

Millennial Searchers

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The New York Times:

FOR Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor who wrote the best-selling book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” the call to answer life’s ultimate question came early. When he was a high school student, one of his science teachers declared to the class, “Life is nothing more than a combustion process, a process of oxidation.” But Frankl would have none of it. “Sir, if this is so,” he cried, jumping out of his chair, “then what can be the meaning of life?”

The teenage Frankl made this statement nearly a hundred years ago — but he had more in common with today’s young people than we might assume.

Today’s young adults born after 1980, known as Generation Y or the millennial generation, are the most educated generation in American history and, like the baby boomers, one of the largest. Yet since the Great Recession of 2008, they have been having a hard time. They are facing one of the worst job markets in decades. They are in debt. Many of them are unemployed. The income gap between old and young Americans is widening. To give you a sense of their lot, when you search “are millennials” in Google, the search options that come up include: “are millennials selfish,” “are millennials lazy,” and “are millennials narcissistic.”

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It’s also important to understand what meaning is not. Having a sense of meaning is not the same as feeling happy. In a new longitudinal study done by one of us, Jennifer L. Aaker, with Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs and Emily N. Garbinsky, 397 Americans were followed over a monthlong period and asked the degree to which they considered their lives to be meaningful and happy, as well as beliefs and values they held, and what type of choices they had made in their lives.

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Some studies have suggested that millennials are narcissistic and flaky in their professional and personal lives, and are more selfish than prior generations. But new data suggests that these negative trends are starting to reverse. In a study published this summer in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, the researchers Heejung Park, Jean M. Twenge and Patricia M. Greenfield looked at surveys that have, each year since the 1970s, tracked the attitudes of hundreds of thousands of 12th graders. Although concern for others had been decreasing among high school seniors and certain markers of materialism — like valuing expensive products such as cars — had been increasing for nearly four decades, these trends began to reverse after 2008. Whereas older millennials showed a concern for meaning, the younger millennials who came of age during the Great Recession started reporting more concern for others and less interest in material goods.

Read the whole story: [*The New York Times*](#)