Everyone wants to live a meaningful life. However, not everyone knows how to go about doing so, or even if it is possible. During this hands-on workshop, students will learn to apply an assortment of philosophical skills that will empower them to develop their own approaches to life’s most basic questions: what counts as a meaningful existence? Is self-satisfaction and authenticity sufficient or are there objective criteria for making such judgments? How does meaningfulness relate to living a good or a happy life? Drawing on the wisdom offered by a variety of philosophers, students will enhance their self-understanding and develop a better understanding of how they want to approach creating and sustaining meaning in their lives.

This course aims to help students sharpen their efforts to live—to the extent that this might be possible—a meaningful (or more meaningful) life. There are two inter-related components to this course. On the one hand, we will investigate the “meaning of life” topic and associated questions and concepts. Students will do this by reading a selection of philosophic texts and practicing a discrete set of philosophic skills that relate to our topic. We will also consider how our current cultural setting influences the way that such questions are asked and answered. Students will develop a sharper sense of what might reasonably be sought and expected in this domain of inquiry.

In parallel with our philosophic explorations, students will be encouraged to work with the idea that our lives can usefully be thought of in terms of a narrative structure. Students will complete a “life story” project that will involve both an organized set of autobiographical stories and several reflective essays. The idea is to reflect on and articulate the “givens” of one’s past, the values and beliefs of one’s present, and the aspirations and commitments in one’s future. This work will be guided primarily by the narrative conception of the self as put forward by Dan McAdams. The background assumption here is that there is a link between articulating one’s life story and living a meaningful life—a thought that harkens back to Plato’s notion that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” Here again, we will consider the ways that our culture fosters or inhibits the creation and viability of satisfying life stories.

TEXTS:

- Assorted articles and videos

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND AIMS:

Syllabus for PHL 376
Crafting a Meaningful Life
Winter Term 2011

Dr. Nim Batchelor
Office: 115 Spence Pavilion, Academic Village
E-Mail: batchelo@elon.edu
Office phone: 278-5698
Office Hours: M-F 9:00-11:30 or by appointment

TEXTS:

- Assorted articles and videos

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CLASS PREPARATION QUIZES and ASSIGNMENTS:
Given the discussion format of this course, it is vital that everyone prepare appropriately for our class meetings. Each day I will post a detailed set of tasks on the Blackboard site that need to be completed before the next day's class meeting. For the first two weeks of the term, we will have reading assignments that need to be completed prior to our class meeting. The Blackboard site will provide you with the full set of tasks that you need to complete for the next class meeting.

I will also occasionally ask that you write brief essays or stories that will be shared with others in class. On these occasions, you need to make sure that you participate and that you do so in a way that will not embarrass you should your work get read aloud. I encourage you to be authentic and courageous. However, if you need and want to keep something confidential, i.e., just between you and me, that is always an option. I will usually collect these written assignments and assign them a grade from a 10-point scale. Roughly, a "10" will be assigned for excellent work, an "8" for adequate work, a "5" for poor work, and a "0" will be assigned for sub-standard work, or for when it is evident that you did not appropriately engage with the endeavor.

If you are absent from class, you can submit your homework to me via an e-mail attachment. I will accept your work late ONLY IF it is handed in on or prior to the first date that you return to class. That is, if you miss a class, you should still do the written work for that day and you should hand it in on the very next day that you attend class. The idea is that the work for this course is to be done as we go along; not all at once at the end of the term. I will not accept homework that is completed significantly after the topic has been covered in class. These judgments will fully be a matter for my own discretion. At the end of the term, I will average all the homework scores and the average will count for 10% of your final grade. If warranted, exceptions to this policy can be negotiated with me.

**PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER:**

During the first week and a half, we will, in part, be reading material of a philosophical nature. These readings will be complemented by our class discussions. In addition to providing you with insight into what various philosophers have said, these readings and discussions are undertaken with the aim of helping you to develop your own philosophical skills. This paper assignment is your opportunity to demonstrate that you have acquired an understanding of AND an ability to utilize those skills. In particular, we will focus on the following primary philosophic skills:

- Conceptual analysis and meticulous attention to the implicit or hidden assumptions contained in our grammar and vocabulary
- Questioning the question
- Multi-perspectivalism, i.e., the ability to see something from more than one perspective or to take a "second order" stance
- Unearthing and critiquing assumptions
- Seeking rationally defensible and coherent explanations or accounts
- Endeavoring to track the logical implications or extensions of claims to test their coherence and plausibility
- Drawing inspiration and insight from the work of other great minds
- Being concerned with values and ethical living
This paper will consist of two sections. In section 1, you need to demonstrate that you have read and understood the thoughts and perspectives of the authors that we have read. Thus, this section of your paper will be both a brief summary of AND a critical assessment of the material that you were assigned to read. Thus, section one is where you BOTH show me that you have intellectually engaged with the assigned material AND that you have understood and acquired the ability to use the various philosophical skills. Let me try to re-state the same thing in a different manner. In our readings and in our class discussions, we will have encountered and discussed a wide array of considerations regarding “meaning” as it relates to living a human life. Your task in the first section of your paper is to write an essay that collects, organizes, prioritizes, assesses, and makes sense of all of that material and those considerations. This section of the paper is a place where you can show me (1) that you understand the philosophic tools and (2) that you have understood how OTHERS have organized and thought about the “meaning of life” question.

In section 2 of your paper, I am interested in what YOU think. I want to know how you approach, organize and think about this aspect of the “human condition.” Here again, I expect you to demonstrate your ability to use ALL of the f the philosophic elements listed above. Furthermore, since this section of your paper is an original essay, I INSIST that you have a THESIS statement. You can’t simply ramble. Your writing must have a purpose and you must state what it is that you are trying to accomplish. Papers that do not have a thesis statement will score very poorly. Furthermore, it should be evident that the body of your paper is coherently and efficiently working toward establishing or supporting your thesis. Given the breadth of this topic, I encourage you to develop a narrow topic and thesis. You should select a topic that interests you and is something about which you think you have something to say. You can use the Eagleton and Benatar texts to guide you to secondary sources that can provide you with additional insights. This part of your paper should demonstrate not only your understanding of the various philosophic tools and skills, but also your ability to put them to work.

So, section one is the place where you show me that you have read and understood what others have to say and section two is the place where you show me what you think on some specific aspect of this topic. This paper will count for 30% of your overall course grade.

**LIFE STORY PROJECT:**

To be a person is to have a story to tell. -- Isak Dinesen

This course is advertised, in part, as a “workshop.” The idea is that we will not only talk about meaningful lives, but actually work on enhancing yours (with all due modesty). We will approach this task by completing what I am calling a “life story project.” The goal is to have you write series of reflective essays and a guided mini-autobiography which, taken together, will help you develop a deeper understanding of your life and (hopefully) a more coherent and intentional approach to the living of that life.

This project rests upon the work of many recent thinkers who have suggested that we can acquire a richer sense of the meaning in our lives by focusing on its narrative structure. Narrativity has become influential in many fields of study over the past few decades. It is particularly influential in developmental psychology, sociology, and other fields within the humanities. Dan McAdams is a central figure in this movement and we will be relying heavily on
his work to guide our explorations. He has written extensively about the narrative conception of the self and how we can enrich our lives by focusing on its narrative elements. Other thinkers in this field have emphasized the role that cultural myths and archetypes play in providing us with story forms and traditional wisdom from which we can draw inspiration and understanding.

We will approach this project in stages. First, I will ask you to read a series of articles that will orient you to the field of narrative study and to some of its potential. These academic readings will be interspersed with guided writing assignments that relate to your own life story. Some of these writings are short and others are somewhat longer. Ultimately, I will ask you to: (1) organize, collect and hand in all of your autobiographical and reflective essay materials, and (2) write a second-order reflective essay on all of the material that you have developed. If all goes well, the result will be significant.

Your “Life Story Project” will contain:

1. A Stephen Covey inspired “mission statement”
2. A “This I Believe” essay,
3. A “What do you hope for in your eulogy?” essay,
4. A McAdams inspired “Life Story Interview”, and
5. A second-order reflective essay on parts 1-4.

The above listed elements of your “life story project” should be collected and bound in a report folder. Although not required, I encourage each of you to embellish your project with photos and other images in the style of the “scrapbooking” craft. This project will account for 25% of your overall course grade.

FINAL PROJECT

Each student will produce a final project that engages with some aspect of the topic of this course. The content and form of this project is something that will be left to the creativity and interests of the individual student. Each student will need to formulate and submit a brief, but firm, project proposal for my approval. Here are several ideas that have occurred to me as I have anticipated these projects:

- If you find the thought of a particular thinker very interesting, you can write a paper that explores their thought more deeply.
- If you discover that you are particularly interested in something related to life stories, narrativity, myths, cultural archetypes, etc., you can write a paper that further explores these topics.
- If you can think of a film, novel, play or TV show that can be interpreted to shed light on some aspect of the topic of this course, you can write a paper or do a presentation that explores those connections.
- You can write and perform a dialogue that pertains to the topic of this course.
- You can use current technology to create a multi-media experience for an audience that will encourage the audience to grow philosophically.
- You can explore a specific thesis question that interests you; something like, “Is it harder or easier to live a meaningful life today than it was in the 1950’s or in 1900 or in 1750?”

These are only a few of the ideas that have come to me. I encourage you to exercise your creativity and to follow your own interests with these projects. I want to restrict these projects to include at most only one other person. That is, you can work in pairs if your project warrants a partnership.
Thus, you should not design a project that requires more than one other person, UNLESS you can get volunteers to give you their time for no grade. I especially want to encourage projects that can be shared with or performed for an audience. We will make time in the class schedule for such sharings.

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

To achieve the goals of this course, it is vital that you attend every class. Each day during winter term is equivalent to a week during the regular term. Thus, I will grant you one absence without penalty. However, starting with your second absence, each absence will reduce your FINAL course score by four points. This means that if you earn an overall course average of 92 and you have 3 absences, your final course grade will be an 84 and thus you will receive a B for the course. There is no lower limit for this policy. If special situations arise, I reserve the right to make adjustments to this policy. My discretion is the absolute and last word on these matters.

PARTICIPATION:

It is not enough merely to show up to class. A portion of your grade will also be determined by the extent to which you contribute to our in-class discussions. Students who participate in the in-class exercises and discussions with vigor and thoughtfulness will do well on this component of the course grade. I also give credit when it is apparent to me that a student has gotten a great deal out of the class and the material that we cover. This is also a place where I can take account of behavior or attitudes that are inconsistent with the aims and effectiveness of this course. In particular, I will dock people who “free-ride” on the labor of others. Let me be clear, if you merely attending class, never say a word, and do all of your other work perfectly, you will receive a participation grade of about a 70, that is, a C-. Scores in the 90’s will only go to those who actively and constructively participate in class discussions. This component will count for 10 percent of your final grade.

GRADING:

Grades for this course will be compiled in accordance with the following outline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Reading Assignments</th>
<th>10%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophic Paper</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Story Project</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Project</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final grade for the course will be a letter grade that fits Elon’s +/- grading system. Each 10-point range (e.g. 80 - 89) will be treated in the following way: 80 to 83 will receive a B-, 84 to 86 a B, and 87 to 89 a B+. The number grade that applies to you will be the percentage of the total possible points that you earn, adjusted according to the attendance policy specified below. I reserve the right to make minor alterations in the percentages specified above. If that is to be done, I will consult with the class and I will give your concerns heavy weight in my decision process.

If you are a student with a documented disability who will require accommodations in order to fully participate in this course, please register with Disabilities Services in the Duke Building, Room 108 (278-6500), for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Philosphic Paper Assignemnts</th>
<th>Life Story Project Assignemnts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tues. Jan. 4th</td>
<td>Intro disc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed. Jan. 5th</td>
<td>Eagleton pp. 1-55 Exemplars, Philosophic skills and key concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thur. Jan. 6th</td>
<td>Begin Life Story Project</td>
<td>“The role of narrative in personality psychology Today” by McAdams and “Contextualizing the Storied Self” by Avril Thorne and Marcia Latzke Begin Life Story Interview Parts A, and B (1-3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon. Jan. 10th</td>
<td>Nagel pp.31-42</td>
<td>Bruner--Life as Narrative  This I Believe (due)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tues. Jan. 11th</td>
<td>Nozick pp.65-92; Schmidt pp. 93-113</td>
<td>Life Story Interview (continue)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fri. Jan. 14th</td>
<td>Williams pp. 345-362</td>
<td>Eulogy Exercise Continue work on Life Story interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. Jan. 17th</td>
<td>ML King Holiday</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues. Jan. 18th</td>
<td>Philosophic Paper due Star Trek day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed. Jan. 19th</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work on Life Story Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thur. Jan. 20th</td>
<td>Work on final projects Assorted exercises and experiences</td>
<td>Life Story Project Due</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri. Jan. 21st</td>
<td>Work on final projects Assorted exercises and experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon. Jan. 24th</td>
<td>Work on final projects Assorted exercises and experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues. Jan. 25th</td>
<td>Exam day Assorted exercises and experiences</td>
<td>Final projects due</td>
<td></td>
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</table>