

Leo Tolstoy Believed Life Was Meaningless. This Changed His Mind.

A person, 50 years old, is in full blown mid-life crisis. Even with fame, fortune, and a loving family, life is meaningless. This was Leo Tolstoy. Having written [*War and Peace*](#) and [*Anna Karenina*](#), he was one of the most celebrated authors in the history of mankind. Yet, Leo Tolstoy found himself immersed in despair.

In his autobiographical book [*A Confession*](#), Leo Tolstoy describes the nihilistic beliefs that haunted him. Regarding the education of his children, Tolstoy heard himself thinking "What for?" The plight of the peasants? Tolstoy thought, "But what does it matter to me?"

"You will be more famous than Gogol or Pushkin or Shakespeare or Moliere, or than all the writers in the world," he told himself, "and what of it?"

Tolstoy's questions went unanswered. "I felt," he wrote, "that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet."

Tolstoy came to a terrible conclusion, "The truth was that life is meaningless. I had as it were lived and walked, till I had come to a precipice and saw clearly that there was nothing ahead of me but destruction."

Bravely, Tolstoy looked into himself for the root cause of his nihilism. Understanding that no one can organize their life without some belief system, he saw in himself a belief that was driving his experience of life: "I now see clearly that my faith – my only real faith – that which apart from my animal instincts gave impulse to my life – was a belief in perfecting

myself.” Tolstoy saw how his belief in perfectionism was not serving him.

The object of his perfectionism was ever shifting: his studies, becoming physically stronger, moral perfection, his desire to be better in “eyes of other people,” and “finally a desire to be stronger than others: to be more famous, more important and richer than others.”

In his book [*Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*](#), philosophy professor Iddo Landau observed:

“Of all the presuppositions that bring people to believe that their lives are meaningless, the most common is probably the perfectionist presupposition...Some perfectionists cannot settle for anything less than perfect since they interpret each situation in terms of competition, and the thought that some people may win against them in some imagined or real competition is too difficult for them to bear.”

Tolstoy had fallen into the perfectionist trap that Landau describes. Much of Tolstoy’s crisis was stemming from a desire to be seen a certain way and a desire to be better than others. *Look at me, I am better than you*, brought pain—not joy—to Tolstoy’s life.

Status in a temporary existence is not solid ground on which to build a life of meaning. No wonder Tolstoy was in crisis. How many of us have found ourselves similarly distraught?

Tolstoy had made a “religion” of worshiping his thoughts on the meaningless of life. His perfectionist ruminations—a theme his thinking returned to again and again—were akin to a “prayer” to a false God. Tolstoy’s suffering was immense. No matter how many times he tried to think his way out of his existential crisis, there was no resolution in this ephemeral world.

Tolstoy made all sorts of attempts to resolve his crisis of

meaning. He considered Epicureanism. He explored science and religion. His accomplishments offered no release from his pain.

Having exhausted the limits of his own mind, Tolstoy came to realize that there was something greater than his thinking could comprehend.

All his efforts to reinforce his personal identity had come at great expense: He was not one with God.

To have an experience of God, Tolstoy found he had to release his concepts of God. "'The conception of God is not God,' said I to myself." And then the insight came, "I seek that without which there can be no life."

How could I, Tolstoy wondered, walk in the world separate from my Source? He took relief in the certainty that "[God] is that without which one cannot live. To know God and to live is one and the same thing. God is life."

Awakened to the knowledge that he was one with his Source, Tolstoy was no longer consumed by personal thoughts of perfection; meaning was restored to his life.

For those who rely only upon the power of their own thinking, Tolstoy's breakthrough is hard to understand.

To those who doubt the concept of God, Tolstoy might reply, *Don't get tangled in words and don't get tangled in concepts beyond the limits of your mind. Instead, simply consider the idea that there is something more significant than the boundaries of your thinking.*

Life's meaning was restored to Tolstoy through subtraction, not addition: He learned he wasn't the *meaning*. Coming to this realization he wrote, "All within me and around me lit up, and the light did not again abandon me."

“God is Life.” Can we say, “God is Love” is a corollary of Tolstoy’s realization? If so, we can learn through Tolstoy’s example. To seek human perfection, to compare ourselves to others, will only block Love and strip meaning from our experience of life.

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