

## ON BEING MEANINGFUL

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A popular modifying word that dots our current conversational and written gibberish with idiotic frequency is the adjective “meaningful.” Dictionaries define meaningful as 1) having a meaning of purpose, and 2) having an assigned function in a language system. It has been a perfectly good word in the past, but useful only on a rare occasion and in its proper context. Its indiscriminate use today continues even though it had earned a listing in Lois DeBakey's catalogue of vogue words as long as two years ago. (A vogue word or phrase has been described as an unfamiliar word or phrase that is usually abstract, vague, ambiguous, or evasive, and becomes abused by overuse. Inasmuch as ambiguity and vagueness convey the sense of a lack of meaning, we are faced with the contradiction that meaningful often can be meaningless.)

Dr. Manny Friedman, an obstetrician out of the Midwest, who conducted an ongoing, in-depth study into the complication of brow presentation, concluded a discussion of his paper by commenting that the information available from such studies "provides us with a meaningful approach to the problem." (Of course, any study that is both ongoing and in depth is much more important than an ordinary study; even meaningful in itself.)

The word obtruded itself innocently into the writings of the psychologists and psychiatrists some years back; it was a pleasant, nonspecific, space filler that could be inserted before almost anything to create an impression that the user possessed some unusual degree of understanding or had something of special importance to say. It was taken up by the sociologists and academicians, and belatedly by the political speechwriters, as a useful addition to circumlocution. It caught on with columnists and pundits. It is bandied about by semi-literate sophisticates at cocktail parties. College intellectuals and protest leaders find it invaluable, and the hippies and LSD apologists can hardly verbalize without it.

It is chic to be meaningful these days, and if you don't enjoy being meaningful yourself, you can always surround yourself with meaningful people, engage in meaningful pursuits, and develop meaningful relationships. In this way your life can become meaningful, and you may never be called on to explain what you mean.