Article

Journal of Humanistic Psychology
2020, Vol. 60(2) 147–167
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DOI: 10.1177/0022167817696837
journals.sagepub.com/home/jhp

Wonderful Life: Exploring Wonder in Meaningful Moments

Jacky van de Goor[1], Anneke M. Sools[1], Gerben J. Westerhof[1], and Ernst T. Bohlmeijer[1]

Abstract

In this article, we bring the study of meaning together with the emerging field of study focusing on the emotions of wonder: wonder, enchantment, awe, and being moved. It is in meaningful moments that these two meet, and in our empirical study, we used the emotions of wonder as a lens to investigate meaningful moments. We applied a novel intervention, the Wonderful Life question, to elicit narratives of meaningful moments from 100 participants varying in age, profession, and social status. Using characteristics of wonder retrieved from the wonder literature to qualitatively analyze these narratives, we identified five types of meaningful moments: opening up to life, facing the precarity of life, celebrations, countering the negative, and familiar routines. The study deepens insight in the way meaning is discovered in different types of meaningful moments. It supports the premise that there is potential meaning in any moment in life, and the mind-set of wonder enabling the discovery of meaning. Finally, it pleads for the use of the Wonderful Life question as a means to elicit a wide spectrum of meaningful moments.

Keywords

meaning, meaningful moments, wonder, enchantment, awe, being moved, the extraordinary, narrative

[1]University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Jacky van de Goor, Management and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Health & Technology, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, Netherlands.
Email: jackyvandegoor@legende-advies.nl

Introduction

> The world is not inert or devoid of surprise, but continues to inspire deep and powerful attachments, and it is these attachments that we need.
>
> —Bennet (2001, p. 4).

In this article, we bring together two hitherto largely separate fields of inquiry. The first is the well-established study of meaning and the second is the emerging field of study focusing on the emotions of wonder, enchantment, awe, and being moved—from now on called the emotions of wonder. It is in meaningful moments that these two may meet, as will be described. The aspect of wonder in meaningful moments, however, has only scarcely received attention yet, and with this study, we aim to discover what new insights emerge by bringing these two fields closer together.

Therefore, we performed an empirical qualitative study using the emotions of wonder to develop a deeper understanding of meaningful moments in life. Studies on the emotions of wonder—mostly theoretical (e.g., Bennett, 2001; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Schneider, 2005, 2014; Vasalou, 2015), some empirical (e.g., Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Cova & Deonna, 2014; Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012)—mainly focus on the impact of these emotions, but also give insight in the characteristics of moments that lead to the experience of wonder. In the study presented here, we have used these characteristics as a *lens* to analyze meaningful moments and specifically the role of wonder within these moments.

The Emotions of Wonder as a Lens to Study Meaning

In this paragraph, we elaborate on our choice to use the emotions of wonder as a lens to study meaningful moments. After describing the characteristics of wonder, we clarify how the emotions of wonder are related to meaning. Finally, we focus on the characterization of meaningful moments and specify our research question.

Characteristics of Wonder

Though distinctions can be made between wonder,[1] enchantment, awe, or being moved, these emotions are closely related and in this article, we choose to focus on their commonalities. In this paragraph, we describe these commonalities, after which we refer to the emotions collectively as the *emotions*

of wonder and to the moments in which these emotions are experienced as *moments of wonder*. "To be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday," is how political theorist Bennett (2001, p. 4) describes enchantment, while philosopher and theologian Vasalou (2015, p. 219) relates wonder to a "surprise of the soul." This surprise may come as a response to something unforeseen, or may be caused by intentionally reseeing the unseen and taken for granted. In line with these descriptions, existential–humanistic psychologist Schneider (2009) refers to awe as the sense of amazement, humility, and wonder before the mystery of life. Schneider pleads for the intentional awakening to awe in order to revive the capacity to be moved—an emotion that philosophers Cova and Deonna (2014) have recently described. Being moved, they argue, is triggered by an extraordinary manifestation of core values. As becomes clear at these descriptions, what moments of wonder have in common is their extraordinariness.

This extraordinariness has both a *contextual* and an *intentional* dimension. The *contextual* dimension concerns the way in which the moment sticks out in the context in which it takes place, forming a contrast with the setting. First, this contrast may be the result of an experience sticking out from the ordinary, regular, and everyday. This is typically the case in new, unusual, and unique experiences, happening in contrast with the known and familiar; as Keltner and Haidt (2003) mention, when one encounters a stimulus that is strikingly vast—in time, scope, complexity, ability, or power. Second, the contrast may result from the emergence of something positive—an insight, life lesson, or positive value—against a negative background. Schneider (2009) mentions how awe may also be experienced in situations of great loss or trauma, as they remind us of the bigger picture of life and creation. In negative events, Cova and Deonna (2014) argue, a specific value may be at threat, and the situation serves as a reminder of its importance. Finally, these last authors note how moments may also be extraordinary without a contextual contrast, as positive values are in some cases salient by themselves.

The *intentional* dimension shows if the extraordinariness of the moment is induced incidentally, by chance, or by means of intentional action. An experience can be extraordinary, because it happens suddenly and unintentionally (Bennett, 2001). Here, it is the surprise of the unexpected that gives rise to an experience of wonder. Apart from the unexpected, there are also situations that are deliberately created to be extraordinary. Weddings, for example, are specifically designed to celebrate and make salient important values (Cova & Deonna, 2014). However, moments may also be intentional in a different way, being neither unexpected or unintended nor the outcome of especially designed situations. Taking a walk in the park, watching a baby sleeping—moments like this happen as a matter of course, but may be perceived to be

extraordinary because of an intentional mind-set, fostered by a deliberate focus and awareness. It is a passion of inquiry, directed to the familiar, the taken-for-granted, in such a way that the extraordinary becomes visible within the ordinary (Bennett, 2001; Vasalou, 2015). This is the awe-based consciousness or "enchanted agnosticsm" as mentioned by Schneider (2004, p. 175, 2014). Here, it becomes clear that the experience of the extraordinary is not an objective affair, but a conscious act of seeing.

Wonder and Meaning

What is the connection between wonder and meaning? Within the multifaceted meaning–literature, we have chosen three perspectives to clarify the relation between meaning and the emotions of wonder: the perspectives of *coherence* (what meaning is about), *illumination* (how meaning is discovered), and *transformation* (what meaning does).

Coherence.

The perspective of *coherence* concerns the presence of order in the world, the sense that there is an underlying pattern beyond the factual and visible. Within the meaning literature, both a more cognitive and a more spiritual approach to this sense of coherence can be found, referred to by Sullivan, Kosloff, and Greenberg (2013) as *everyday* and *ultimate* meaning. Within the cognitive approach, meaning is experienced when the world "makes sense," when we detect lawfulness, regularity, and patterns in the world (Heintzelman & King, 2013). It is a sense of rightness (King, 2012), an experience of confidence when what happens is predictable and explicable (Antonovsky, 1987). This sense of rightness involves (universal) value systems that take center stage in many theories about meaning (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Schwartz, 1994; and earlier, Maslow, 1971). From a spiritual approach, coherence concerns the "bigger picture": how we are part of patterns at a higher, holistic or cosmic level, of the "grand narrative of creation" (Wong, 2014, p. 175). This level of ultimate meaning is the level of self-transcendence, acknowledging the mystery of life, a larger whole or higher truth (Frankl, 1966; Maslow, 1971).

Though the relation between the emotions of wonder and coherence has been found to be clarified through the cognitive approach (e.g., by Keltner & Haidt, 2003), the relation is mainly found in the spiritual approach, as made clear by various authors elaborating on the mystical, spiritual, and sacred side of these emotions (e.g., Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Cova & Deonna, 2014; Curry, 2012; Funk Deckard, 2008). At moments of wonder, Jenkins (2012) states, we experience that there is more to life than the material and the rationally explainable, and that "the collective sum of sociability and belonging is

elusively greater than its individual parts (p. 29).” Vasalou (2015, p. 219) calls this the irruption of the “mystery” within our being, that “surprises the soul with itself”—a mystery that arouses a spiritual sense of wholeness (Schneider, 2014). Bonner and Friedman’s (2011) empirical study of awe, based on personal stories in Schneider’s book *Awakening to awe* (Schneider, 2009) supports the relation between this emotion and spiritual coherence, showing recurring themes of feeling part of something larger than the self, being connected to the universe and in touch with divinity.

Finally, there is a clear relation between the emotions of wonder and values (Bettelheim, 2010; Curry, 2012, Vasalou, 2015). Cova and Deonna (2014) argue how being moved leads to a renewed and reinforced attachment to core values, of which we have lost notice in the ongoing hustle of life. Vasalou (2015, p. 31) calls this “wonder’s evaluative *yes*”: the virtue of aspiration which orders what is lower to what is higher, directing attention to the value of the object at which wonder is directed; thereby indicating the rightness involved in the sense of coherence.

Illumination. Illumination relates to the emotions of wonder and the process of meaning discovery. It is an aspect of *insight* (Castonguay & Hill, 2007) that specifically focuses on the framing of an event in relation to meaning in life. According to Wong (2016), there is potential meaning in every situation, but it is up to us to discover it through reframing the experience into a larger, meaningful context. Similar to Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, and Lorentz’s (2008) notion of the *presence* and *search* for meaning, King and Hicks (2009) have distinguished between the *detection* of meaning, when events fit in with existing beliefs and expectations, and the *construction* of meaning, when events are not consistent with core assumptions. To examine the construction and detection of meaning, King and Hicks (2009) performed an empirical study in which participants rated the meaningfulness of predefined hypothetical life events, varying in significance and valence. The study shows that major events are perceived to be more meaningful than trivial events, and that meaning is primarily *detected* in major positive events and *constructed* in major negative events. The authors note that meaning detection may occur spontaneously in situations that serve as a reminder for (forgotten) assumptions about life, but may also involve the intentional enactment of values. In the case of meaning construction, an effortful meaning-making process heals the gap between experience and expectation. Discovering meaning, therefore, is a process of illumination and (re)connecting the dots. Other studies on meaningful moments supplement these insights. For example, McDonald (2008) performed a narrative inquiry with in-depth interviews on five reported epiphanies—meaningful moments preceded by periods of anxiety,

depression, and inner turmoil. Results reveal several defining characteristics of epiphanies, among which is the acute awareness of something new or something that someone has previously been blind to, profound insights with permanent and lasting results.

Within the literature on the emotions of wonder, many references to this process of illumination can be found. Keltner and Haidt (2003) mention how the emotions of wonder provoke a need to update one's mental schemas, as they lead to a "stretching forth of the mind" (Aquina in Vasalou, 2015, p. 74). This boundary confusion (Bennett, 2001) causes not only charm and fear but also creates space for novelty. Cova and Deonna (2014) mention how this "stretching forth" takes the form of the reorganization of our hierarchy of values and priorities. Therefore, the emotions of wonder can lead to paradigm shifts, as perceived reality, the taken for granted, is disrupted. Apart from these descriptions, mostly correlating with the constructing of meaning, the emotions of wonder are also involved in the detection of meaning. As has been mentioned before, wonder may also involve the intentional reseeing the taken for granted (Bennett, 2001; Schneider, 2014; Vasalou, 2015).

Transformation. Meaningful moments and the discovery of meaning may have a lasting and transforming impact on life. Wong and Watt's (1991) empirical study on meaningful moments in life shows how memories in the categories of instrumental and integrative reminiscence, the latter described as the achievement of coherence, the reconciliation of discrepancies between ideal and reality and the acceptance of negative life events, are beneficial to successful aging. McDonald's (2008) study on epiphanies, as referred to before, highlights the profound and permanent change resulting from these experiences, described as "an existential leap into the unknown" (p. 111). This lasting impact is also found in Hoffman, Kaneshiro, and Compton's (2012) empirical research on peak experiences among Americans in midlife. Following Maslow's procedure to elicit these types of meaningful moments, participants were asked to report a peak experience and asked to rate the degree to which this experience affected their view of life or attitude toward life. Results show a major impact.

The theme of transformation is colored in by many studies on the emotions of wonder. Authors mention how the emotions of wonder have the power to transform lives (Schneider, 2004). They may lead to a strong, affirmative attachment to life and existence (Bennett, 2001), to a "felt global attitude directed at the world" (Cova & Deonna, 2014, p. 456). This sense of being connected to life is accompanied by a feeling of empowerment: We are not an onlooker, but a full participant in life, with the power to affect our surroundings (Berman, 1981; Boje & Baskin, 2011). An ethical attitude may be

part of this transformation, as the emotions of wonder show that the world offers gifts, which in turn inspire people to give something back (Bennett, 2001; Vasalou, 2015). This is what Schneider (2005) designates as the responsibility, the challenge to respond. Here, we see how the above mentioned *mind-set of wonder* as a passion to see the extraordinary in the here and now, may contribute to a *meaning orientation* toward life as a whole (Wong, 2011), encompassing a holistic worldview as well as the motivation to make a difference in the world.

Characterizing Meaningful Moments

Above, we have described the characteristics of wonder and have clarified the relation between meaning and wonder by showing how three major perspectives in the recent meaning literature, coherence, illumination, and transformation, are reflected in studies on the emotions of wonder. Thereby, we have laid a foundation for our study, which focuses on the characterization of meaningful moments through the lens of wonder.

Based on research and practice of working with meaningful moments, Wong (2012) has developed a model that highlights four characteristics of the impact of meaningful moments, indicating that they are (a) deeply felt—touching emotions in a deep and lasting way; (b) deeply processed—involving deeper layers of meaning beyond the factual and superficial; (c) enlightening—providing a solutions or leading to new discover; and (d) transforming—enriching life, changing life's direction, or restoring a sense of purpose and passion. These four characteristics clearly reflect the perspectives of coherence, illumination, and transformation, thereby affirming the relation between wonder and meaningful moments. Where Wong focuses on the *impact* of meaningful moments, our study is directed at what happens *inside* these moments that accounts for their extraordinariness: at the aspects of wonder within meaningful moments. Therefore, we address the research question:

> **Research Question 1:** What characteristics of meaningful moments arise through the lens of wonder?

In the remainder of this article, we first introduce a novel method for eliciting meaningful moments: The Wonderful Life question. Next, we describe around 100 memories collected by means of this intervention, using the dimensions of *context* and *intention* to characterize and distinguish them. Finally, we reflect on how the proposed lens and method of elicitation contribute to enriching our understanding of meaningful moments in life.

Method

Background: The Wonderful Life Question

To elicit a variety of meaningful moments, we have chosen to work with a novel intervention, the Wonderful Life Question:

> What if there is an afterlife. There, all your memories will be erased, except for one. Which memory do you choose to take with you to eternity?

This question is derived from Hirokazu Koreeda's 1998 movie "After Life," showing people in the process of choosing their own memory to take to the afterlife. Inspired by this film, the first author of this article employed this question over the course of several years in many workshops in various context in her practice as trainer, coach, and facilitator (see Data Collection for a more elaborate description of how the question was used).

Because people can take only one memory to eternity, we assume that the selected memory must be very meaningful. More specifically, the combination of small (choosing only one memory) and big (consequences: forever) forces people to focus on the most essential, salient moments of life. In actual practice, this effect of the question has been observed on the level of both process and content. The question immediately induces a process of scanning life and filtering crucial moments, and results in a wide variety of selected moments, as will be shown. Therefore, the question seems adequate to elicit a wide range of meaningful moments. So, while the question is sufficiently open not to direct to specific types of experiences, it does target meaning that sticks out in the evaluation of a whole life. The question bears resemblance to other elicitation methods with known relevance to the study of meaning. It can for example be considered to be an extremely compact form of life review, which has been proven to be effective in the improvement of personal meaning (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, van Beljouw, & Pot, 2010). Moreover, there is a similarity to self-defining memories (e.g., Moffitt & Singer, 1994), yet these serve a different purpose (i.e., narrative identity). Finally, because recycling the memory in the afterlife is central to the selection process, the temporal orientation is more alike the future-oriented *Letter from the Future* instrument. This instrument has been proposed as prospective reflection instrument with clear meaning-related functions such as providing value and purpose to guide current thought and action (Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015).

Data Collection

To contribute to the validity of our study, it was important to collect an extensive variety of meaningful moments; therefore, we have used data from a

diverse group of people in a variety of settings. In total, 100 personal stories of meaningful moments have been collected from a total of 50 male and 50 female participants between approximately 20 and 80 years old. A wide range of participants has taken part in the workshops: professionals such as civil servants, bankers, and training professionals; students in a school for intermediate vocational education; people living in an institution for homeless people and women's shelter; and festival attendants. Stories have been collected in workshops aimed at personal development; telling a personal memory in answer to the Wonderful Life question being part of the workshop. Data have been collected from a total of 14 workshops, in a range of 4 to 13 participants per workshop, with an average of 8. In seven workshops, participants were completely unknown to each other, in the other seven workshops participants were acquaintances, being (direct) colleagues, classmates, or coinhabitants. All participants took part either because the workshop was part of a larger (schooling or training) program they already participated in, or they signed up voluntarily. Stories have been audio recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained to use their written memories for research purposes, and ethical approval for the study was given by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of BMS at the University of Twente.

In the workshop format, people were asked the Wonderful Life question as stated above; the question itself had not earlier been revealed to them. They were given some time alone (around 15') to think of their own memory to take to the afterlife. These were then told and shared in the group and recorded with a data recorder. People were asked to tell their memory like a film fragment of their life, giving as much detail as possible, but without an explanation of their choice. During the sharing of the stories, other participants were asked to listen to the story without intervening; only the workshop facilitator sometimes asked general questions to help make a clear picture. In this way, a "poetical space" was created: resonating on the story, other participants were stimulated in their own process of connecting to meaning.

Data Analysis

To answer the question what characteristics of meaningful moments arise through the lens of wonder, we have performed a qualitative analysis, using both a deductive and inductive approach. The dimensions of *context* and *intention* were used as point of departure for the deductive part of the analysis. The three variations within the dimension context and the two variations within the dimension intention formed the coding scheme to code every story in a procedure with two independent coders, leading to the distinction of five story types. In addition, through an inductive approach by means of constant comparison, an extra dimension was identified to do justice to the variety of

moments described. This is the dimension of *focus*, as will be described. This dimension is used to refine the description of each of the five story types. In our analysis, we took a holistic approach, aimed at getting an impression of the complete story (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994), therefore coding stories as a whole instead of in subsections—an approach also fitting the brevity and narrative character of the data.

Results

First, we present a general overview to get an impression of the data. Next, we introduce the five story types that emerge from the dimensions of *context* and *intention*, and describe the third and new dimension of *focus*. Finally, we give a detailed description of each story type, using the dimension of *focus* to refine the characteristics.

General Overview

In general, there is a wide variety in the memories that participants have chosen. First of all, they vary in length: Some memories are very short, only a couple of sentences, where others are extensive and detailed, describing not only the focal event that people wish to take to the afterlife but also including the context leading to the focal event. There are stories of major life events like marriage, death and the birth of a child, as well as more common, recurring and everyday-like moments like bedtime rituals, meeting with family or friends, or coming home after a day's work. Close family members are often the main people in the chosen memories: the storyteller's mother or father (often only one of the two), own children, love partner, grandparents, or a group of family members together. Apart from these, there are stories concerning close friends, as well as complete strangers, and stories in which the storyteller is alone.

The setting of the memories also varies: There are memories in or around home, within nature, during a holiday or trip abroad, and in public places like hospitals, cemeteries, or restaurants. Remarkably, there is only one memory in which the storyteller is at work, which is from a nun in Africa. She marvels at the special consciousness of a handicapped boy receiving the Holy Communion, his awareness of a greater force. This mystical, spiritual aspect is also present several other stories. Stories are set in contexts that can be labeled positive as well as negative, the latter, for example, being sickness, accidents and death, poverty, being in a personal crisis, or feeling lonely.

Storytellers can have both an active or a passive role in the memory. Active, by participating in action with others, acting toward others (giving,

helping), or taking action directed at himself or herself (making a personal decision, pursuing a personal goal). Passive, by experiencing the situation as an onlooker, but also as a recipient: receiving something nonmaterial (love, solace, encouragement) or material (a dog, a book of personal memories). Money is not mentioned in any story, and in the few stories that feature material issues ("things"), they seem to have a symbolical meaning: experiencing freedom on a motorcycle, feeling the recognition of a son through his gift of earrings.

Within the stories, a great variety of positive emotions and values are mentioned, such as (ecstatic) happiness, pride, gratefulness, completeness, richness, freedom, trust, peace, and love. Also, words like comforting, calming, feeling safe, heartbreaking, and relief are used, and expressions indicating an emotional state, like "feeling everything fell in its place." Negative emotions are mentioned only very sparsely and only alongside a positive emotion. Several times, people mention a feeling of forgetting time, being completely in the present, or feeling emptiness and quietness.

Meaningful Moments: Dimensions and Story Types

From the 100 memories in our data set, it was possible to place 99 stories within the variations of the dimensions *context* and *intention*, only one story was too short and unclear to be positively assigned. Focusing on the variations within these dimensions, we have found five distinct story types, as shown in Figure 1.

Within the data, an additional dimension has been identified. This dimension, *focus*, has emerged from the observation that each story has one or more points of attention: either the storyteller himself or herself, the world and/or relations. The *focus on self* concerns events that give courage or personal strength to the storyteller. The *focus on the world* is found in stories in which the storyteller tells of a deep, personal and/or spiritual attachment to the world, as well as in stories in which the storyteller experiences the nature of the world and human life: its qualities, magic, and possibilities as well as its vulnerability and precarity. Finally, the *focus on relations* concerns the value of intimate bonds with other people. The dimension of *focus* has been applied within each of the five story types, helping refine the description of the story types and show the variations within each story type. These story types are presented below.

Opening up to Life. Stories of this type tell of events that stick out from the familiar (*contextual* dimension) and happen unintentionally, often suddenly and unexpectedly (*intentional* dimension). They are positive experiences, in

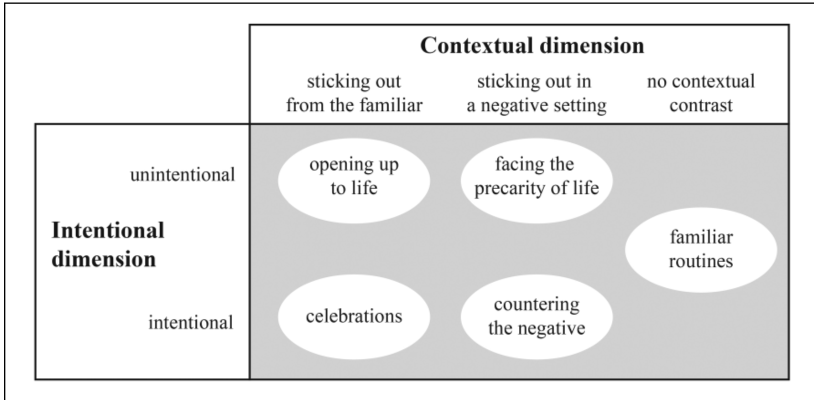

Figure 1. Story types emerging from the contextual and intentional dimension.

which the storyteller encounters something unusual, surprising or new, concerning himself or herself, but mainly concerning the world or relations (dimension *focus*). In stories with a *focus on the world*, the storyteller is usually an onlooker, watching a landscape, situation or event, either completely alone or with people only in the background. Stories tell of a sudden sense of belonging in a certain place, and of the thrill of discovery, like this story of a first visit to New York City, entering through the subway:

> And while others are busy with their own work you enter full of wonder, in the darkness, and at a certain point you go up the stairs [. . .] and the moment you see the first rays of sun, hear the first sounds: the honking taxis, the crowds around you, there is so much positive energy and hustle around you, and that arouses so much emotion, such a variety of emotions. From fear of the unknown, excitement for the new, what if I go left, where does that take me, what if I go right, where does that take me.

Stories concerning the *focus on relations* tell of moments of unique togetherness, opening the storyteller to the quality of intimate relations. The storyteller is not an onlooker, but taking part in the event; mostly with close family members, though sometimes with strangers. These are often first-time experiences or life events, like meeting a love partner or having a baby:

> It is a little over a year ago, and it was extremely hot outside, and I was feeling really cold, because I was in the delivery room. And, yes, there was a completely fresh newborn baby lying next to me, and my boyfriend was with me, and . . . the nurse and the obstetrician had just left the room. And, yes, it was the three

> of us for the first time, really a family. And for me the whole world, it still moves me, the whole world around me was just gone, truly. The only thing that counted to me was . . . that moment.

Facing the Precarity of Life. Similar to the story type described above, stories of the type named "facing the precarity of life" also happen unintentionally (*intentional* dimension), but they stick out in a negative setting (*contextual* dimension). The moments have "dark" characteristics: They concern difficult or demanding situations like illness or accidents, death or dying, personal crisis, and difficulties in pregnancy or childbirth. The specific event befalls the storyteller, but he or she experiences a sudden, positive outcome: a happy end, a valuable insight, a spiritual connection, or life lesson. The stories are found to be focused on all three variations within the dimension of *focus*: self, the world, and relations, sometimes interwoven in one story. Stories often tell of experiencing the vulnerability of the world and of human life, especially when this concerns the life of loved ones (relations), like in this story of a dangerous childbirth:

> And . . . the moment that . . . yes, that he came out and I heard he was alive because he was, had been stuck, and I was, we both actually just survived and that he came out and started breathing and that I, too, had survived, and . . . that was really amazing! That I thought: okay, we're here! That was it: we're here! He is here, and I am also still here.

Stories of this type may also concern life lessons, like in this story of a young man telling of a hiking trip in which his father collapsed:

> Yes, that moment. That was . . . that was odd. Because I hadn't anticipated it, because my father is very strong, physically. And when you see that happening you don't expect it. And then . . . yes you realize that that's not really all normal, to say so.

Celebrations. Celebrations are moments that are deliberately created and planned (*intentional* dimension) to stick out from the ordinary and familiar (*contextual* dimension). The attention is purposely directed to something positive and valuable. Stories mention life events like weddings, farewell, or welcome home parties, as well as more frequent celebrations like birthdays. The storyteller has either intentionally created the celebration himself or herself, or is taking part in a celebration created by others. Stories of this type sometimes focus on self, but always together with a focus on relations (dimension *focus*):

> It is a Saturday evening, and . . . a big party. Because my boyfriend and I were going to Angola. And [. . .] a hundred people, my boyfriend is Scottish, so,

> Scotsmen with a kilt, my mother in law, my parents, my family, colleagues, many many friends, also many friends from, from abroad. And . . . yes, everyone, just . . . full, full in a party mood, in high spirits, dancing. And to us it is a gathering with everyone we know, and [. . .] at the same time the closing of a period and the start of a new period, to go away. So that is . . . from adventure to adventure. And that adventure itself. Yes, really, it is . . . as a memory it is só rich, because everything, really, to me, that moment contains so much.

Countering the Negative. Stories of this type tell of taking positive action (*intentional* dimension) in a negative setting (*contextual* dimension). The moments have a similar setting as stories of Type 2, facing the precarity of life: difficult or demanding situations often concerning death or deprivation. However, in these stories, the negative is countered or opposed by means of an intentional act; the agent being either the storyteller himself or herself, or someone else acting toward the storyteller. Stories are mainly focused on relations, showing acts of soothing, comforting, or healing:

> My, my story is in the hospital [. . .] and you see me sitting next to my father's bed. My father, who gave me my first shave when I was fifteen. You know, and then you get that soft hair, which is unwieldy, you can't shave it. The first, I think, two months when it started to grow my father shaved me, with a knife. And now I myself am sitting at my father's bed. He is 55 and heard he had a brain tumor two weeks before. [. . .] There was quite a struggle between us, late puberty, [. . .] rebelling against my parent's values. But I am sitting at that bed, and shaving him. [. . .] The circle was completed. He shaved me, I shaved him.

Familiar Routines. This is the name given to stories that do not stick out from the familiar and everyday, nor within a negative setting (*contextual* dimension). The events in these stories are not new or unique, but a recurring routine in the life of the storyteller. The events occur more or less frequently, varying from everyday routines in a homely setting, to less frequent but common holiday rituals and family visits. The *intentionality* of the stories of this type is not directly clear. From one perspective, the moments may be deliberately created to repeat and relive something special. In this case, stories of this type may be seen as repetitions of two other story types: opening up to life (Type 1), and celebrations (Type 3). The following childhood memory of a holiday ritual illustrates this repetition of the opening up to life:

> We always went to see if the goblin was home. Because there was, around the pond were several trees and one big one with a, at the foot of the tree just something like a little door. And I was always very excited because it could be

> possible that we were really so quiet that we would actually meet that goblin. Too bad it never happened. But to me, what is so great is that it always could have happened.

However, the moments may also be happening as a matter of course, without a deliberate, conscious intention. In this case, it is an intentional mind-set that leads the storyteller to see the value of the seemingly ordinary moment. This may be the case in stories of daily routines, like coming home from work or bedtime rituals:

> I am sitting in my youngest son's room, he is a year and a half old, and . . . my other son is also sitting on his bed, he is three years old. . . . It's after dinner, they both, have taken a bath, they're wearing their pajamas, and I am reading to them. And . . . that moment of connection, with . . . with my heart and their hearts, and realizing yes, this is what it is all about. That's what I want to take.

Stories of this type fit one or more of the variations of the dimension of *focus*, though most commonly the focus is on relations, as is shown in the story above.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this novel, empirical study, we used the emotions of wonder as a lens to develop a novel characterization of meaningful moments. Literature on wonder shows that this extraordinariness is brought about by two dimensions: *context* and *intention*. Both dimensions have been found to appear in all but one of our collected stories. Analyzing stories through these dimensions, five types of meaningful moments have been distinguished: opening up to life, facing the precarity of life, celebrations, countering the negative, and familiar routines—each extraordinary, wonderful, and meaningful in its own way.

Looking at our results in relation to the three perspectives on meaning, we find our study to support the perspective of coherence and reveal new insights in the perspective of illumination in meaningful moments. Concerning *coherence*, many references to this perspective have been found within the collected stories. As shown, *values* are often mentioned spontaneously by participants, referring to their judgment of the rightness of the situation. Also, we have found references to *patterns* and the *bigger picture*, as participants mention "everything being just right, falling in place" and "the beauty of merging into, everything blending together, becoming one whole."

Concerning *illumination*, our study refines this perspective by showing the different ways in which meaning is discovered in each of the five story

types. Story type *celebrations* typically concerns the detection of meaning, the enactment and reinforcement of existing value systems. In stories concerning *countering the negative*, coherence, or rightness, is restored by an intentional act. The two unintentional story types, *opening up to life* and *facing the precarity of life*, seem to connect the storyteller to higher levels of coherence than previously experienced. Stories in these categories tell of connecting to the *light* side of life, to possibilities, as well as to life's *dark* side: to precarity and fragility. The moments seem to awaken the storyteller to life's true nature, taking part in its magic as well as its tragedy. These results support Schneider's (2009) notion that moments of awe lead to an appreciation of the whole of life—the fragile as well as the exalting. However, our findings contradict King and Hicks's (2009) finding that meaning is primarily *detected* in positive events. We have found positive moments that clearly concern meaning *construction*: stories of *opening up to life* (and specifically with a focus on the world) typically tell of reframing—of amazement, discovery, and thrill. This difference may simply be caused by the fact that King and Hicks worked with a predefined set of meaningful moments, in which events of the type *opening up to life* were not included. Therefore, we plead for the use of the more open Wonderful Life question in studies that aim to integrally cover meaningful moments.

Finally, concerning the perspective of illumination, our study sheds a special light on the small and seemingly ordinary moments in life that seem to be somewhere in-between intentional and unintentional. This is the fifth story type we have found: familiar, *recurring routines*. While King and Hicks's (2009) study shows that people tend to ascribe less meaning to minor, trivial events, our study reveals how "regular" moments can be extremely meaningful. Apparently, meaning is not only encountered at extreme or rare moments or solely created during special celebrations, but is an inherent part of everyday life, as highlighted by several authors we have referred to (e.g., Bennett, 2001; Vasalou, 2015; Wong, 2016). In this category of stories, the special, unique, and wonder of life is incorporated in familiar rituals and routines. But how consciously or deliberately are these "everyday celebrations" created? Is coherence intentionally enacted, or merely observed and appreciated? The question arises if it the special that has become habitual, or if it is the habitual becoming special. In the last case, it is the mind-set of wonder, the awe-based consciousness, as referred to before, that leads us to see the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Interestingly, we see how our characterization of meaningful moments actually covers all moments in life, intentional as well as surprising, ordinary as well as unique, positive as well as negative. The Wonderful Life question reveals that there is potential value in any moment in life. This may be seen

as empirical support for the approaches to meaning that follow Frankl (1969), stating that meaning is inherently there, but it is up to us to discover it. Perhaps it is the Wonderful Life question that activates the mind-set of wonder, aiding the process of illumination by seeing the extraordinary in any situation—a process that leads us to see more than the rationally explainable: life's magic, value, and sacredness.

Concerning the last perspective on meaning we have discussed, *transformation*, it is not possible to relate our results to this perspective as we have not questioned participants about the impact of the moment on their life. Here, we see how Wong's (2012) model of meaningful moments, as mentioned in the introduction, is complementary to our characterization. Both characterizations are of value because of their *integral* approach to meaningful moments, as opposed to studies describing a specific type of meaningful moment (e.g., Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Hoffman et al., 2012; McDonald, 2008). Where Wong's model characterizes the *impact* of meaningful moments, our characterization focuses on the aspects of wonder *inside* these moments. Together, they color in the picture of meaningful moments, covering both what happens within these moments, as well as their deeper impact—or, referring to Mishler (1991) on narratives, showing both *how the moment works* as well as *the work the moment does*.

While we have used the dimensions of context and intention to build our characterization, the dimension of *focus* has solely been introduced to add refinement. A further study of this dimension may deepen insight in meaningful moments, as the variations within this dimension—self, relations, and the world—clearly relate to the meaning, themes of agency, communion, and self-transcendence. The collected stories themselves are also valuable material for further use, giving insight in a great variety of meaningful moments. The stories show how values can be intentionally passed on to children, how travels to the unknown reveal the vastness of life's possibilities, how rites de passage strengthen feelings of belonging as well as autonomy, how broken relationships can be healed, how battles may be fought for truth and justice, how bonds may be strengthened in times of hardship and grief, . . . Building on these results, these inspiring descriptions may be put to practical use to develop interventions to support people in the process of finding meaning in each type of moment in life.

Reflecting on our method, the great variety of participants and the large amount of collected stories contribute to the validity of the study. However, as data were collected in workshops, group dynamics may have influenced people in the story they chose to tell in answer to the Wonderful Life question. Though this question does not mention the emotions of wonder, it was possible to characterize all of the stories by means of the dimensions of

wonder, except for one. As we have clarified the relation between wonder and meaning through the perspectives of *coherence*, *illumination*, and *transformation* (Bennett, 2001; Berman, 1981; Bettelheim, 2010; Boje & Baskin, 2011; Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Cova & Deonna, 2014; Curry, 2012; Funk Deckard, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Schneider, 2004, 2009, 2014; Vasalou, 2015), this finding may be taken as support that the Wonderful Life question is a valid way to elicit meaningful moments. However, the dimensions of wonder that we have found within our data may also be part of other emotions that we have not studied. This is a limitation of the approach we have taken.

To finish, we would like to underscore that storytelling interventions in groups, such as in Wonderful Life workshops, may facilitate the mind-set of wonder and contribute to a meaning orientation toward life (Wong, 2011). As has continuously been observed in Wonderful Life workshops in which data were collected, the Wonderful Life stories are deeply touching, and the story's impact is passed on from the storyteller to the listener. Parallel to the concept of elevation (Haidt, 2000) and its impact on morality, it can be of great value to further investigate this interactional component of the Wonderful Life question and its effect on opening up to wonder, to values, and connecting to a larger whole. For, as we have opened with Bennett (2001, p. 4), *it is these attachments that we need*.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. It is important to make the distinction between *wonder why/how* (classical Descartian wonder), aimed at gaining knowledge, and *wonder at* or *existential wonder* (Hepburn, 1998; Sinclair & Watson, 2001), concerning acknowledgment and admittance of existence or truth. The type of wonder that we are referring to in this article, is *wonder at*.

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Author Biographies

Jacky van de Goor is PhD student at the StoryLab of the department of Psychology, Health & Technology at the University of Twente, focusing on meaningful moments in life. She has almost 20 years of experience as a leadership trainer and coach in the field of vitality and meaning at work.

Anneke M. Sools is assistant professor at the department of Psychology, Health & Technology at the University of Twente. She has published widely on narrative research. Her main research expertise is in the area of narratives from the future, and their role in guiding thought and action in the present.

Gerben J. Westerhof is professor in Narrative Psychology at the University of Twente, the Netherlands. He is interested in the study of life stories and their relation meaning in life, well-being, and mental health across the life span. He is the author of some 100 peer-reviewed publications as well as several handbooks and psychological interventions on these topics.

Ernst T. Bohlmeijer graduated in 2007 on the effects of life review on depression in older adults. Since 2011, he works as full professor at the department of Psychology, Health & Technology at the faculty of Behavioural Sciences at Twente University. His research focuses on mental health promotion with a special interest in positive psychology, psychological flexibility, and compassion.