

## **Design School Kolding Semester Start 2015**

### **What is the meaning of life? And of becoming a designer?**

**by Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen**

Welcome to Design School Kolding. Welcome to a new academic year. Welcome new and old students. I hope you have had a lovely summer and are ready to work.

Today, I want to speak to you about two things:

- The meaning of life
- What is design?

What is the meaning of life? This is a question people have been asking themselves throughout time. Yet, to some generations, the answer has been relatively easy because they have been able to leave it up to God; that is a transcendental power outside the influence of man. However, to modern man, meaning the enlightened human being who defines faith as a religious matter and not as a cross that deprives him of responsibility as well as freedom, the answer to the question – what is the meaning of life? – is hard to find.

I think it is for you as well. You are young and you live in a time when almost any answer is as probable and legitimate as the next. No one has told you what to believe when it comes to life's purpose. At least not if you are from Denmark and your parents have been so busy making sense out of life that they have not really had time to share their thoughts with you. And where our anti-authoritarian upbringing forbids us to be the arbiter of what other people should believe. Perhaps for those of you with a slightly different social and cultural background than the average Danish one, it is a little bit different. And maybe you will be able to guide your fellow Danish students in finding a sense of direction.

I take this as my starting point because the main issue in a person's life is finding out: Who am I? What do I want to achieve in life? What will it take to be able to one day look back on life and feel that it served its purpose?

Every year, Design School Kolding sends some very talented designers out into the world. Designers who may never have gotten anything but top marks. Still some of them do not get anywhere. Because they cannot decide where to go. Because they do not want to say yes to something and then risk missing out on something else. Because in fact, they do not know what it takes for a life to become meaningful. So the point is that top marks will not get you anywhere if you have not found the answer to the existential question: Why am I here?

At Design School Kolding we can help you make the most of your skills. It is much harder to help you make the most of life, although we will do our best. You have been accepted on to an elite education programme. It will require a great deal of you. Yet, you also have to spend time figuring out what you want to do with your life and with your education.

I quickly discovered my purpose in life. My father took his own life when I was 18 and this became a deciding event that made me determine the direction of my life. Right away – thanks to my university studies – I understood that my father's suicide had to do with a profound sense of loneliness. He grew up after the Second World War. He was brought up to do what his parents and family expected. However, the spirit of the time was very different and about individualism and freedom. The other side of that coin was that many people may have experienced a bigger sense of freedom but it came at the price of loneliness. My dad missed a sense of belonging, a sense of community. He could not handle just relying on himself, and consequently he ended his life. That made me decide to work to create a world where everyone has someone or something to wake up to in the morning. So the meaning of life for me has turned out to revolve around creating communities that people enjoy being part of.

### **A good host**

One of my good friends, Uffe Elbæk, who is now leader of Alternativet (the Alternative), a new Danish political party, and former rector of the educational programme Kaospiloterne (the Chaospilots) in Aarhus, once said that for him the meaning of life was to be a good host. I think I could adopt this definition. The better a host you are or that you help others become, the better the dinner, the party or the friendship.

So what makes a good host? Well it is someone who makes people feel good; who makes others be the best that they can be; who creates a friendly and hospitable atmosphere. If you are a good host, you make your guests grow and show who they are. A good host is a server of communities.

My personal goal is to be a good host here at this school. And I hope that all of you will be good hosts to your fellow students, collaboration partners and the many guests that come here. Help make this school a place where people love to come. Where no one is afraid to come. This requires a few ground-rules – that we agree what makes a good colleague, a good fellow student, etc.

And who knows, perhaps you will also find a great sense of purpose in being a good host – for your boyfriend or girlfriend, your friends, your parents, a city, and the countless communities that you will have the ability to establish, if you decide to focus on our shared human interests.

### **What is design?**

Let me talk a little bit about the definition of design. Design is also about meaning. Because the purpose of design is to create meaningful solutions, and by that I mean solutions that people can easily relate to. So the main keyword when talking about design is **meaning**, immediately followed by the word **solution**. Designers help come up with solutions to specific problems and challenges. However, these must make sense to the users. Making something that works on a technical level or that draws investors is not enough. The decisive litmus test when creating a solution is the user. That the user finds the solution meaningful.

Recently I read a story from an African country where an engineering company had set up a water pump in a village. A solution that meant that women and children no longer had to walk miles and miles to collect water. A practical and technically sound solution. Still, the women did not use the pump. And the reason is that in order to activate the pump, they had to swing a lever from side to side causing them to swing also their behind, which is strictly prohibited for women of that culture. The pump worked on a technical level but not on a cultural and an emotional level. A designer would never have created a solution like that (I hope).

Culture determines what is meaningful to us as people. Human habits, traditions, myths, religions, languages, etc. decide what appeals to us. Therefore, a designer always studies the context before he or she begins to develop a solution. This is the only way to make sure that the solution will make sense. The tools he or she uses are of course very much aesthetic. Beauty – appeal – plays a major part when talking about successful design. It is far easier to see the meaning of something if it is also beautiful.

When you study design at an art-based design school, colours, materials, sketching, storytelling are important tools. These tools, combined with a sublime imagination, are a fundamental part of a Design School Kolding designer's toolbox. The other part has to do with methods that ensure profound understanding of context, including emotional context, and user-involvement.

When you surround yourself with a world that is meaningful, unfolding your potential as a human being becomes easy. You can be free and creative, which is what defines us as humans. When I wear a dress that makes me feel pretty and comfortable, it becomes easier for me to talk to people. I can focus my energy on the conversation instead of thinking about whether my stomach looks too big.

Or let me give another example: If you are going to the hospital to have some tests done, it becomes much easier to concentrate on asking the doctor the right questions if the hospital has a wayfinding system that makes it easy for you to find your way. If they do not, you arrive at the doctor's office all stressed out and short of breath and perhaps you will not be able to focus on what he tells you.

Last week some of our staff members presented a decision tool that can be used when women with breast cancer need to decide which treatment would be best for them. Our designers had designed a very straightforward card with the themes and questions that are important to touch on. Here as well the objective is to help the patient to open up. To think, listen and ask – and to remember what is being said.

Based on this you could say that the vision of design is to support humankind and communities to unfold their full potential, that is to be creative.

The designer uses his or her own professional creativity to support the creativity of others. Some might say that the professional designer helps all people to become

designers. In his latest book, "What Happens When Everybody Designs", Ezio Manzini distinguishes between professional design and diffuse design in the sense that the professional designer is a supporter of the diffuse design. In this context, diffuse design is to be understood as the design that any human being can make and make even better the more meaningful his or her surroundings are. People are supported in being able to make meaningful solutions.

That is why you are here at Design School Kolding.

You are here to learn how to use your unique creativity and capacity for empathy to support other people in becoming even more humane, even more creative, even more visionary and even more imaginative.

You are here to release the human potential in a world that is in desperate need of new solutions, new ways of being together – across cultures, borders and social boundaries.

Every month, hundreds of people drown in the Mediterranean Sea because they have only one hope and one dream and that is to live in Europe, but sadly they are not wanted here. These people are the same as you and me. They are people with hands and with brains. People who were born creative but never got a chance to release their creativity. Being at the Index Award Show it was such a joy to experience hundreds of designs that actually help people in the Third World countries to a better life.

At the same time, humankind is faced with huge challenges like global warming and lack of resources – not least drinking water.

And socially, Europe, Russia and China have to deal with low birth rates; that there are not enough young people to care for the elderly. We feel it in Denmark already – there are more old people, more lonely people and more people with dementia.

In Denmark we also need to deal with the issue that we have not experienced actual economic growth in 15 years. This means that there is nothing more to tax, which is a prerequisite for maintaining an acceptable welfare level. Therefore, it pleases me to see that the companies that use design are the companies that perform best. Think of companies like Apple, LEGO or Novo Nordisk.

Overall, the answer to how to address the global challenges is: More for less for more.

Dear students: You have so many opportunities to be able to help solve the global challenges. You have so many opportunities to support other people in becoming creators. Lucky you!

### **The meaning of life. Again.**

I began by talking to you about the meaning of life. In my opinion the design profession itself – on a personal level as well – may very well guide you in finding the right course and purpose in life.

I cannot think of anything more meaningful than helping other people fulfil their full human potential. And if – on top of that – you strive to be the best host that you can be, perhaps you are well on your way to finding the answer to the most important question of all: Why am I here?

Thank you.