

WILLIAM F. EVANS



MEANINGFUL MOMENTS

FINDING MEANING IN EVERY SEASON OF LIFE

Foreword by Dr. Alexander Batthyany

Afterword by Dr. William H. Willimon

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Every Season of Life

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Advocate Press, Columbia, South Carolina

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First published in the United States of America in 2026.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Meaningful Moments
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-966237-13-6

*This book is dedicated to my incredible wife and soul mate,
Dr. Cynthia M. “Cindy” Evans. I am grateful for all the years of life
we have shared together thus far, and I hope for many more years to come.
You have been the most amazing advisor, coach, mentor, teacher,
friend, and wife. I am eternally grateful to God for the gift of you.
With love, always and forever!*

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*“There is no situation that does not contain within it
the seed of a meaning” (Frankl 2000, 53).*

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Introduction

I have long desired to write these reflections on finding meaning in life. Indeed, I have experienced many meaningful moments and I believe you have, too. I just needed some time to journey into older adulthood awhile to understand better the meaning of my life, and to understand that life meaning can be found in any situation and in any season of life.

I first encountered this idea while reading *Recollections* by Dr. Viktor E. Frankl. In his autobiography he wrote, “There is no situation that does not contain within it the seed of a meaning.” He also stated on the same page, “I can see beyond the misery of a situation to the potential for discovering a meaning behind it, and thus to turn an apparently meaningless suffering into a genuine human achievement” (Frankl 2000, 53). He would know, I believe, as well as anyone would know, the truth of that statement. As a Holocaust survivor, this Jewish medical doctor has inspired many to seek meaning even in times of suffering. Dr. Frankl’s writings have been so helpful to me over the years. Still, I needed more time and I needed more wisdom—time to see and hear and know that even in the difficult moments, life is meaningful, and life is miraculous. Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle” (goodreads.com). I believe life is miraculous because I have experienced many miracles in my life, both large and small. My life,

and yours, is a miracle. And life is a precious, fragile gift, meant to be treasured.

What follows are reflections, meditations really, about my life and the lessons learned along the way. I have structured the book through four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. These seasons correspond to four distinct developmental phases of my life: childhood into early adolescence; later adolescence into early adulthood; middle adulthood; and finally, later adulthood.

I do not pretend that my life is unique or extraordinary in any way. What I do contend is that my own life journey, like your life journey, is filled with experiences that point to something, or someone, beyond us, if only we have eyes to see. I believe we are all searching for meaning in life. I also believe that meaning in life can be found in any situation, just as Viktor Frankl stated so clearly and profoundly.

I share my human journey and my quest for meaning with the hope that what I have gleaned over the years will also assist you in understanding the meaning of your own human journey. Each season covers ten life experiences and memories that somehow proved to be pivotal in my search for meaning. May my memories point you to something meaningful in your own memories and life experiences. I hope these reflections spark a deeper longing for life meaning within you, and I hope that your spark turns into a flame that also brings light to others.

We are here on earth to reflect light, to share love, and to learn to live well, together. Therefore, I wish you well as you seek and share the meaning of the miracle of your life.

*William F. "Bill" Evans
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Spring



“Day by day life is asking us questions . . . and we have to answer. Life is a life-long question and answer period. Responding to life means being responsible for our lives” (Frankl 1985, 124-125).

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Home in a Box

“Each human being is unique . . . and thus, neither expendable nor replaceable. In other words, he is a particular individual with his unique personal characteristics who experiences a unique historical context in a world which has special opportunities and obligations reserved for him alone” (Frankl 1967, 44).

Perhaps you have experienced someone bringing a puppy home in a box. I love puppies. I even love the smell of puppies, with only one exception—and that is regarding the “stuff” they leave behind, if you catch my drift. Bringing a puppy home in a cardboard box may not be that unusual. But a newborn baby?

I was born on October 13, 1954, as the third child to Thornton William “T. W.” and Gladys Campbell Evans. I came into this world rather suddenly and unexpectedly, I surmise, as I was delivered by our family doctor in his home office in Winnsboro, South Carolina. The reason I say suddenly and unexpectedly is how they brought me home. Not in a car seat, not in a baby bassinet, not in a cozy cradle, but in a cardboard box.

Yes, you read that correctly. I came home for the first time to 321 North Zion Street in a cardboard box.

I was told at a much later date that my sisters, Brenda, then age five, and Sandra, age ten at the time, were on the front porch awaiting my arrival. The family folklore states that after one quick look at

the baby in the box, they asked my parents if the family had to keep “it.” Thankfully, my parents said yes. What a welcome! And just in case you are wondering, my beautiful sisters and I have reconciled since then.

Another piece of this story is that my mother had suffered two miscarriages before my birth and had been told by her doctor that she should not have another child. I am guessing the losses of those precious children were just too much for her. Well, ready or not, here I was! I always say that while I was not expected, I was always wanted. What I mean by that is my parents always told me they had wanted a boy to go along with my precocious and sometimes silly sister, Sandra, and my sweet, goofy sister, Brenda. I think even my sisters, reluctant to accept me at first, warmed up to me eventually. We are still close as siblings today, in spirit at least, if not in miles.

Let’s think inside the box for a moment. My parents were totally unprepared for the birth of a new infant. Are any parents ever prepared, really? They brought me home in the best bedding they could find at the time. Yet the most meaningful part of this story, for me at least, is that I came home to a loving family, and I was wanted. Well, at least most of the time.

It is interesting, to me at least, that in my life I found a meaningful place to live by coming home in a box. Even more profoundly, sometime later, I found even greater life meaning and a tug toward home through a manger, a feeding vessel for cattle, which is also quite a humble beginning. Mary and Joseph’s saga with the birth of Jesus makes me feel better about how I came into this world, how I made my way home, and how I am even better prepared for how I might go out at the end.

Home. In a box.

Thoughts to Ponder

Reflect on how you came into this world, and how you may go out of it. What gives meaning to your birth story? Is there a rebirth story for you?

Do you feel valued as a person? Does anything in your birth story point you to a larger story than just your own? How would you define this larger story?

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Honeybees

“The right kind of suffering is in itself a deed, nay the highest achievement which has been granted to man” (Frankl 1967, 128).

Around the age of three, I was completely overtaken and nearly overwhelmed by an entire hive of honeybees. Fortunately for me, I was not allergic to honeybee stings, or this experience would have killed me. I cannot blame the bees.

The entire episode was my own fault. You see, we were visiting my maternal grandparents in Pinewood, South Carolina, where my grandfather served as a Methodist pastor at the time. He had a few beehives in the backyard, and I was told, very specifically, to stay away from them for my own good. Well, little rebellious me decided to take fate into my own hands, and as soon as everyone settled down after lunchtime for a nap, I snuck out of the house, picked up a stick from the yard, and proceeded toward beehive number one to check things out for myself.

I remember shoving the stick up into the hive and shaking it around a time or two. My next memory was of waking up in the emergency room of the local hospital next to my concerned parents as they listened to a relieved medical doctor and nurse who were in the room with us. I distinctly remember the doctor saying I was lucky to be alive and very fortunate that I was not allergic to bee stings. Evidently, I had been stung hundreds of times by the honey-

bees as they attempted to protect their home turf. My parents told me later that many bees had died in the process, and those bees had to be scraped off my skin where they had attached themselves as they stung me. This was a very close encounter with death, more so than any of us realized.

What is the lesson learned from this experience? Learn to trust the wisdom of those who have more life experience than you. Learn to respect those in authority over you. Basically, “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way” (Sammis 1989, no. 467). Well . . . I had chosen another way, and my way did not work out so well—then, or in the thousands of times I have rebelled over the years just to get my way with whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it.

Selfish pursuits have never worked out that well for me. And now that I consider it, honestly, I don’t think selfish pursuits work out that well for most of us, at least in the long run. I don’t think selfishness was ever intended to lead us to a more meaningful life. When we are so self-absorbed that we will ignore good sense and wise protection, who is to blame for our rebellion? Only us. Or, to make this more personal, only me.

This experience certainly helps me better understand what Adam and Eve were thinking when God told them, very explicitly, not to eat of the fruit of one particular tree in Eden. They didn’t trust the heart and wisdom of God any more than I did my parents and grandparents. Just look at the results of their rebellion and our own. So much is broken on Planet Earth. So much is broken within humanity. Yet there is good news—rebellion (and stupidity) can be forgiven. Lives can be healed and restored. God continues to love and pursue and care for us. Hopefully, we are learning how to love in return.

By the way, I love honey to this day. I have bonded with a few hundred bees and lived to tell the tale!

Thoughts to Ponder

Dr. Viktor Frankl wrote, “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering” (1997, 76). Dr. Frankl also

stated, “We mature in suffering, grow because of it—it makes us richer and stronger” (2019, 109). Are there any “close calls” or “close encounters” with death in your childhood experience? What have you learned from surviving such experiences? What meaning have you gleaned from the event? What wisdom do you have now that you did not have then? Are you sharing that wisdom with the generations behind you?

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Attachments

“I was so emotionally attached to my parental home that I suffered terrible homesickness” (Frankl 2000, 19).

I am not sure why I remember this feeling and this early childhood experience so well, but I do. I distinctly remember my parents taking a trip to Cuba when I was about four years old. This occurred, of course, before the Cuban missile crisis and the subsequent ban on American tourism there.

My dad managed an appliance store in our hometown, and evidently, he had won a free trip because of the success of that store. My memory of them leaving and being away, for what seemed like forever, gave me an unsettled, fearful feeling. As far as I know, this was the first time both of my parents had left home without us. I think my mom had been hospitalized at some point in my early years to seek treatment for her bipolar disorder. While that seemed traumatic enough—having my primary caregiver, my key source of attachment, taken away—now both of my caregivers and attachment sources were away, and that struck me with anxiety and uncertainty. Developmental research points out that strong emotions tied with certain events become our clearest memories. Why else would I remember this event?

Thankfully, my parents returned home safe and sound, and my world felt settled and secure again. Yet I also remember becoming

very clingy after this, especially with my mom. Even when the time came for me to attend kindergarten, I was reluctant. I was resistant to spending any time away from my parents, especially my mom. Kindergarten never happened for me, so I guess they homeschooled me for a while until I was required to attend first grade. Even then I did not like being away from home.

What is the meaning behind this memory? I am not fully certain to this day, but I suspect it was directly tied to one of the key conditions for discovering meaning in life, according to Dr. Viktor Frankl, that we all need “a human encounter, a love” (Frankl 2000, 64). He also wrote, “Love is that capacity which enables us to grasp the other human being in his very uniqueness. Meaning is something unique. So is each and every person” (Frankl 1970, 19).

Ultimately every person is irreplaceable, and if for no other person he is so for him by whom he is loved” (Frankl 2014, 19). I, for one, cannot imagine living a meaningful life without at least one strong and secure relationship where one feels loved, valued, and cared for. I always felt loved, valued, and cared for at home. I knew I was loved there, and I loved my family in return.

Relating well with others is an important goal in life. When Jesus was asked about the most important thing in life, he stated in essence: love God, love others, love yourself (Luke 10:27, my paraphrase). I think even the ordering Jesus gave was significant. Love first the one who is the ultimate source of life. Love with every part of your being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then love the people around you. Oh, and it is important that you love yourself, too, only not as the first or only order of business in life.

Knowing that I am deeply loved, and that I can love deeply in return, has served to provide me with a deep sense of secure attachment and life meaning. To love and be loved is an essential ingredient for finding meaning in life, far more important than I ever imagined.

Thoughts to Ponder

Reflect on your early childhood relationships, and the mean-

ing they have provided. What memories are precious to you? What memories are painful to you?

What is the meaning behind these memories for you?

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Third Grade

“Being human is being always directed, and pointing, to something or someone other than oneself: to a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love” (Frankl 1985, 38).

Mrs. Chapman was one of the most caring teachers I ever had. In third grade, I developed double pneumonia and had to be hospitalized for days and then for weeks as I recovered from home. Although it was not required, Mrs. Chapman came to visit me several times each week, both in the hospital and at our home. Because she kept me current with my studies, I did not have to repeat third grade, even though I missed far more than the typical ten days allowed for absences at that time. I am sure that all this extra work was not a part of her teaching contract. I am also sure she did things like this for other students in her long teaching career.

About twenty years ago, I decided to see if I could locate and contact Mrs. Chapman just to tell her thank you for going that extra mile for me and to let her know I deeply appreciated how much she cared for me and her other students. Through the local school administration office, I discovered she had retired from teaching, and after I explained why I wanted to reach out to her, they graciously gave me her home telephone number.

The day I called, she picked up the call immediately, and she

thanked me through tears that I could detect from the other end of the line. One thing that remains with me still from this call is how much it meant to her, especially when she told me that after all her years of teaching, only a handful of students had ever called to say thank you.

Friends, we may assume that other people know how we feel about them, but never assume such important communication is fully understood. I feel certain she had treated many other children in just the same way she treated me, with great compassion and care. Make sure you tell people how grateful you are for the ways they cared for you.

Who stands out as a great example of care and concern from your childhood experiences? Have you ever reached out to them to show your gratitude? If not, why not? If so, what did you learn from that experience?

One thing I learned from my call with my third-grade teacher is that too often, we take people for granted and we assume they know how we feel about them. Why not make sure that they know and understand?

Thoughts to Ponder

Who do you need to contact this week to let them know how much you appreciate them for the ways they cared for you and helped you through a difficult time? What are you waiting for? Go! Why not do it right now?

About the Author



William Franklin "Bill" Evans is a native of Winnsboro, South Carolina. He holds degrees from Wofford College (BA, 1976), Duke University (MDiv, 1979), and the University of South Carolina (EdS, 1993, and PhD, 1998). For twenty years, Evans served as a pastor with The United Methodist Church in North Carolina and South Carolina. He also served as a hospital chaplain at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, and as a pastoral counselor at Baptist Medical Center in Columbia, South Carolina. Evans served in the United States Air Force/Air National Guard as a Chaplain from 1984 until retiring from the South Carolina Air National Guard as a Brigadier General in 2010.

Bill is a professor of psychology at James Madison University, where he has taught since 1994. He teaches various developmental and leadership courses as well as cross-cultural psychology in Austria and Italy each summer. He also serves on the International Advisory Board of the Viktor Frankl Institute in Vienna, Austria. Evans is an active member in the International Leadership Association, and he has presented internationally in Austria, Canada, Great Britain, the

Netherlands, Israel, Italy, Russia, and the Czech Republic. He is the faculty advisor for several student service organizations at JMU. Evans has been recognized at James Madison University with awards that include the SOAR Award for Outstanding Faculty/Staff of the Year, 2025; the Roberts' Award for faculty excellence, 2024; the Alger Family Faculty Endowment Award for outstanding community engagement, 2019; induction into the Inaugural Class of the JMU Purple and Gold Society for outstanding leadership, 2018; the JMU Career and Academic Planning "Make Your Next Move Award" for outstanding career advising, 2013; the Hall Award for outstanding faculty leadership and service, 2008 and 2002; the JMU Bluestone Award for outstanding faculty advising, 2006; the JMU "All Together One" Award for community impact, 2004; the JMU Alpha Phi Foundation Professor of the Year, 2000; the JMU Mortar Board Class of 2000; and induction into the Omicron Delta Kappa Leadership Society, 1996.

Dr. Evans is a co-author of several books: *Inspiring Leadership* (2006), *Becoming a Community Counselor* (2008), *Thriving!* (3rd ed., 2016), and *Leadership: From Integrity to Impact* (2021). *Meaningful Moments* is his first solo work.

Bill and his wife, Cindy, live in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Their passion is mentoring young adults and serving together in their local church and community. He can be reached at evanswf@jmu.edu.

What if every season of your life— even the painful ones—held the seed of something meaningful?

In *Meaningful Moments*, William F. Evans takes us on an intimate journey through four seasons of a life fully lived, revealing how meaning can be found not just in triumph, but in struggle, loss, and the quiet, ordinary moments we so often overlook.

Shaped by decades as a pastor, military chaplain, counselor, and professor—and deeply inspired by the wisdom of Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl—Evans offers forty reflections drawn from his own life, organized across the seasons of childhood, young adulthood, middle age, and later life. Each story is a lantern held up to universal human experience: love and grief, faith and doubt, service and sacrifice, wonder and grace.

This is not a book about an extraordinary life. It is a book that insists your life is extraordinary—if only you have eyes to see it.

With a foreword by renowned Frankl scholar Dr. Alexander Batthyany and an afterword by celebrated theologian Dr. William H. Willimon, *Meaningful Moments* bridges psychology, spirituality, and lived experience into something rare: a book that doesn't just ask life's deepest questions, but helps you find the answers in your own story.

Read it slowly. Let it stir your memories. And discover the meaning that has been waiting there all along.

**“To write a book like this is a beautiful act of service to life,
to others, to meaning, to our humanness.”**

—Dr. Alexander Batthyány, President of the Viktor Frankl Institute, Vienna, Austria

**“Let's all follow Bill's lead and expect, look for, work at making every season,
every moment of our lives meaningful.”**

—Dr. William H. Willimon, Professor of Christian Ministry,
Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina



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