

The big question: What is the meaning of graduate studies?

Melanie A. Badali
Graduate Student, University of British Columbia

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What is the meaning of life? This is a question that has preoccupied great thinkers through the ages. For many graduate students, life is graduate studies. Some leave loving family, friends and community and travel thousands of kilometers across the country to attend graduate school.

Others, fortunate enough to study in their city of origin, have been known to leave social functions early to study or tend to their 'rats', undergraduates, or thesis. In any case, we have all chosen to spend many years earning a much lower salary than many of our friends who had way lower G.P.A.s than us in high school or undergrad. To many an unknowing observer such behaviour might seem peculiar or baffling. As graduate students, in the throes of stress over comprehensive examinations, grant application deadlines, or thesis defenses, we ourselves might wonder...“Why are we here? What is the meaning of Graduate Studies in Psychology?”. Having read this far, you might be expecting great revelations. Alas, the answer to this question probably differs for every one of us. This article is not going to reveal the universal meaning of graduate school. I don't think that there is one. Rather, I simply want to encourage students to find personal meaning in their academic journey. You might start by asking yourself what brought you here in the first place. Was it your love for people? Was it your desire to help those in need? Did you want to make the world a better place? Perhaps you wanted to ease pain and suffering. Gosh, maybe your goal was to

ELIMINATE PAIN and suffering. Imagine that...a world without pain and suffering. Wouldn't that be fantastic?!? Thomas Moore once said, "...whatever your dream is...embrace it. Imagine a world where your dreams have come true and use that as inspiration." For many of us, the new information and skills we learn in graduate school (not to mention the stress) can pile so high up that we may temporarily lose sight of the dreams that brought us here in the first place. It may be important to remind ourselves that sometimes "Imagination is more important than knowledge". I first saw these words in April written on a magnet on my sister Bernadette's fridge. It caught my attention. I thought to myself..."Do I believe that? My sister is an artist, so it makes sense for her to embrace this dictum. But what about me, a student, as well as a budding psychology researcher and clinician? I focus on accruing knowledge through my studies and research projects. In my clinical work, I attempt to apply the knowledge I have acquired. Where is the place for imagination in my life's passion, psychology?" To my surprise, just a few weeks later, I again confronted this quote at the Annual Meeting of The Canadian Pain Society. We had the privilege of a session with Patch Adams, medical doctor and, by his own admission, social activist. It was here that I learned the source of this gem of a statement. It was someone famous, someone of whom you have probably all heard. You may be thinking it was a famous painter, such as Emily Carr. Or perhaps a poet's name popped into mind. In any case, I

would bet that most readers would be scanning through their memory in search of various artists who might embrace this thought.

Alas, you would not win the million dollars if you settled on someone in the arts. In fact, it was the famous scientist Albert Einstein who said “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” In our own field of psychology, some of the greatest contributions have been made with the help of imagination. During a recent tribute to distinguished Canadian psychologist Dr. Ronald Melzack, members of the audience praised Dr. Melzack for not only his scientific contributions to the study of pain, but also for his imagination and creativity, which greatly influenced his work, including development of the Gate Control Theory. If you think about it, this is not surprising. Most influential people have a vision, which means seeing beyond what is our present reality. It turns out that the people who only need to be referred to using one name (my operational definition of success), e.g., Freud, Descartes, Plato, or Skinner, were shown not always absolutely correct in their ideas when empirical testing was implemented. However, ideas (any ideas!) are the inspiration for empirical testing, and data has little meaning without the imagination to understand its importance for the real world. Perhaps, imagination is the link between research and theory. Without imagination, we might only know half of what we do know. We might not be inspired to pursue knowledge if we were without the ability to imagine the possibilities that exist.

We have a variety of powerful methodological tools at our disposal to help us seek knowledge. We receive courses in research design and statistics. However it can be easy to get caught up in the quest for statistical significance and to overlook the meaning of our work. Statistical significance may have little bearing on important issues in the real world and is only the foundation upon which our contributions to humanity can be built. It focuses primarily on the issue of reliability (e.g., what the likelihood is of...). We must make sure to include measures (e.g. effect sizes) that help us understand whether any differences found are actually meaningful, and most importantly we have to look at our work openly, honestly and creatively to assess its value. We must put our egos, and in the case of graduate students, our FEAR (e.g., if this study doesn't work out, how am I ever going to graduate?...) aside, and pursue truth with passion. When the stress piles up, when rejection letters for awards or manuscript submissions arrive, when you have just completed 12 hours straight of data entry and you have 500 more hours to go, what keeps you going? Is it your commitment to making the world a better place? If not, what is it? Don't forget about why you decided to pursue graduate studies in the first place. What is your dream? Imagine what the world would be like if it came true, and go for it!

“The secret of life is to have a task. Something that you devote your entire life to, something to bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the important thing is, it must be something you can't possibly do.” – Henry Moore