



The Map of Meaning:

A guide to sustaining our humanity in the world of work

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by Marjolein Lips-Wiersma and Lani Morris

■ reviewed by John Kay

This book can make a major impact on the lives of many, wherever they work and whatever their faith.

It provides a highly practical, easy-to-follow yet thorough treatment of what we mean by 'meaning' in our lives, and how we can increase that meaning. In a world where there is ever-growing stress and where the economic and social system based on individualism is being challenged, it is a very timely publication.

The authors provide a great welcome balance of theory and practice: Marjolein is Associate Professor of Management Studies at the University of Canterbury NZ and Lani is an independent practitioner in organisational behaviour. The book, which is written with considerable humility, is the result of over 15 years of research and practice. Its premise is that we are more likely to find work and life meaningful if we have a practical way of engaging with these deeper questions of meaning – and Christians would agree that the more we live out our faith, the better.

By asking people to describe the things that give meaning to their lives and work, Marjolein was able to draw up the Map shown on the opposite page (Fig.1) which can then be used by us all as we seek to increase the meaning and balance of our lives.

The Map is not prescriptive, nor does it classify or judge. It helps the reader to access

what we already know deep down to be important to our humanity. It helps us bring it to the surface, act upon it, and bring it to life. Now the Christian may say "I know what gives meaning to my life; it's Jesus". Indeed this is true, but many of us struggle to work out how this translates into our life, work and relationships. There are few places that we can go for help with this struggle, and for me, the Map provides as good a way as any.

The book is effectively a 'how-to' manual. Examples show how the Map has been used by individuals and by groups, by people of many faiths and none, by people in paid employment and those whose work is simply the cares of life. For Christians, it has been used to strengthen the way that faith works through into life; to show how value and strength emanate out from Christian beliefs to non-believers; and to increase mutual understanding within groups. Interestingly, one major example deals with the motivation of a very downtrodden group of priests.

There are three main elements to the Map:

- four 'pathways' to meaning: developing the inner self; expressing full potential; unity with others; service to others
- two tensions between these pathways: the needs of the self and the needs of others; the need for reflection (being) and action (doing) – these need to be in balance if we are to retain our sanity!



- ▶▶ ■ the overall context provided by, on the one hand, inspiration (for example one’s faith) and on the other the reality of self (...human frailty) and circumstances (...the pressures of the world)

The authors provide unpretentious exercises that bring these three elements to life, examples of how they have been used, and of the impact they have had on those involved. Though these exercises are simple, they are also profound; they draw you towards your inner self but allow you to be your own guide so that you are never out of your depth.

The book is in two parts. The first deals with personal use of the Map, and this is where the power lies. I have been a leadership trainer and coach for many years, and have experienced many tools and therapies in the personal development arena. I have found that many of these have shortcomings and indeed dangers, primarily because they are rooted in an economic, rational and individualistic approach to life and are couched in specialist language. The Map’s power comes from being more broadly based, expressed in everyday English.

The second part of the book deals with organisations, and here too it has impact but does not (and indeed I think cannot) go far enough. The basis of this section is that organisations benefit from people who are able to nurture and energise themselves; that people (and society) benefit from

organisations where work is a natural extension of our search for meaning; and, sadly, that many organisations actively damage the search for meaning. The rational, economic, process-based management paradigm often fights against the need to have engaged and committed people. The authors address this by helping individuals be stronger about their own meaning, and by helping groups share a common search for meaning and use this to shape their goals. Examples show where this “multi-individual approach” has worked well. There is value in this for any organisation, but I think that there needs to be an additional and complementary organisation-wide approach if the full impact is to be made in larger firms. One such approach is the Social Capital model that I have used in my own work with Peter Heslam’s *Transforming Business* project.

I have been aware of the Map for several years, and have indeed flirted with its use, but it is only through reading this book that I have grasped its full significance and potential. As a ‘secular’ tool it is accessible to all, and whilst the authors’ faith is not described, many examples bring out the inspiration of faith and show that the Map has been immensely useful to many Christians – individuals and groups. Perhaps most powerfully, because of its accessibility to all, it provides a highly constructive way of bringing the power of faith to those who have none.

I recommend this book to you. ■

Fig.1 The map of Meaning

Originally featured in the Lips-Wiersma PhD Thesis 2000 “The Spiritual Meaning of Work”, University of Auckland

