

Elise Kapitancek

Crisis of Meaning Interview

Interviewer: Elise Kapitancek (EK)

Interviewee: Jennifer Massaro, life-long best friend (JM)

Jennifer has been my best friend since the first day we met in Kindergarten. She looked across the table to me and said, "hi! I'm Jen and we are going to be best friends." She has a strong personality and an independent spirit. When I asked her to participate in the crisis of meaning interview, she laughed and said: "sure! Which one of my issues do you want to focus on, Lord knows I've seen some days." I thought Jennifer would be a good example for this particular interview because she has stood resilient through many harsh trials in life. I wanted to find out exactly how she found the recovery of meaning after such tough hits from the world. Unfortunately due to distance, I was forced to interview her on the phone but we had a great conversation. I chose to ask her about her father abandoning her at a young age. He later returned to her and is now plays an important role in her life. In this interview you will hear how she confronted meaninglessness in her life, how she lived through it, and about her re-evaluation on the meaning of life.

EK- Jen, I know your life story...but could you please explain for me the most significant event in your childhood that led you to struggle with years of meaninglessness?

JM- Sure. When I was a year old my father left my mom and I. They spent the next year finalizing their divorce and my mom and I were forced to move in with my Nana. Since I was so young when my father left, and I spent most of my social time with my family, I didn't realize for a number of years how weird it felt not having a father.

EK- What was it that sparked the realization for you?

JM- When I went to pre-school and was socialized with and surrounded by other children my age. I heard children talking about their dads, I saw their dads pick them up from school, I got asked questions about my dad. I started to panic and ask my mother all sorts of questions. I started by asking her what was wrong with me, how come I was different from the other kids. Society has a constructed idea of what a family is, and granted that is changing now - but at the time I felt like I had done something wrong by not having a similar family mold to my peers.

EK- What answers did your mom provide for you? I remember by the time we were in kindergarten together, you had a pretty firm grasp on the fact that your

family was different. I don't remember you really talking about your dad until first or second grade though.

JM- Well, I think how tough it must have been for her at that time to give me any answer I could understand or hold onto. She is a very religious woman, as you know, and for years she would tell me things like: "God made you in a special way! He blesses the earth with families of all different shapes and sizes. We are a unique family and that is something you should be very proud of." Eventually, as I got older she explained to me that I used to have a father, but that he chose drugs over his family. It wasn't until probably 6th grade that I learned he had been addicted to heroine and was squandering all of my mom's money to feed his habit.

EK- Can you point to a specific moment or event when you truly felt life was void of meaning in light of the situation with your dad?

JM- I can remember a few defining moments in regards to feeling meaninglessness. Although I didn't recognize it at the time, I think the first moment was in pre-school when my friend came to my Nana's house for a play-date. She asked me why my dad wasn't home for work yet. I didn't know how to respond and I felt as though it was so wrong for me not to have an answer for her, I wondered why I was there in that moment if I couldn't live up to what my friend thought was a normal life. Another moment was when I found out the true reason I didn't have a father in my life. I felt that he was addicted to drugs because I had done something wrong. I blamed myself and again wondered why my life couldn't be like what I perceived everyone else's to be. A huge event in my feelings of meaninglessness was in 7th grade when I was diagnosed with depression.

EK- I remember you being hospitalized for a few months in 7th grade for attempted suicide. Would you say this was your lowest point of meaninglessness in life?

JM- Absolutely.

EK- Can you elaborate on these feelings of meaninglessness, and explain how they kept you from being open to other experiences in life?

JM- The feelings of meaninglessness I felt were paralyzing. I felt like I couldn't do anything, and even that I shouldn't do anything because nothing mattered. I felt like the only impact I had on other people was negative because I brought them down. I wasn't sure why I was here or why I felt so sad about my family's

situation. I figured it was better to stay at home and not talk to anyone, and in this way, I was not open to other experiences.

EK- Because I'm your best friend, I know you got past this. Can you explain to me the tools you used to handle your depression and to come out stronger as a more confident individual?

JM- Sure. It was a combination of two things: the re-entry of my father into my life, and art. During my junior year of high school my mother moved to Wisconsin for a job. I wanted to stay and graduate from my high school at the time and the only way to do that was to move in with my father. He had reached out to me and I took a leap of faith. The first few months were a very hard adjustment because I had harbored so much anger towards him for my entire life. It was also an adjustment getting used to living with his wife and two daughters. Many old feelings that he had replaced me were coming back. However, it became very clear to me that he really needed my help raising his daughters. Once I saw how useful and helpful I was, I started to see a lot more meaning in my life. I began to notice the types of skills I had and this made me think about college and a career as a psychologist. I started to create goals and was excited to accomplish them. I began to be able to forgive my father after I spent many hours with him talking and trying to understand his past struggles and trying to understand the love he was now bestowing on me. As for the piece about art - I used it as an outlet during the toughest times of my depression. It helped me get out all of the emotions I didn't know how to talk about and I loved immersing myself in it.

EK- So, after you came to a new acceptance for and forgave your father, did you do a re-evaluation of sorts on the meaning to your life?

JM- 100% yes. I felt like I finally had the clarity to look at my life without it being clouded by depression. I started to see that for me personally, meaning came from how I could help others. This is why I am now in med school. I want to work with children on alternative ways to deal with their mental illnesses. I think things like art and music therapy are wonderful for this. I also realized that a meaning in life is something that each person needs to find for him or herself. I had to go through all the tough times to be able to step back with perspective.

EK- Well thank you for sharing, my friend!

Comments:

Jennifer's interview reminded me very much of Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*. She felt like her actions were futile and meaningless, just like actions of the men in the concentration camp. However, she was able to find

meaning in life again when she saw the value of her actions and exercised “a will to meaning.” Therefore, it wasn’t the meaning of life in general that began to matter to Jennifer, but it was the fact that she could point to a specific purpose in her life at the moment. I also think that finding a release through art could be likened to logotherapy because it helped her to become aware of how life-meaning could contribute to her ability to overcome depression.

Her re-evaluation of the meaning of life made me reminisce about Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Jennifer said she realized that each person needs to find for him or herself the meaning of their personal life and that she had to go through all the hard times to arrive where she is now. This reminded me of Hesse’s conclusion in *Siddhartha* that people have to find their own way and find what is true to them. It also reminded me of how Buddha decided to look within himself to find his truth. It seems like Jen did a lot of similar reflection and was able to come to an answer that worked for her. This interview was interesting because I already knew her so well. It was enlightening though to see how she decided to approach talking about her situation and what details she was willing to share knowing that it was a class assignment.