

# GO YOUR OWN WAY

All too often we search for contentment in material things. Maybe it's time we looked a little closer to home, writes **Fiona Hoban**

**W**here does the time go? As autumn beckons, I'm sure many of us will get that familiar wave of concern that time is flying by, and that really we should be doing more with it. We forget, however, that we are human beings – not human doings.

That existential question: "What am I supposed to be doing with my life?" comes up quite a bit in my work as a counsellor. Clients often struggle with this, as well as with a sense that whatever it is they are doing, they should be doing more.

How do we go about answering that question? Victor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, said that if we study the lives of people who seem to have found the answer to that question, it appears that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man, ie, being human always points and is directed to something or someone other than oneself. The more one forgets himself, the more human he is, and the more he actualises himself. He went on to say that everyone has a specific vocation in life to carry out; everyone has a specific way of doing this; and everyone has a specific opportunity to implement it.

But what might that specific vocation be? It could be anything, really. What is it that you long for in the depth of your being? What is it that makes your heart sing? And if you answer: "massive wealth and world domination", there are a couple of rules of thumb to consider, according

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to American psychologist Tim Kasser. "People would be well advised to focus on the pursuit of goals involving personal growth, community connection and contribution, and whatever is personally interesting and important, instead of money, beauty and popularity or a feeling of being forced," Kasser said.

Having consumerist goals in life is not a bad thing per se, eg, wanting to drive a certain car or have a certain lifestyle.

Psychologists Carver and Baird note: "It's not what you want to buy, but why you want it that matters." They argue that "any goal causes a problem when it is pursued in the hope that it will deliver something it cannot: buying love, improving character or regaining self-esteem".

In that sense, it's a good idea to ask yourself: "Am I doing this to find happiness or to express happiness?"

Of course, sometimes, while we may know what makes our heart sing, circumstances do not permit us to pursue this avenue. If this is the case, what then? How can we make sense of our life? How can we find meaning and purpose?

Frankl proposes that life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. He argues that while we may not be free from conditions, we are free to take a stand toward such conditions.

In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he says: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

It is widely accepted that choosing one's own way is in itself deeply fulfilling and can bring meaning and purpose into our lives. So, regardless of our circumstances (and, for some, circumstances can be pretty rough), we still have choice – we still have an opportunity unique to each one of us to decide how best to carve out our life.

Frankl sums it up nicely when he says: "We watched some of our comrades behave like swine, while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualised depends on decisions, not on conditions."

So, while we are human beings and not human doings, it's no harm to stop every now and then and ask: "What exactly am I doing with my life?" Because the only person who can answer that question and be responsible for it is you. ✨