

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

Thinking About What Matters Most: The Power of Purpose Initiative

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is conducting a major new research program supported by the Foundation to track the spiritual growth of students during their college years. The study builds on an abundance of anecdotal evidence that suggests growing interest on college campuses to acknowledge religion and spirituality as core components of a liberal arts education. The project employs a multi-institutional and longitudinal design to identify trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students.

The world needs more focus in terms of purpose,” says Michael Reagan, founder of Lionheart Books and director of the Power of Purpose initiative. “We want to give the world meaningful examples of purposeful lives that will hopefully inspire other people. In spite of the fact that I’ve lived in the commercial world, I’m a hopeless romantic, and I think people can be inspired when they read stories of other people who have done great things.”

As far back as Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have considered the goal or purpose of natural phenomena intrinsic to understanding it. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was common to cast the emerging scientific understanding of the world in terms of natural theology, which looked for purpose in nature and reasoned from those insights to the nature of God.

Gradually however, this perspective gave way to a mechanical view of nature and skepticism about purpose in nature came to dominate the scientific worldview. The growing influence of science and waning relevance of religion contributed to a sense that the human search for purpose was a futile quest. Many asserted that there was no such thing as purpose—in nature or in human experience.

The Power of Purpose initiative has the ambitious goal of restoring purpose to its rightful place at the heart of our understanding of our world. “We are reaching worldwide,” says Reagan, “and we don’t know what we are going to get. It’s kind of a black hole. You just don’t know when you send out massive amounts of information to, say, India, what kind of response you are going to get.”

The competition will award those individuals that can write the best essays. At the risk of sounding sentimental, Reagan acknowledges that his dream is that this project might actually help change the world a bit for the better. “If we can make some small contribution to the recognition that we need more vision in terms of what our future is and what our purpose is, that would make me a happy man,” says Reagan.