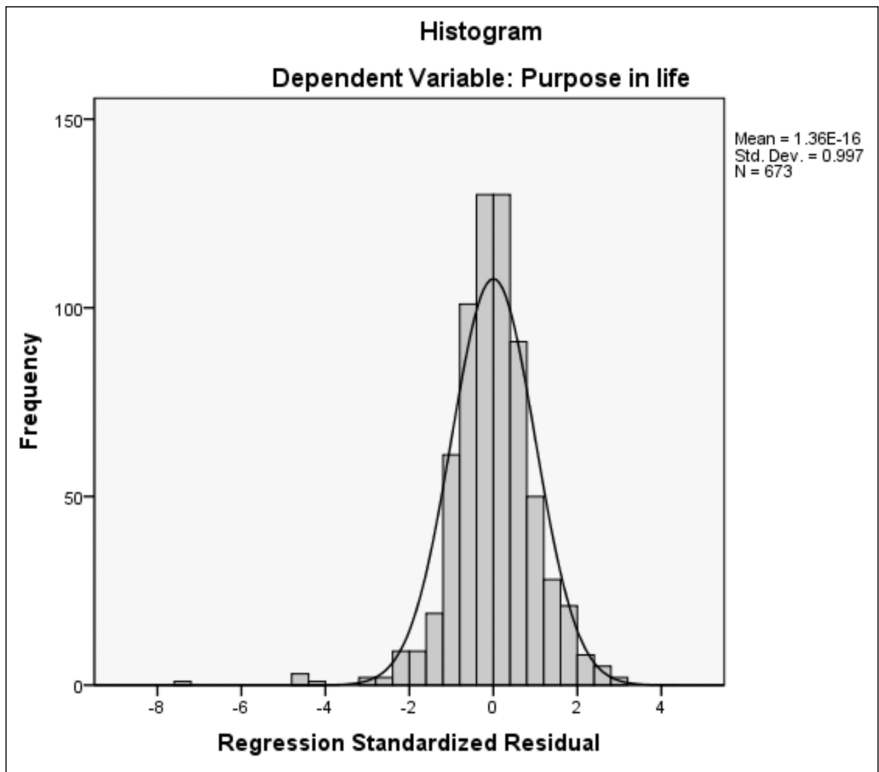


Figure 5. Plot of the regression standardized residual.

### ***What Brings Joy?***

To analyze the written short answers, I separated my sample by meaning in life scores to compare responses. In answer to the question about what brings joy, people with high “serving others” scores cited family and friends more than any other response. However, many people provided a bundled answer collecting their “favorites.” For examples:

My partner, life, family, and studies (student)

Friends, laughter, sunny days, dark chocolate, my hubby, and two yellow labs. (student)

Faith, family, friends, learning relaxing, good food, being active and outdoors . . . List could go on and on. (faculty)

Being outside, friends and family, animals, watching children learn and experience life, watching/reading/observing/playing a role in someone meeting their goal/dream. (administrator)

I found that people with the highest “create own meaning” scores were more likely to cite academic-related issues as bringing joy. Examples:

Anything academic (student)

Ability to create something – research (student)

Following my passions which are diverse (cycling, skiing, philosophy, research, teaching, politics). (faculty)

People with the highest “cynic” scores often cited family and friends but several entries reflected a darker mood. For example:

The thought of escape from dissertation revision hell (student)

Joy isn’t brought on by anything predictable (faculty)

Depends on the day . . . (administrator)

### ***What Saddens?***

In response to the question “What saddens you?” those with high scores on “serving others” were more likely to mention unfairness, discrimination, and evil committed against others:

World misery, selfish people (administrator)

Selfishness, greed, bullying and oppression, ignorance, disease, loss of loved ones, the war, other people’s sadness and hardship, those who are homeless and poor. (student)

Polarization in political and religious life, abuse of others in any form, oppression, exploitation, the ravages of substance abuse. (administrator)

For those ASHE members who scored high in the “create own meaning” category, the written responses were more often slanted toward academic or work-related issues:

The disrespect and state of higher education and faculty (faculty)  
 The devaluation of learning for its own sake in favor of only learning that which has an economic benefit/outcome. (faculty)

Those ASHE members with a higher “cynic” score were more likely to write brief, pointed responses:

Infidelity and lack of financial support from my ex-husband (faculty)  
 The way everything brings suffering (faculty)  
 The inability to escape (student)

### ***The Best Part of Academic Life***

The survey asked ASHE members to identify the best part of academic life. Those who scored high on serving others cited instances where their jobs allowed them to serve others:

Helping people, working with people (student)  
 The wonderful, quirky people with [whom] we get to work, and the joy of working in a culture that values inquiry and exploration. (administrator)  
 Investing in the lives of students, watching them learn, watching them grow and mature as professionals. (faculty)

ASHE members with high “create own meaning” scores often referred to freedom in their responses:

Freedom (student)  
 The freedom and ability to set my own schedule (faculty)  
 Time off in the summer (faculty)  
 Freedom to explore and learn (administrator)

Our colleagues who scored higher as “cynics” looked more introspectively and responded with what brings personal joy:

Being paid to read (faculty)  
 Getting to study whatever I want (faculty)  
 Nothing (faculty)  
 Chasing ideas (student)

### ***The Worst Part of Academic Life***

Finally, the ASHE survey asked respondents to write about the worst part of academic life. Those with high “serving others” scores cited obstacles that get in the way of serving others:

It has become infused with a business logic of legitimacy, and I am greatly concerned that this changes the nature of the work, and the meaning that one can find in the work. (faculty)

Dissertations—too many of them to do them well, and the fact that technology, instead of freeing my time to allow for more reflective thought, has been a tool to put more and more administrative work on me as a professor. (faculty)

Arrogant faculty members that are unwilling to collaborate/compromise with colleagues across the campus. (administrator)

Those with high “create own meaning” scores brought up issues that restrained them or made them feel that they were forced to conform:

Writing endless papers and trying to guess what professors want from you. The instability, uncertain career path (student)

Colleagues, students, administrators, being forced to get external funding, being forced to publish for tenure/present at conferences. (faculty)

Narrow construction of what is knowledge (faculty)

The (un)written hierarchy that places tenured faculty above any other researcher or administrator on campus. (administrator)

The more cynical wrote about big negative aspects of academic life:

Bureaucracy and the stupid legislature (administrator)

Academic freedom means you are free to work as hard as you can. (faculty)

The sad state of higher education due to a neoliberal agenda when intellectually stimulating people go out of their way to put you down. (student)

## CONCLUSION

Some will criticize this work— perhaps casting it as nothing more than parlor tricks or even as a form of reading tea leaves. Despite these criticisms, I believe that we are important and that studying ourselves provides important data. Moreover, I agree with Socrates who stated: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” We have just taken a step in examining our lives.

In preparing for this address, I seriously contemplated speaking about the need for bridging research and practice. I also considered presenting the topic of global competence and internationalization. In line with the conference theme, I thought about focusing on the changing and challenging financial situation. Ultimately, I choose to go down another path—this much more introspective one. I think the introspection is important because we cannot withstand the challenges of a changing future unless we prepare ourselves and understand ourselves.

What did we learn about ourselves? Here are some final thoughts:

- ASHE members are more likely to find meaning in helping others.
- Tenure and/or promotion do not necessarily bring happiness.

- Academic life may contribute to happiness and purpose, but it is family and social relationships that are more prominent.
- Having a purpose in life is key.
- Purpose and happiness do not have to decline with age.

I close with a set of favorite quotations from some of the best thinkers that ever lived:

- “Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.” —Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, (563–483 B.C.)
- “Singleness of purpose is one of the chief essentials for success in life, no matter what may be one’s aim.” —John D. Rockefeller (1837–1927)
- “True happiness . . . is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” —Helen Keller (1880–1968)
- “The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.” Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)

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## APPENDIX



Dear ASHE Member,

Thank you for attending the Presidential Speech entitled “The Meaning of Academic Life.” In May of this year I sent a request and a link to an electronic survey to all ASHE members (1,904 members). The data I will be presenting in the Presidential Speech is a result of the responses of 700 ASHE members who provided data.

There are many reasons why people attending the speech did not have an opportunity to participate. Perhaps you are a new member to ASHE or the ASHE records may not have your most current email address, or maybe the survey request arrived at an inopportune time. Whatever the reason, if you did not participate or if you did not answer all of the items in the survey you will not have received your scores for the Meaning of Life, Purpose in Life, and Happiness scales. No doubt having your scores will allow you to participate more fully in the speech and its subsequent discussion.

Just for you, I have created an alternative. I have included JUST the scale items for your response. Of course your scores will not have been included in the calculated percentile ranks, but taking this revised version and self-scoring will give you an idea of where you are in the continuum of scores.

This revised version is not exactly the same as the original survey. For ease of scoring I have reverse-worded those items that were negatively stated in the original survey. Further, whereas the original survey allowed respondents to slide an indicator anywhere between the numbers of 1 to 10 to indicate the number most true for them you are limited to writing in your response. Just like in the original survey, you do not need to limit yourself to integer responses.

Please follow the specific scoring directions for each of the three sections. Once you have calculated your scores, refer to the scoring percentile table to approximate your percentile scores.

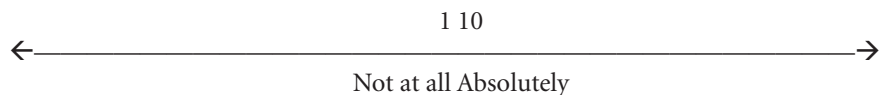
Once again, thank you for attending the speech and for your participation.

Sincerely,  
Linda Serra Hagedorn

### MEANING OF LIFE SCALES

The Meaning of Life constructs are based on previous research on the topic and are guided by the work of Kinnier and colleagues (2003).

*Scoring Directions:* For each of the three scales enter a score between 1 and 10 where 1 indicates not at all and 10 indicates absolutely. The final scale score is the average of responses in each scale.



### SERVING OTHERS SCORE

Score

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | I live to contribute something that is greater than myself |
| 2 | I live to love, help, or serve others.                     |
|   | Total (sum of items 1 and 2)                               |
|   | <b>Score (divide total by 2)</b>                           |
- 

### LIFE IS OWN CREATION

Score

- 
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | The meaning of life is my own creation.   |
| 2 | Life is a mystery.  |
| 3 | The meaning of life is nothing more than the opportunity to live—to enjoy [life]. |
|   | Total (sum of items 1,2, and 3)   |
|   | <b>Score (divide total by 3)</b>  |
- 

### LIFE HAS NO MEANING—CYNIC

Score

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Life is absurd; it is a joke.                            |
| 2 | There really is no meaning to life; life is meaningless. |
| 3 | Life is a struggle.                                      |
|   | Total (sum of items 1, 2, and 3)                         |
|   | <b>Score (divide total by 3)</b>                         |
-

### THE PURPOSE IN LIFE TEST (CRUMBAUGH & MAHOLICK, 1964)

Scoring Directions: Enter a number from 1 to 10 as indicated in the continuum. Your Purpose in Life Score is the sum of all 20 items.

<i>Items</i>	<i>Rate each item from 1 to 10</i>		<i>Score</i>
1	I am usually:	Bored Enthusiastic 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10	
2	Life to me seems:	Completely routine	Always exciting
3	In life I have:	No goals or aims	Clear goals and aims
4	My personal existence is:	Utterly meaningless	Purposeful and meaningful
5	Every day is:	Exactly the same	Constantly new and different
6	If I could choose, I would:	Prefer never to have been born	Want 9 more lives just like this one
7	After retiring, I would:	Loaf completely the rest of my life	Do some of the exiting things I've always wanted to
8	In achieving life goals I've:	Made no progress whatever	Progressed to complete fulfillment
9	My life is:	Empty, filled only with despair	Running over with exciting things
10	If I should die today, I'd feel that my life has been:	Completely worthless	Very worthwhile
11	In thinking of my life, I:	Often wonder why I exist	Always see the reasons for being here
12	As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:	Completely confuses me	Fits meaningfully with my life
13	I am a:	Very irresponsible person	Very responsible person
14	Concerning freedom to choose, I believe humans are: and environment	Completely bound by limitations of heredity	Totally free to make all life choices
15	With regard to death, I am:	Unprepared and frightened	Prepared and unafraid
16	Regarding suicide, I have:	Thought of it seriously as a way out	Never given it a second thought
17	I regard my ability to find a purpose or mission in life as:	Practically none	Very great
18	My life is:	Out of my hands and controlled by external factors	In my hands and I'm in control of it
19	Facing my daily tasks is:	A painful and boring experience	A source of pleasure and satisfaction
20	I have discovered:	No mission or purpose in life	A satisfying life purpose

**Total (sum of items 1 through 20)**

**THE OXFORD HAPPINESS QUESTIONNAIRE (HILLS & ARGYLE, 2002)**

*Scoring Instructions:* Enter a score between 1 and 10 where 1 indicates strong agreement and 10 indicates strong disagreement. Final score is the sum of all items.

---

- 1 I feel particularly pleased with the way I am.
- 2 I am intensely interested in other people.
- 3 I feel that life is very rewarding.
- 4 I have very warm feelings toward almost everyone.
- 5 I often wake up feeling rested.
- 6 I am optimistic about the future.
- 7 I find most things amusing.
- 8 I am always committed and involved.
- 9 Life is good.
- 10 I think that the world is a good place.
- 11 I laugh a lot.
- 12 I am well satisfied about everything in my life.
- 13 I think I look attractive.
- 14 There are no gaps between what I would like to do and what I have done.
- 15 I am very happy.
- 16 I find beauty in some things.
- 17 I always have a cheerful effect on others.
- 18 I can fit in everything I want to.
- 19 I feel that I am in control of my life.
- 20 I feel able to take anything on.
- 21 I feel fully mentally alert.
- 22 I often experience joy and elation.
- 23 I find it easy to make decisions.
- 24 I have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life.
- 25 I feel I have a great deal of energy.
- 26 I usually have a good influence on events.
- 27 I have fun with other people.
- 28 I feel healthy.
- 29 I have happy memories of the past.

**Total (sum of items 1 through 29)**

---

**SCORES AND PERCENTILES**

*Directions:* For each of the scales, first locate the score closest to your calculated score in the appropriate column. Next, approximate your percentile score from the left column.

		<i>Serve Others</i>	<i>Own Creation</i>	<i>Cynic</i>	<i>Purpose in Life</i>	<i>Happiness</i>
Percentiles	5	5.4200	2.9400	1.0180	114.8165	145.3485
	10	6.0958	3.5407	1.3367	127.0150	160.1580
	15	6.6900	3.9133	1.6313	133.2880	168.4145
	20	7.0300	4.1900	1.8120	137.3240	176.1100
	25	7.4300	4.5367	1.9967	140.7575	181.4950
	30	7.5450	4.7400	2.1427	144.0880	185.1590
	35	7.8400	5.0600	2.3333	146.5195	189.5995
	40	8.0300	5.3233	2.4707	149.2940	194.3320
	45	8.2100	5.5267	2.6567	151.7210	197.6250
	50	8.4800	5.6867	2.7867	154.1950	201.0850
	55	8.5700	5.9800	2.9667	157.1125	204.4695
	60	8.7650	6.1467	3.0133	158.9440	208.1860
	65	8.9900	6.4450	3.1463	161.9825	212.2815
	70	9.0200	6.6900	3.3440	164.3150	215.5880
	75	9.1650	7.0100	3.5858	166.7900	222.0125
	80	9.4350	7.3233	3.8127	169.5220	227.3680
	85	9.5350	7.5133	4.0570	172.0715	232.8990
	90	9.8500	7.9500	4.5527	176.8640	239.4920
	99	10.0000	9.3667	8.2452	191.9223	266.3500