

Oskar's Purpose in Life

Hunter Harris
Goodwin College

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Oskar Schell is a 9-year-old boy who lost his father in 9/11. His father, Thomas Schell, and him were very close, often playing many games and telling many stories. Something Oskar particularly enjoyed was the various quests that his father set up for him. After his death, Oskar finds a key in an envelope labeled “Black”, and becomes fixated with the key, believing it to be one of these quests. In the novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar’s father died in 9/11, and since then, he has worked to find self-purpose and meaning in his life through his adventure with the key.

Oskar spends the better part of a year searching for the lock to the key he finds. He starts out with the obvious and tries all the locks in his apartment, but has no success. He then goes to the locksmith’s store, and asks if the man working there has any idea who the key belongs to, or what it fits into. He comments on how it seems that it’s for a lockbox since it’s thicker, but not too big of a lockbox, and that it’s quite an old key, being twenty or thirty years old. Oskar then thinks about how many locks there could be in his area, and decides that there is probably about 18 locks per person in New York City, which then means there would be about 162 million locks for him to check. He runs a few more calculations, and decides that there’s no way he could possibly try every lock, since there is a new lock approximately every 2.7 seconds. To save time, he decided to just ask all the people who have the last name Black, and hope that gets him somewhere. This becomes his new purpose in life.

What does purpose in life actually mean? This really varies per person, but there are a few common ideas shared among various psychologists. Ellen Fielding of *Is Life Worth Living?* writes, “On the face of it, this doesn't seem like a very controversial statement—most people, most of the time, hang onto life with, so to speak, a death grip.” (Fielding, 2012). This is really saying that people generally live life, and try to keep living life. In addition, people don’t like the

thought of living their last years with a disease, or not being happy during those years, or something that “drastically restricts our freedom and mobility, compromises our ability to communicate, inflicts chronic pain, or eats away at our memories and capacity to think.” (Fielding, 2012). So, knowing this, what does life itself actually mean? It seems that the meaning of life really is just to survive and be happy and healthy doing so. But still, people then wonder, is life worth living?

“Is life worth living?” is a question that many people have asked themselves, each other, and used as a topic of study. The answer though largely depends on the person. To further complicate things, people may respond differently depending on if they are being asked if their life is worth living, or if someone else’s life is worth living. It’s rare to find someone who would say “gee, your life really isn’t worth living” to someone, but people are often quick to talk about how meaningless or worthless their own life is. Some people think life is only worth living under certain circumstances and conditions, making life conditional. Some factors that influence that can include enjoyment, fulfillment, significance, and others. People can often think that they are a burden to others or to society, or that their quality of life is just not good enough to be worth living. But, people do continue to live on every day, which means they have something to justify carrying on, despite any issues they may have with their lives.

Oskar, for example, has not had the easiest of lives. For starters, his father died when he was very young, and he’s had a lot of trouble getting over his death. He does not have a good relationship with his mother either, such as how he hides the messages from her and always seems upset at her for having Ron over, so he is fairly stuck dealing with his loss on his own. He desperately desires closure with his father, but is unable to get it, so he spends most of his life looking for ways to relate to his father. One example of this is when he was in the park. This is

before his father's death, but it shows how Oskar has always desired and cherished a connection with his father, and now that his father is gone, the connection is lost. He said "I spent all day walking around the park, looking for something that might tell me something, but the problem was that I didn't know what I was looking for...But that's how tricky Dad could be." (Foer, 2005, p. 8) This quote shows how he is following a quest his father left for him, but doesn't even know what that quest is. It could be something, or it could be nothing, but to Oskar, it's everything because it's his father. Now, after his father's death, he is still searching for quests he thinks his father left behind for him, but that may not even exist. The possibility is enough hope for him, since he is desperately trying to hold on to those good times and memories, and any possible hinting of continuing those means everything to Oskar.

Oskar doesn't have a good support team to help him process his emotions. His mother seems to keep mostly to herself and her friend Ron, leaving Oskar to deal with his problems by himself. This leaves Oskar to become fairly independent, but also fairly lonely. He occasionally has moments of self-harm, and self-pity. To combat his dark feelings, he needs something to occupy his mind and his time.

The key that Oskar finds perfectly fills this need. Oskar has struggled with finding purpose in life previously, often picking small things and insignificant things. He once said "entomology is one of my *raison d'être*, which is a French expression that I know." (Foer, 2005, p. 1) This expression means "reason to live" and is brought up several times in the novel as Oskar searches for the lock to his key. Entomology, while it can be interesting, should not be a reason to live. This goes back to show he does not know what to do with himself after his father's passing. He creates a quest for himself that he fully believes his father left for him from nothing more than a key in an envelope. Oskar holds tightly to anything that could possibly be

related to his father, and this is no exception. He has a very low chance of finding the lock though. Based on his own calculations, he will never be able to keep up with trying locks when so many are created each day. Nonetheless, he begins his journey of meeting many new people with the last name of Black.

On his journey, he meets many people that share their lives with him, but unfortunately not much information about his quest. A couple important ones he meets are Abby and William Black, and Mr. A.R. Black. Each person, including ones not listed here, help Oskar a bit with his emotional state, but they are not useful for his search to find a resolution, except Mr. A.R. Black as his companion. This, however, does not discourage him. Oskar's purpose is finding the lock, and he will not let anyone step in the way of that, or slow him in his quest. If someone cannot help him, he accepts it and moves on, determined to keep looking until he finds someone who can.

Oskar is looking for the lock to get closer to his father because he believes his father left the key behind for him to find. Although, he becomes obsessed with his search. It becomes all he thinks about and does for months. The key is his purpose in life, all he has, the link to his father, and a way of life for him.

After 8 months of searching, he finally notices a message on his phone from Abby Black, the second person he visited, saying that her ex-husband has information on the key for him. She actually called months ago, but Oskar was too busy to even notice the message, and too scared to touch the phone. This shows just how dedicated and focused he was in his ways that he didn't even notice such an obvious and crucial detail. The key ends up not being related to his father, massively disappointing Oskar. He then decides that his father is "safe" with a flipbook of a man falling in reverse, instead of jumping out of the window and falling to his death.

Oskar is affected in many ways by the loss of his father. For example, he cannot focus on much else than the key, since it is his only link to his father, and his new purpose in life. He also has anger outbursts, or anger in-bursts, since they are just in his head, but to the reader, they appear to really happen, right up until they are done happening and it is found out that it was just a vivid imagination. He also is fairly socially isolated, having only a few friends at school, and rarely talking about them outside of a few brief occurrences. Judging by their names of Toothpaste and The Minch, they likely are not the most normal people around, and are referred to as nerds by other classmates.

Oskar believes the quest was left for him, and doesn't want anyone interfering with this last connection between him and his father. He says, "Another thing I decided was that I would be as secretive about my mission as I could at home, and as honest about it as I could outside home, because that's what was necessary." (Foer, 2005, p. 87) This shows that part of his purpose in life was to be independent, and that he didn't want or need any external validation for what he was doing.

Oskar was determined to give the quest his all. He says, "...at the end of my search I wanted to be able to say: I don't know how I could have tried harder" (Foer, 2005, p. 160) which shows that he at least recognizes that he may not find the lock to his key, but he is alright with that, as long as he gave it his best effort. Although, Oskar's desire for secrecy in his mission affected other people around him. One example is his mother, who doesn't even know about the messages her late husband left for them on the day of his death. Oskar also acts strangely towards others, and has weird tendencies that others would not find normal. He visits many people with the last name of Black, taking time out of their lives and making an impact on them. Mr. A.R. Black, for example, travels with Oskar for a portion of the quest, and considering that

no one else travelled with Oskar, this is pretty significant. After Mr. Black said he was finished traveling, and Oskar is talking to the renter, he says "And then I came straight here, and now I don't know what to do." (Foer, 2005, p. 254) which shows that part of Oskar's purpose in life is to find companionship, and even though he didn't want to share his quest with anyone, he did enjoy sharing it with him. Oskar may not have known what to do at the time, but that only stopped him for a bit. He was still determined, and not willing to give up.

Some symbolism relating around Oskar is the key, email, and kissing. The key is an obvious symbol, linking Oskar to his father, and symbolizing the quests his father laid for him. When Oskar sets up email for the doorman on his portable TV, it symbolized Oskar's reserved but helpful nature. More subtly, it shows that Oskar prefers to interact with adults than kids his own age, as he would never have offered the same type of help to someone in his class, based on the lack of interaction he has with them in the novel. He was very close with his grandmother, and very distant from everyone else. Finally, Oskar asking multiple people if he can kiss them symbolizes his need for affection from others, something he usually does not get, and his immaturity. He is, after all, only 9 years old. This shows that he does not understand the real meaning and significance behind a kiss, or the boundaries and levels of affection you can have with someone, and is simply looking for some way for some affection to be shown.

Outside of the story, there are many people who also struggle with purpose in life. These people can be found anywhere in life. One example is Viktor Frankl, who has seen it firsthand. He was an Austrian psychiatrist who lived through four Nazi concentration camps. He observed the situation around him, and noticed some prisoners were more likely to survive than others. He writes, "Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore, no point in carrying on. He was soon lost." (Burrell, 2017) This shows how if someone doesn't have

a purpose in life, they won't last long. People need a purpose in life, and a reason to keep moving forward. Oskar's purpose in life was finding the key's lock to get closer to his dad, but he also had some pretty dark feelings and tendencies, such as bruising himself all the time. This story may have had a darker twist to it if he hadn't found this purpose in life.

In the end, Oskar realizes that the key isn't even related to his father, but just happened to be in a vase his father bought at an auction. Oskar is disappointed by this, but recognizes that that is just the way things are. It seems that Oskar is willing to accept that outcome, and has at least enjoyed the experience brought to him from the quest. Moving forward, it seems that Oskar has come to terms with his father's death much more than before, and is ready to be a bit more open with his feelings. He even manages to open up to his mother, after not having done so for so long. After his father died, but not before he found the key, Oskar says he struggles with basic tasks, saying "Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks" (Foer, 2005, p. 36) This gives an early perspective on Oskar, and can be used to show how he is now recognizing his feelings, and is now able to talk to others about them. He is ready to stop being so alone. Oskar's purpose in life for a while was finding closure to how his father died, and he has done so. Although this was not the resolution he was looking for, he was able to agree with himself that his father was "safe". Oskar has fulfilled his purpose in life, and is now ready to go on to bigger and better things, and find a new purpose to drive him.

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