

## Filling the Existential Chasm Between Start and End

By Desmond Kao

People love productivity. It makes their time seem unwasted and their skills put to use. Maybe it's built into the human psyche, the desire to exert effort toward something, to feel that energy was put forth. In the traditional sense, productive behavior is rewarded with financial or academic accolades, however, it is widely known that such achievement is not necessarily positively correlated with a sense of fulfillment. A defining feature of the human experience is that we are not merely slaves to our biology, psychology, or sociocultural influences. There is something else there that sets us above these factors. Its nature is unquantifiable, but it is undeniably inherent to our humanity. Is it religion that fills this chasm? Or might it be art? Or human connection? There are degrees to which this meta-consciousness of our ability to exceed our biology can manifest. For example, a student can do everything right, they can look amazing on paper. Straight A's, Ivy League education, clubs, and sports, but there is a looming existential dread that many will recognize as all too familiar. Why do individuals who are textbook examples of traditional success reside in the same existential vacuum as the underachiever? The issue resides in viewing this playing field as a linear landscape; an oversimplification of a complex matter.

In some ways, we're still under these defined biological constraints, on which society is based. You don't imagine the higher-ups sitting around in a circle in business attire asking, "How do we make sure everyone feels the most satisfied! The most content!" For the most part, society isn't structured like this, and in many ways, our more primal selves are weaponized against us.

One apparent answer is to escape these societal factors and view them as scapegoats for this problem of unfulfillment and discontentedness. But I don't think running away is the answer. Neither is blame. We would simply be escaping into another circumstance in which we are left with ourselves, even in a country or another career. The final thing every human has is the ability to choose and make decisions. Even in the most dire situation, we have the ability to face matters with dignity stemming from a higher morality, in opposition to shrinking away.

Facing the constraints that are placed on us head-on as if they are another sort of challenge to be overcome is an answer. I think balance is extremely important. Perhaps one notch beyond this, it's the most important. There's a fine line between exerting effort and enjoying the journey itself. I strive for balance in my life, the ability to get good grades, and lead with a sense of curiosity, to ask questions in a crowded lecture, but

also taking time to do absolutely nothing, as Franklin Covey would put it, Sharpen the Saw; taking care of yourself in various ways, maintaining freshness to continue your other pursuits in life. The key is to balance the recognition for the importance of merit, with a throughline of a proper philosophy. An understanding that the idealized future in which we have it all doesn't exist, and the way you feel now is probably the way you'll feel then. This concept of an ideal, happy future is referred to as deferred happiness syndrome. Meaning is created in the way you face situations and challenges; to look back and feel as though you confronted a situation to the best of your ability. And I really mean your best.

We have undergone a substantial amount of conditioning to reach a point of completion for a given task, like me writing this blurb. A part of me has that end goal in mind, a vision of that neat paper, overflowing with text. This is the part of my mind conditioned towards valuing completion. This is an issue I see in many of my peers, where academics become a means to an end based on the meritocratic image society places on us. They don't see me, Desi, as a student who became enthralled by the different conceptions of the family structure in his Ethics and Society course in freshman year, or the one who shared laughs with his TA in his Personality Psychology course, building connections beyond what was required. No. In the end, a sort of material extrapolation of all my efforts in higher education is created. They see my grades, the clubs I joined, my internships, and my awards. This realization that we as individuals will be viewed in terms of what we've accomplished rather than who we are, makes us prioritize these accomplishments versus looking within and taking time for introspection. Imagine a world in which our records are erased, our report cards burned, our university names gone. Who are you when the material ceases to exist?

Meaning is found between the gaps of beginning and completion, and life is made out of action at any given moment. Here's where it all comes together through interning at The Center for Collaborative Arts and Media.

Why do we find catharsis in the pursuit of art? The Center for Collaborative Arts and Media (CCAM) is an artistic and creative epicenter of activity at Yale. CCAM reinforces my belief that fulfillment lies in engaging with one's interests, and creating something regardless of external validation; reaffirming my belief that a dramatic revaluation of what we're all doing is necessary. We cling to things and we cling to habits; this is the psychological foundation for us humans, which no longer needs to be the higher agent.

During my internship at CCAM, I had the opportunity to explore various facets of artistic and technological creativity. For instance, my experience with motion capture

technology allowed me to see how digital art can capture the subtleties of human movement. I got to observe how we can translate spatial movement and objects into different mediums like music, not only revealing the technical marvels of modern art but underscoring the profound connection between physical and digital realms, reminding me of the inherent value of blending the old with the new, the tangible with the intangible, looking back and looking forward.

Building my own large language model for a workshop was an exercise in both technical skill and philosophical inquiry. This project made me appreciate the intersection of artificial intelligence and human creativity, and triggered my philosophical instincts, considering the amount of trust we all are putting into the black box of AI and Machine Learning. This all was a reminder that even in the realm of cutting-edge technology, the human element remains central – our curiosity, our desire to communicate, and our drive to innovate; it's more about how we can use these machines as a tool, versus viewing the technology as an isolated instance.

Working with 3D imaging allowed me to visualize and manipulate space. This experience expanded my appreciation for the possibilities of artistic expression, showing me that art can redefine our perception of reality and offer new ways to engage with the world.

These projects were concerned with the opposite of completion, and rather the value in moments of discovery and creativity along the way, reinforcing the meaning that is found in the liminal space between start and finish; filling the existential void rather than maintaining tunnel vision on the results.

My time at CCAM has been a testament to the idea that meaning is created through our actions and our interactions, reaffirming my belief that the most profound aspects of our humanity exist in our abilities to choose, create, and connect. To conclude I would like to share a message from Alan Watts in one of his lectures:

*"We thought of life by analogy, with a journey, with a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end; and the thing was to get to that end, success or maybe heaven after you're dead.*

*But, we missed the point the whole way along, it was a musical thing and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played."*

–Alan Watts