



R613- Living the Questions: Approaches to a Life Worth Living

Michael Gino LoStracco

Chair, Religious Studies and Philosophy

William Penn Charter School

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Course Description

"Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer." — Rainer Maria Rilke

In this semester elective course open to 11th and 12th graders, students will develop contemplative habits of mind and critical metacognitive skills in pursuit of perennial questions about what makes a life worth living, questions such as *What matters most? What is a good life? What kind of life is worthy of our humanity?* Using as our text *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*, based on the acclaimed Yale course, we will delve into such questions and explore many responses from the world's philosophical and religious traditions. Through the intentional practice of introspection, reflection, and deep listening– as well as conceptual analysis, argument, and vigorous discussion– we will begin to articulate for ourselves meaningful answers that will inform our sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Students can expect regular reading and journaling assignments, student-led discussions, contemplative and creative exercises, and a final oral presentation.

Course Materials

Required text

- Volf, Croasmun, McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*, Open Field: 2023.

Other materials

- A journal or sketchbook for journaling assignments
- A folder or binder for handouts
- A Google Folder for papers and presentations

Assignments and Assessments

- **Journals (15% of final grade):** Regular reflective writing assignments based on the assigned readings. Journals will be sight-checked daily for participation and collected bi-weekly for comments. While you should respond to the prompts and questions offered, writing freely based on your own responses to the readings is also encouraged. You are expected to write ~1 page in your journal for each class meeting, according to the assigned reading and prompt. Your journal reflections will serve as the basis for our

class discussions and will inform your formal assignments, like “Your Turn” papers and Socratic Seminars. See [here](#) for a student self-checklist.

- **“Your Turn” assignments (30%):** Due at the end of each chapter, these formal assignments are typed and sometimes involve other creative or hands-on activities. You are encouraged to use your journals to inform your responses and should compose these assignments in a Google Doc, submitting them in your Google Folder on the assigned date. See [here](#) for the grading rubric.
- **Socratic Seminars (40%):** These are student facilitated and evaluated discussions at the end of each unit of study, with a rubric and discussion protocol provided. Student facilitators will be assigned for each discussion, and both facilitators and participants will evaluate themselves. Everyone will have an opportunity to both lead and participate in these formal discussions. If you miss a Socratic Seminar, as a facilitator or participant, you will be given an alternative assignment. See [here](#) for the grading rubrics.
- **Final Presentation (15%):** Final oral presentation articulating your responses to the Your Turn questions from Unit 5, with a rubric provided. This presentation will be approximately 10 minutes in length and will mark the culmination (for now!) of your work in this course. Here you will synthesize your responses to each of the Your Turn questions from the final three chapters, drawing on your work from previous chapters, into a coherent vision of a life worth living. It is your opportunity to publicly articulate how you intend to live the questions once the course is finished. See [here](#) for the grading rubric.

Classroom Policies and Expectations

- **Presence:** It is imperative that you attend class and you are responsible for what you miss. Attendance will be taken at the start of class and phones are put in the caddy.
- **Mindfulness:** We will begin each meeting with a mindfulness-based practice. Please respect this time by maintaining quiet stillness and not disturbing others.
- **Community:** An atmosphere of courtesy, intellectual maturity, and mutual respect is expected. Speak your mind and support your claims with integrity. Really listen to what others have to say, no matter how different their ideas may be from your own. Respectful disagreement is expected and encouraged. Together, we will co-create classroom norms based on these principles.
- **Integrity:** Intellectual honesty is paramount and the work you present should be your own. When you use or reference another person’s ideas or work, it should be acknowledged appropriately. The use of AI to generate content is prohibited unless otherwise noted. If you ever need an extension or are late with an assignment, don’t panic; always communicate with me before making a rash decision.
- **Trust:** You do not need to ask permission to go to the restroom; please take care of yourself. However, if you are gone with frequency or for great lengths of time, that will invite a check-in conversation.
- **Confidentiality:** What is shared in the context of this class stays within the context of this class. Vulnerability is a gift and can be transformative; it can also be abused and

misused. To ensure that we support and encourage each other with an ethic of care and trust, we must commit to a rigorous standard of confidentiality and not speak of what others share outside of the class without their consent.

Syllabus

Unit 1: Diving In, Weeks 1-3

Objectives

- To introduce the course and scope of our work together, including the book and some essential questions
- To begin a reflective journaling practice and consider one's own assumptions, beliefs, values, and priorities
- To practice both authentic sharing and deep listening

Essential Questions

- What matters most to you?
- What is a Good Life?
- What is worth wanting?

1) Reading: Introduction: This Book Might Wreck Your Life (pp. xi-xxxiv)

- **Journal: As you read throughout the week, consider the following prompts in your journals. Your responses will be the basis of our ongoing class discussions:**
 - Of the narratives offered in the beginning of the chapter (i.e. Buddha, Simon Peter, Ida B. Wells), which did you find most compelling and why?
 - Is life more like the card game war or poker? Give some reasons for each.
 - What do you think about *responsibility*? How responsible are you for the shape of your life?
- **Your Turn (pp. xxxii-xxxiv):**
 - In a Google Doc, complete the introspective inventory of the "Finite Four" (i.e. Time, Money, Attention, Emotions).
 - Then for class, come prepared with three objects from your life, one that represents your relationship with time, money, and attention. Be prepared to share your responses and explain your object choices in class.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - [Video: A Guide to What Matters Most- Miroslav Volf](#)
 - Read excerpts from [scenes of the life of the Buddha](#)
 - Alternative: [How a Prince Became the Buddha](#) (video)
 - [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Contemporary Extensions](#)
 - ["Team Tower Challenge"](#)

2) Reading: What's Worth Wanting? (pp. 3-17)

- **Journal:**
 - What do you make of the Socrates quote on p. 6? Do you agree?
 - Can you think of individuals in your life who exemplify each of the modes of being discussed in the chapter? If so, who are they and why?
 - Consider further the extent to which the levels offered (i.e. *Autopilot*, *Effectiveness*, *Self-Awareness*, *Self-Transcendence*) are useful or relevant to your life now. If you could rename, reorder, or add to them, how might you do so and why?
- **Your Turn (p. 17):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the three questions listed on p. 17.
- **Additional in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Read excerpts from [Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"](#)
 - Read from ["This is Water"](#) by David Foster Wallace

3) Reading: Where Are We Starting From? (pp. 18-32)

- **Journal:**
 - What is problematic about the "Walgreens vision" of the Good Life, as the authors put it?
 - What do the authors mean by the "Good Life Tangle"?
 - What can the lived examples of King, Lincoln, and Lytton tell us about what it means to live a Good Life?
- **Your Turn (p. 31):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the three questions listed on p. 31. In addition, bring to class a picture of one of the people you admire and one of the people you envy. Be prepared to share your written responses about them.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Read/listen to excerpts of [Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech](#)
 - Further context: [The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford](#)

[Socratic Seminar 1](#)

Unit 2: The Depths, Weeks 4-7

Objectives

- To explore the nature of responsibility
- To discern the ends and standards by which our lives are evaluated
- To articulate the source, scope, and limits of our moral concern

Essential Questions

- To whom or what are you ultimately responsible?
- What does it mean to be responsible?
- From where does our responsibility to live a certain kind of life come?

1) Reading: Who Do We Answer To? (pp. 35-48)

- **Journal:**
 - In your own words, define the three types of responsibility described on p. 37.
 - Considering the stories and perspectives of both Confucius and Muhammad, respond to the question posed on p. 45, "If this were true, how would my life have to change?"
 - What do you make of Kant's views on reason, rationality, and responsibility? How do you respond to the challenges of his views on p. 46?
- **Your Turn (p. 48):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the three questions listed on p. 48.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Explore: [The Prophet Muhammad and the Origins of Islam](#) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
 - Close reading/listening of Bob Dylan's ["Who Killed Davey Moore?" \(lyrics\)](#)

2) Reading: How Does a Good Life Feel? (pp. 49-61)

- **Journal:**
 - Consider the "push-pin principle"- are there gradations of pleasure, making some more worth wanting than others, or is a "pleasure is a pleasure is a pleasure"?
 - Do you think Subha's state of equanimity or enlightenment is realistic? Explain your response.
 - Does Wilde idealize the feeling of sorrow? What is his rationale for the beauty and wonder of sorrow?
 - What does it mean to get "in sync with something deep about the world"? What words would you use to describe that feeling?
- **Your Turn (p. 61):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the two questions listed on p. 61.
 - Then find an artifact from popular culture- an advertisement, song lyric, social media post, or a brand- and analyze what it says about how a Good Life feels. What is the message being conveyed? Does it align with Bentham, Subha, or Wilde's ideas? Be prepared to share your example and reflections in class.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Read John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
 - [Read excerpts from "Therigatha \(Poems of Women Elders\)"](#)

3) Reading: What Should We Hope For? (pp. 62-76)

- **Journal:**
 - Draw a picture of what flourishing means to you. What do you include in that picture, and why?
 - To what extent should circumstances or external conditionals determine our notions of flourishing?
 - Consider the examples of Aristotle and the Buddha. Whose vision of flourishing aligns more with your picture ?
 - Consider the example of the Apostle Paul: How should we think about the plights of others and the condition of the world in our idea of flourishing?
- **Your Turn (p. 76):**
 - [Peer Interviews based on Your Turn questions](#)
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - [The Flourishing Brand Shark Tank](#)
 - [“Traveling through the Dark”](#) by William Stafford

4) Reading: How Should We Live? (pp. 77-102)

- **Journal:**
 - What is your “true north”, the orientation of all your activity? What is worthy of your agency?
 - What are some of the merits and limits of consequentialism, as described in the chapter? How about following God’s commands and cultivating virtue?
 - Reflect on the role discernment plays in answering the question of this chapter. What does discernment look like for you?
- **Your Turn (p. 102):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the three questions listed on p. 102.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Selected readings from the Bhagavad Gita (Chapters 2 and 3)
 - Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37
 - [Drawing your Moral Circle](#)
 - [Matthieu Richard on the Habits of Happiness](#) (TED Talk)

[Socratic Seminar 2](#)

Unit 3: Bedrock, Weeks 8-9

Objectives

- To explore the relationship between our life and our worldview
- To understand how different visions of a flourishing life center different values

- To consider the importance and limitations of consistency in one's worldview

Essential Questions

- *Where* are we? *Who* are we?
- What implicit beliefs about human nature and the purpose of life shape the way we evaluate different worldviews and ethical systems?
- How do these assumptions influence our view of what is possible or desirable in life?

1) Reading: The Recipe Test (pp. 105-125)

- **Journal:**
 - What are the most important ingredients in your recipe, so to speak: agency, affect, or circumstance? Why do you think that is?
 - Of the three philosophies discussed- Stoicism, Utilitarianism, Confucianism- which one makes most sense to you and why? Which do you think is most prevalent in society and why?
 - Do you think one or more of these philosophies can be combined? If so, what might that look like? What would you call this combined philosophy?
- **Your Turn (p. 125):**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to at least one of the questions on p. 125
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - Read excerpts from Confucius' *Analects*
 - [The Integrity Tower](#)
 - [Practice two Stoic meditations: The View from Above and Negative Visualization](#)

2) Reading: The Really Big Picture (pp. 126-150)

- **Journal:**
 - Think about the "Order, Ordering, Things Ordered" exercise (described below). What foundational assumptions about the world and our place in it do you bring to the discussion?
 - Of the different cosmologies (i.e. Christian/Theistic, Indigenous, Empirical Scientific, Transhumanist, Buddhist) presented in the chapter, which is most compelling to you and why? Do you think one or more of these can relate together, and if so, how?
 - Try to explain the Is/Ought problem in your own words. Why is it relevant to the discussion?
- **Your Turn:**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to the questions on pp. 149-150. Then draw a picture of your "Really Big Picture" on a separate piece of paper. Use your

imagination and have fun with this, translating your written responses into a visual map. You will not be graded on your artistic ability but instead on your imagination and effort. Prepare to share this with the class in a Gallery Walk.

- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**
 - [“Order, Ordering, Things Ordered”](#)
 - Read from Creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2
 - From a [Brief History of Time](#) by Stephen Hawkins
 - Read Lenape Creation story (Adam DePaul translation)
 - Listen/watch Sagan’s [“Pale Blue Dot”](#)

[Socratic Seminar 3](#)

Unit 4: Facing the Limits, Weeks 10-13

Objectives

- To articulate how to navigate challenges, endings, and the limits of life with wisdom and compassion
- To reflect on personal experiences of failure and suffering, identifying insights and growth that have emerged from them
- To evaluate various perspectives on how to engage with difficulties in life—whether personal setbacks or larger existential realities—with meaning and intentionality

Essential Questions

- What can failure teach us that success cannot?
- To what extent is suffering necessary for personal growth?
- How do time, impermanence, and finitude affect our choices and values?
- What role does community play in helping individuals navigate failure and suffering?

1) Reading: When We (Inevitably) Botch It (pp. 153-171)

- **Journal:**
 - What does it mean to be “called out to be called forward”? Can you cite an example from your own life experience?
 - What if “trying harder” in response to failure doesn’t cut it? How should we address past harms?
 - Respond to the Maimonides’ quote on p. 163: “repentance brings near the far apart.”
- **Your Turn:**
 - In a Google Doc, compose responses to at least one of the three questions listed on p. 170.
- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**

- Watch the TED Talk reference on p. 155, [“On Being Wrong”](#) Kathryn Schulz
- Peter Singer’s [“Drowning Child” thought experiment](#), paired with the quote on p. 161: “Why should our failure to be moral change what it means to be moral?”
- Watch [Pema Chödrön: What to Do When You Lose It Completely](#) and discuss with connection to her interpretation of Buddhist repentance on pp. 165-67: *regret, refrain, remedial action, resolve*.

2) Reading: When Life Hurts... (pp. 172-186)

- **Journal:**

- Consider the Jeremy Bentham quote on p. 172 and then Paul Bloom’s critique on the following page. What do make of the concept of “psychological hedonism”?
- Reflect on Mary Wollstencraft’s “three central pillars” necessary for human flourishing. To what extent does society need to change for individuals to flourish?
- There are several eloquent and inspiring quotes from James Baldwin on pp. 182-185. Select one and reflect in response.

Your Turn:

- In a Google Doc, compose responses to at least one of the three questions listed on p. 186.

Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:

- [The Way and Human Flourishing in Confucian Thought](#)

3) Reading: And There’s No Fixing It (pp. 187-206)

- **Journal:**

- Reflect on the story of the historical Buddha on pp. 187-190. Can you relate from your own experience to his perspective on suffering and its causes?
- Do you believe, like Drake (and al-Ghazali and Leibniz...), that everything happens for a reason, that there is an underlying order to how things unfold in this world? How does such a view help you make sense, or not, to the realities of failure, pain, and suffering?
- How do you make sense of the story of Job? How does the story of Job compare to Buddhist and Muslim teachings discussed in the chapter?

- **Your Turn:**

- In a Google Doc, compose responses to at least one of the questions listed on p. 205.

- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**

- [Anchors and Compasses in the Midst of Anguish](#)

4) Reading: When It Ends (pp. 207-223)

- **Journal:**

- What do you think Socrates meant by philosophy is "training for death"? Which of the same questions we've been discussing was he considering?
- What do you make of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn's articulation of the Buddhist conception of death and dying? Is it comforting or disconcerting? Does it resonate or not? Explain.
- Consider Nussbaum and Lewis' views, offered in response to Hahn's on pp. 213-214. How do they sit with you?
- Do you agree with Hägglund that the finitude of life is precisely what makes it matter ("No death, no agency. No agency, no meaning.")? Elaborate on your thoughts.
- The Apostle Paul taught that death is conquered, that resurrection makes life with Christ possible, and that death is a gateway to a better experience; in other words, life can be affirmed in the face of death. What does that mean to you?

- **Your Turn:**

- In a Google Doc, compose responses to at least one of the questions listed on p. 223.

- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**

- [Timelapse: Tibetan Sand Mandala Demonstration \(video\)](#)
- [No Birth, No Death | Teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh \(video\)](#)
- [The Fragility of Humanity - Martha Nussbaum \(video\)](#)

[Socratic Seminar 4](#)

Unit 5: Back to the Surface, Weeks 14-15

Objectives

- To understand and evaluate the relationship between insight and action
- To consider different theories of developing lasting psychological and behavioral change
- To appreciate the role community plays in sustaining a way of life rooted in a vision of flourishing

Essential Questions

- To what extent does knowledge entail responsibility?
- Why is a vigilant awareness of our limitations necessary when it comes to growth and change?

- How are different visions of a Good Life enacted and sustained in community?

1) Readings: It Turns Out We Have Some Work to Do (pp. 227-240) and Change Is Hard (pp. 241-258)

- **Journal:**

- Consider the words of Kimmerer, Aristotle, the 1st century Rabbis, Jesus, and Confucius from chapter 13. Which resonate most with you and why? If they share a key theme or idea, what is it? Why does it matter?
- Why is it often difficult to put knowledge and values into practice? What pressures or constraints in your life make it hard to live according to your conscience or vision for a Good Life?
- Compare and contrast al-Ghazali and Wilde's "response" to the student described in the chapter. Which makes more sense to you and why? How might that response align with your developing life vision?

- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**

- Read excerpts from al-Ghazali's "The Alchemy of Happiness"

2) Reading: Making It Stick (pp. 259-280)

- **Journal:**

- How do each of the systems presented in this chapter (i.e. A.A., Buddhist, Ignatian, Indigenous, Confucian) emphasize community, and why is that important?
- Of the practices described in the chapter, which appeal most to you? Can you see yourself seeking out others who share a joy in those practices? Why might you want to?

- **Additional resources, in-class activities and exercises:**

- [Practice guided Buddhist and Ignatian meditations \(adapted\)](#)

[Socratic Seminar 5](#)

Final Presentations: Weeks 16-17

- Based on the Your Turn prompts from Unit 5, develop a ~10 minute presentation outlining your vision of the Good Life and human flourishing (for now!) and how you intend to put that vision into practice. Consider the Your Turn prompts from each of the last three chapters. Select one or two questions from each to focus on and outline a presentation discussing your responses. Draw on your previous journals and Your Turn

papers and exercises in the process. Be sure to make your presentation visually appealing and reflective of your own unique vision. Part of “making it stick” is sharing our intentions and aspirations with a community of like-minded people. It is a way of promoting accountability and fostering support for one another, and that in turn helps ensure follow through. Think about this presentation not as a final exam or project but a first step toward living your vision of a flourishing life!

- See rubric [here](#)