

Science Looks at Purpose in Young People

By Dr. William Damon, Professor of Education at Stanford University and Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence

WILLIAM DAMON AND HIS RESEARCH TEAM at Stanford University have launched a scientific study designed to discover how young people acquire a sense of noble purpose in today's world. The study begins with the assumption that purpose is essential for a constructive and meaningful life and that youth is a formative period for acquiring a lifelong purpose.

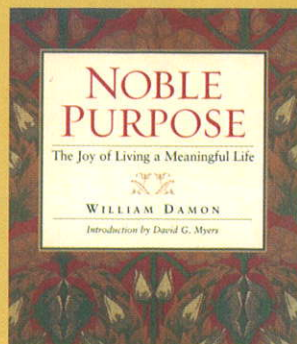
Dr. Damon's study asks: What noble purposes inspire today's young? How are young people being introduced to such purposes? What kinds of noble purposes are today's educational institutions advancing and what kinds are they neglecting? One of the goals of the study is to determine the social, cultural and educational conditions that promote purpose among the young. The results of the study will reveal the extent to which these conditions are present or absent in our schools and other places where young people spend time.

The project was inspired by a previous examination that William Damon and his research team conducted of essays for *Laws of Life* Essay Contests in four American communities. Dr. Damon noted that the student essays offered a unique window into the deepest thoughts and feelings of today's young people. In the essays, the vast majority of students expressed a positive view of life and a great deal of compassion, spirituality, and personal and social responsibility. This suggested that today's young may have a far stronger sense of moral purpose than is presumed in most popular media portrayals. Dr. Damon resolved to investigate this conjecture directly, through the study of youth purpose now underway in his lab.

The present project began with a working conference attended by leading scholars and researchers, during which the theories, questions and range of scientific methods best suited for exploring the development of youth purpose were defined. A summary report of this conference is now available at the Stanford Center on Adolescence. In addition, Dr. Damon has written a short book called *Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life*, now available at the Templeton Foundation Press, that draws upon insights gained from the conference, as well as from a wide variety of educational, social, scientific and philosophical sources.

The second phase of the project, a new survey of youth purpose in diverse communities across the United States, will be beginning in October 2003. This survey will be supplemented by case studies of several young people who have demonstrated extraordinary purpose in their lives so far. Dr. Damon will formulate the findings from his investigation into a set of recommendations for creating a new field of scientific inquiry and new methods of educational practice devoted to this important topic.

The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life



William Damon, who for twenty years has written widely on moral development at all ages of human life, examines another dimension of purpose in his new book, *Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life*. He talks about "finding large-scale purposes that focus your talents, skills, thoughts and energies in an enduring manner...finding something that you can truly believe in, something so worth accomplishing that you dedicate yourself to it wholeheartedly, without qualm or self-interest...devoting yourself to a cause, or to many causes, that you consider noble purposes."

Drawing on religious, philosophical and literary writings, Dr. Damon defines the qualities that transform purpose into noble purpose. He shows how people from many cultures throughout history have pursued noble purposes by answering God's call as each has heard it, and he looks at the faces of noble purpose—how noble purpose can be found in a variety of activities and settings, from the heroic to the everyday. *Noble Purpose* is available at bookstores or by calling 610-971-2670. The book can also be ordered online at www.templetonpress.org.

