

I have a good friend, one of the very best mathematicians, who worked like crazy for eight months to solve a particular problem. His solution was a beautiful, brilliant achievement—it answered an old question and made real progress in this area. Shortly thereafter, a young woman saw a different way to do it—very simply, very elegantly and in a very short time. The guy was crushed. He thought, “What’s it all about? What am I doing?” He went to India for six months and came back a changed man. “I now understand,” he said to me, “the meaning of life is life itself.” When I repeated this observation to a colleague in computer science, he said, “That may be true, but it doesn’t give an algorithm!” (An algorithm is a specific, step-by-step procedure for doing something.)

So what matters? Of course, this is a very personal question. For me, I think our purpose here is to keep trying to understand a little more deeply the universe we are all in, to try to take one more step on this unending quest. And to have fun along the way. Why should someone want to run a three-minute mile, juggle nine balls or go to the stars? It’s just human nature to reach a little higher, to go a little farther, to focus a little more clearly. I have faith that if each person in the spirit of his or her activity were to move forward a little, we would all be headed in the right direction, even though it might not be obvious to us how it all fits together.

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