Individual Seminar Prep: *Happiness and Meaning*

**Part 1:** Synthesis of Project Content and Essential Questions

**What is the purpose of your existence?**

I think that the idea of existentialism best answers this question. It says that we must recognize the absurdity of trying to find meaning in a meaningless existence. We must then find meaning in our own lives and exist in that way. Moments of existential angst will inevitably come, and we must be prepared to face them and know what to do. Existentialism teaches us to not rely on others to tell us what our life is about, and instructs us to take charge in our own existence and make it actually our own.

“The Absurd arises out of the fundamental disharmony between the individual's search for meaning and the meaninglessness of the universe.” –Existentialism PowerPoint

“You are standing on a cliff where you not only fear falling off it, but you also dread the possibility of throwing oneself off. In this experience that "nothing is holding me back", you sense the lack of anything that predetermines you to either throw yourself off or to stand still, and you experience your own freedom.” –Existentialism PowerPoint

**What is happiness and what makes one happy?**

I think that the movie “Happy” tells us a lot about how to be happy. The overall theme in the film was that those who had connections to other human beings were happier than those who did not. One surprising thing I saw in the movie is that, once you have basic needs met, having more money does not mean you will be happier. I also thought it was interesting that Japan, a country whose focus was almost exclusively on gross domestic product, or money, was one of the saddest countries. When compared to a country like Bhutan, where the government is focused on gross national happiness as well as money, the people may not have as much money or development as those in Japan, but they are overall more happy and live a happier life.

* “50% of happiness is determined by genetics; 10% is jobs and careers; 40% is varying what you do, ‘spice of life’”
  + “Happy” movie
* “People who are more oriented on extrinsic (superficial) things were less happy”
  + “Happy” movie

**What does it mean to live a meaningful life?**

Jennifer Aaker tells us what a meaningful life is in an article for Stanford. She says that spending time with family members and working through struggles and hard times can help one have a meaningful life whereas time with friends is purely superficial and will have absolutely no impact on the meaning in our lives. She insightfully informs us that focusing on the present will only bring about brief happiness and thinking about both past and future will increase meaningfulness but will almost definitely make us miserable. She also makes the correct assumption that those who have foregone a life of toil and misery for the stress-free days of retirement live a life completely devoid of meaningfulness. Stellar article overall.

“Happiness was linked to being a taker rather than a giver, whereas meaningfulness went with being a giver rather than a taker.” – *Stanford research: A meaningful life is a road worth travelling*

“And so, the meaningful life guides actions from the past through the present to the future, giving one a sense of direction. It offers ways to value good and bad alike, and gives us justifications for our aspirations. From achieving our goals to regarding ourselves in a positive light, a life of meaningfulness is considerably different than mere happiness.” – *Stanford research: A meaningful life is a road worth travelling*

**Part 2:** Ted Talk Selection and Response

Main Points:

* Some say that the reason we like things of value because we are snobs and focused on statues.
* He says that we are naturally essentialists and we respond to what things really are, not just what they look, feel, smell like.
* He says that “pleasure is deep” and that we can feel deep pleasure in not just things like art but things like food or naps. We can do this by believing it is better than it is. Kids given veggies were told that the veggies were from McDonalds and it made them like the veggies more because they like McDonalds.
* The history of an artwork can change its value. For example, a three-year old’s million dollar paintings dropped tremendously in value after the parents showed a TV show how she paints and they saw it wasn’t very hard. This decreased the value for people.

Response:

I agree with this speaker. For example, if your friend strongly recommends a song, you will like it better than if they hadn’t told you about it. Another example is if your friend is a really good cook, and they offer to prepare you a meal. You go over to their house and watch them spend five hours on preparing this extravagant meal. You will enjoy it more than if you had the exact same meal prepared the exact same way with the exact same care at a restaurant.

Question:

How does this philosophy agree with or contradict the ideas of happiness we have encountered so far?