



Introduction

This is a book about the *Why* of things—that territory of life we’re forbidden to enter. I wrote it to show why life is so lifeless for so many people, why meaning has been so difficult to find, and what to do about it if you want to.

Mankind’s search for meaning has been a long, frustrating journey that began shortly after the rise of civilization. Now that we are beginning to understand complex systems, we’re finding that civilization itself, as we have defined it, is the *major* obstacle to finding meaning in life.

Finding meaning in life requires having a systems view of it, because the things of life *are* systems. We talk about them. We refer to systems of government, systems of communication, ecological systems, systems of business, systems of thinking—but most of us have a linear view, not a systems view, of systems. That’s why they have no meaning to us. If you already know what these four sentences really mean, they don’t apply to you. Your only reason to read this book would be to find out why you’ve been called “crazy” a lot and have had such a hard time “fitting in”. If your reasons for reading this book are personal, read it as it’s written, from this Introduction through to the Conclusion. If your reasons to read this book are related to business, read Chapter Ten first. It’ll show you why you should read the first nine chapters.

Many people use the terms *meaning* and *spirituality* interchangeably. They mean *meaningful to me*. Most people are unique individuals, both genetically and due to their experiences—nature *and* nurture. What is mean-

ingful is unique to the individual. But for everyone, the prerequisite to finding what is meaningful is the ability to see meaning—the purpose, the intent behind the things that comprise our lives. Civilization is a normative social system that requires us to ignore that part of reality. Society trains us to be unable to see meaning.

Meaning and spirituality, in the hands of social institutions, look like the traditional practice of medicine—prescriptions written in unintelligible jargon by elitists primarily concerned with gathering power and exercising control over others. Treating meaning and spirituality as mysteries of perpetual confoundment is the mechanism of control. It may well be the ultimate obscenity of the human condition.

This book does not prescribe what is or should be meaningful to anyone. Rather, it provides a perspective that promotes an individual's ability to see meaning and, from that, find what is meaningful to him or her. It provides *tools* of personal freedom.

My own search began in 1973 as a question—"How come my best stuff gets me into the most trouble?" By this time, I'd been working in large corporations—General Foods, M&M/Mars, Pillsbury—for thirteen years. I'd noticed a repeating pattern. Every time I solved a problem of any substance, I found myself in disfavor with management.

I was confused. The solutions were soundly based. They were practical. The logic behind them was self-evident. The cause of the unfavorable reaction was that the solution not only required doing things differently and doing different things, but it also required *seeing* things differently. It required deviating from the status quo. Several times I'd been advised, "You have to work inside their comfort zone." That was nonsense. Somewhere "inside their comfort zone" was the root cause of the problem.

Someone once said, "The height of insanity is doing the same thing, the same way, over and over, and expecting different results." Resolving the root cause of a problem and maintaining the status quo are mutually exclusive. As Albert Einstein once said, "The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation." "Their comfort zone" is "the same thinking that created the situation".

Over the next twenty-five years, I solved the riddle. I found out why my best stuff got me into the most trouble. In the process, I discovered why the meaning of things is so hard to see.

Meaning is no big mystery. When things make no sense, they are meaningless. Many aspects of the human condition are beyond senseless. They are self-contradictory—anti-sense—“Catch 22s”. A Catch 22 is not simply a paradox, an apparent contradiction that may actually be true. A Catch 22 is self-contradictory—leaping, screaming, pole-vaulting nonsense. Catch 22s raise the possibility that the very idea of meaning may be a myth. Yet, meaning is what affirms to a person that he or she actually exists. Without it, a person lives a purely mechanical existence, going through all the motions of life without feeling alive. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this condition “existential dread, psychic entropy, a fear of being”. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl called it “the existential vacuum”. The common name for it is “the walking dead”. It’s caused by external dependency.

An externally dependent person is exactly that—dependent on things outside of him or herself to direct his or her life. Externally dependent people don’t ask questions. They follow orders. They don’t make waves. They are faithful followers, true believers. If they care about meaning at all, they take no responsibility to find it themselves. They seem to believe that the source of whatever direction they’re following will explain it to them. In the absence of that explanation, they follow orders “on faith”. Their god is “correct and proper form”.

There are a few things I’d like to tell you about myself and this book before you read it. I’m an artist by nature and a scientist by training. I spent thirty-eight years in business, primarily involved with creating new businesses, figuring out why a business wasn’t working or trying to turn around a dying business. A perpetual “fish out of water” you say? Absolutely. I’ve lived most of my life outside whatever “comfort zone” I had at the time. Why? Because life’s more interesting that way. I’ve found two very different views of knowledge. One is the open view, that knowledge is a platform for further exploration and growth. Knowing what you know provides self-confidence. It also defines what to learn next. The other is the closed view, that knowledge is protection from real and imagined threats. People wrap their knowledge around themselves. They spend their time dissecting and intensifying it, reinforcing their stockade. This makes knowledge a prison.

Staying inside a safe perimeter, doing the same things over and over, from the same point of view, looks to me to be what Hell is all about. It’s

terminally boring. Conversely, exploring forced me to realize that while specific details—facts, figures, names, and places change constantly, there are basic principles common to every aspect of life—the principles of systems. *The ability to see systems divulges the meaning of things.*

When some particular thing doesn't work, or looks senseless, we just look at it to find out why. But when we're surrounded by nonsense, we say "it's the system." That's what I did in 1973, when I realized that what I'd been encountering was not unique to the individual companies I'd worked for. It was indigenous to the whole institution of "business". At the time, I didn't know what "the system" meant. I've spent the last twenty-five years correcting that. Part I—"The System", passes along what I've learned. Having a systems view is the critical prerequisite for making sense of things, for having the ability to find their meaning.

Parts I and II are the "what"s and "why"s—the content. Part III—"Changing the System"—is how to use it. It shows how a person can reinvent any system for him or herself so that it has meaning.

Most discussions of meaning and spirituality focus on our personal life, which typically excludes our professional life. What's more personal than our work? It's what we do—our craft—a place where we get to use our unique abilities. Potentially, it's the most direct means we have of affirming our existence, provided we define what we do (internal dependence) instead of letting what we do define us (external dependence). Lack of meaning in our work lives may be more devastating to our sense of being alive than a lack of meaning anywhere else. I challenge the separation of personal and professional life. Our work is our primary art form. That's as personal as it gets.

Many books about meaning and spirituality are metaphorical. By that I mean they describe the human condition symbolically rather than literally. This is typical of theology, mythology, and science fiction. The problem with metaphors is that a person must already have solved the riddle to recognize the metaphor. Metaphors communicate *after* the fact. They're not useful for solving riddles.

This book is about solving the riddle. That's why it doesn't speak in metaphors. It talks directly about meaning, substance, spirituality, and the reasons for their absence. It challenges much of what many people believe. It examines how most of us think and what we think about. It's outside most people's "comfort zone" but much closer to home than

many may care to get. Under any circumstances, it demands creative reading.

E. Paul Torrance, who has done landmark research on creativity in the American educational system for more than forty years, talks about creative reading in his book *Why Fly?*:

When you read, it is important that you think about the many possible uses of the information which you are reading. It is especially important that you think of the various ways in which the information could be used in your personal and professional life. In reading, do not just ask, "What is the author saying?" Also ask, "How can I use what the author is saying?" Do not stop with just one use. Think of as many uses as you can for the important ideas presented. Jot down some of these uses for future reference.

I'd like to add my own thought. Also ask yourself how you feel about what you're reading. Do you agree? Do you disagree? Why? After you've answered the first "why?" ask yourself why you believe that answer. "WHY?" is the question we've been trained not to ask. It opens the door to meaning. I believe that if you don't read this book this way, it will be meaningless to you.

One last thing. If you're reading along and something doesn't register, don't worry about it. This book is not so linear that you won't be able to understand what follows. Besides that, its meaning will show up—probably when you least expect it. The less you grind it around in your head, the faster its meaning will show up. When you get to Chapter Six, you'll see why I'm giving you this advice.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cliff Howener". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.