In the fall of 1965, I was a sophomore at Williams College—for the second time. The year before, I had left Williams to work as an organizer for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). It was an exciting time to be in college. Black students in the South were at the forefront of the civil rights movement. Their courage had set an example for the world to admire. In the North, the (mostly white) student leaders of SDS had begun a movement of their own for social and economic change. The Port Huron Statement of 1962 was their manifesto. It described with passionate clarity the gap between America’s ideals and the realities of racism and poverty and summoned my generation of students—“bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit”—to close it. The war in Vietnam was on the horizon. The campuses of America’s colleges and universities were beginning to stir with an energy they had not seen since the 1930s. By the time the decade was over, these stirrings would grow into the most powerful student movement the country has ever known.

Many of us who were students at the time were part of this
movement. We felt in touch with history. We believed we were participating in events much larger than our individual lives. It was a thrilling idea that made the rest of life—and school in particular—seem unimportant by comparison. Like others of my generation, I embraced this idea, and like some I acted on it. With my parents’ strained support, I left Williams at Thanksgiving in 1964 and a month later was living with four other organizers in a small apartment in a poor white neighborhood on the north side of Chicago, hoping to help start what we called “an interracial movement of the poor.”

My parents were Democrats of liberal conviction. They had voted for Henry Wallace in 1948, and twice for Adlai Stevenson. They hated Joseph McCarthy and revered Martin Luther King. I absorbed their beliefs and took them with me to college. But at Williams I met a new idea that put my beliefs to the test. The student leaders of the civil rights movement had shown by their example that it is not enough merely to believe in justice and equality. They had shown that one must struggle and sacrifice to achieve these things as well. They had proved that it is necessary to enter the fray and become a participant in the great contests of life or risk not having a life of any consequence at all. This was a terrifying idea but an exhilarating one too, for it implied that if one just picked up the banner and marched, one’s life might be consequential after all. In the fall of 1964, I was nineteen years old. I had been in school all my life. What, I thought, was more important—a few more years of college, all leading to an end I couldn’t see, or action in the service of a cause I saw as plain as day? How, exactly, I came to frame the choice in these terms remains obscure to me even today. What other longings fed it I can’t say. But when I left Williams, in the middle of
my first sophomore year, it was because I had come to believe that the meaning of my life was at stake and that if I stayed in school, and continued on the path I was following, I risked living a life with no meaning at all.

The work in Chicago was hard—long days of ringing doorbells and handing out leaflets, followed by evening meetings to take stock and make plans. Our goal was the creation of a union of neighborhood residents mobilized to press their landlords and the city for reform—for cleaner buildings, safer streets, and, ultimately, a greater voice in their economic and political fates. The neighborhood was called “Uptown,” and when I lived there most of the residents were former coal miners from Kentucky and West Virginia who had come to Chicago looking for work when the mines gave out. They understood, from long experience, the value of a union. They were polite, but suspicious of the well-spoken kids who knocked on their doors and tried to persuade them that a union of neighbors is the same as a union of workers and that a rent strike is no different from shutting down a mine.

After seven months, with not much more to show for my efforts than one failed rent strike and a sidewalk protest at the office of our city councilman (where my fellow organizers and I outnumbered the other protesters), I had begun to doubt whether my next thirty years of organizing would produce results to justify a lifetime of labor. My politics were unchanged, and I admired the organizers who had made a permanent home in Uptown. I still felt the same drive to live a life of purpose and value. But I was less confident that the life I wanted was the life that I was leading. I was less sure of what I wanted. I had come to Chicago to find the answer to the question of life’s meaning and because I believed I would never find
the answer in school. After seven months, the question remained, but a life of political activism no longer seemed the clearly right answer. And I was beginning to miss the life I had left.

Williams is a comfortable place and that is part of what I missed. But I also missed reading—for which I now had almost no time—and the aimless conversations of college life that the hard realities of my organizing work discouraged. And there was gentle pressure from my parents, who accepted my decision to leave school even though they had already paid the full year’s tuition (a sacrifice that as a parent with children of my own in college, I now recognize for the gift it was). My parents never said, “Go back to school,” but when I came home to Los Angeles that summer and told them I wanted to return to Williams, their relief was physical. It was no clearer to me then, than it had been the year before, where school was leading. I was no more confident that school had anything to do with the meaning of life. The demands of the world seemed as large and urgent as they had when I left Williams to meet them. It was the summer of 1965, and as my parents and I discussed my plans to return to Williams that fall, we watched Watts burn on the television screen, twenty miles and another country away. But I was ready to go back to school and the life I had left and to sort things out as best I could.

It was in this mood that I enrolled that fall in a seminar taught by Nathaniel Lawrence, who was then the chair of the philosophy department at Williams. I had taken the introductory course in philosophy my freshman year and wanted to study the subject further. I had some dim sense that I might find in philosophy, and in Professor Lawrence’s seminar, answers to the questions that plagued me. The seminar was titled “Existentialism.” Most of the other students were juniors and seniors, and I felt a bit over my head. The
readings were difficult. We read Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, and *The Mystery of Being* by the great Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel. We met once a week, in Professor Lawrence’s home at the end of Main Street, a few blocks from campus. Each session lasted three hours. We broke in the middle for tea, and there were always fresh cookies (courtesy of Mrs. Lawrence). The fall came on, the days shortened, the air grew chilly. The Berkshires were covered in scarlet and gold. When we arrived at Professor Lawrence’s home, late in the afternoon, we found a fire going, and his two golden retrievers asleep like bookends beside the hearth.

The discussions were animated, often passionate. It seemed to all of us that much was at stake—just what one would expect in a seminar on existentialism. At the heart of the seminar was the question of how best to live, of what to care about and why, the question of the meaning of life. It was the question that Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Marcel all addressed in different ways and that we discussed—awkwardly, confusedly, eagerly—around the fire in Professor Lawrence’s living room. By the third or fourth week of the term, I had begun to look forward to our meetings with growing excitement. The seminar became the center of everything I did that fall, in class and out. Partly it was because the readings were deep and enlightening, partly because I discovered I could keep up with my more advanced classmates and even make a contribution or two, partly because Professor Lawrence’s wisdom and kindness enveloped us all. But mostly it was because I made a discovery in that class that has been a central conviction of mine ever since. I discovered that the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school.

There are many things to study in a college or university. The
question of what constitutes a life of significance and value is only one of them. And there are other places to search for an answer. There are other institutions—religious ones most notably—that offer instruction in the meaning of life and other settings, including many that have nothing to do with formal education, in which people make discoveries that help them to say, “My life has a value I recognize and cherish.” What I discovered in Professor Lawrence’s seminar forty years ago was that an institution of higher education is one of the places where the question of what living is for can be pursued in an organized way. I had left Williams looking for a place where the question has more reality than I thought it ever could in school. What I found when I returned was the place for which I had been searching. It has been my professional home ever since.

For the past forty years, I have been by turns a student, a teacher, and a dean. I am now, after ten years as a dean, a teacher once again. For the past twenty-eight years, I have been a member of the faculty of the Yale Law School. At present, I am teaching in a freshman program in Yale College that is devoted to the study of the great works of philosophy, history, literature, and politics that form the foundation of the Western tradition. For all this time, and in the different roles that I have occupied in my career, my deepest belief has remained unchanged: that a college or university is not just a place for the transmission of knowledge but a forum for the exploration of life’s mystery and meaning through the careful but critical reading of the great works of literary and philosophical imagination that we have inherited from the past. Over the years, many of my beliefs have changed but not this one. My confidence that the meaning of life is a teachable topic has never faltered since Professor Lawrence first helped me to have it, and my whole professional life
has been devoted to vindicating this confidence and to transmitting it to my students.

That is why I have written this book. For as I have watched the question of life’s meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place, I have felt what I can only describe as a sense of personal loss on account of my own very substantial investment in the belief that the question is one that can and must be taught in our schools. In my time as a teacher and dean, I have seen this question exiled from the humanities, first as a result of the growing authority of the modern research ideal and then on account of the culture of political correctness that has undermined the legitimacy of the question itself and the authority of humanities teachers to ask it. I have felt puzzlement and anger at the easy sweeping aside of values that seem to me so obvious and important. And watching these developments, I have been moved to wonder about their causes and consequences and the likelihood of a cure.

Why did the question of what living is for disappear from the roster of questions our colleges and universities address in a deliberate and disciplined way? What is the source of the appeal of the research ideal, and why is it so hostile to this question? Why are the ideas of diversity and multiculturalism and the belief that values are merely expressions of power so corrosive of the attempt to explore the question of life’s purpose and meaning? What have the consequences of the disappearance of this question from our colleges and universities been for the culture at large, where our churches now monopolize the authority to address it? And what are the prospects for its restoration to a position of respect in the academy?
These are the questions I ask and answer in this book. I ask them as a student who fell in love with the humanities at Williams long ago. I ask them as a teacher of law and philosophy who has tried to keep the question of life’s meaning alive in his classroom. And I ask them as a former dean who worried every day that the demands of the research ideal and the spirit of political correctness have together put the humanities on the defensive and their authority to guide us in the exploration of life’s meaning under a cloud.

These questions have a personal urgency for me. My attempt to answer them is a defense of what I care about and have done in my life. But there are others for whom they have great importance too. There are the humanities teachers who need to recover the confidence they once possessed in their authority to lead the search for an answer to the question of life’s purpose and value—who were originally drawn to their work by this question itself and need to be reconnected to it. There are the students who depend upon their teachers for such guidance—who are excited and confused and perhaps even frightened by the question but for whatever reason find the answers that religion offers incomplete. And there are the parents of students who, despite all their cautionary advice about the realities of life, yearn for their children to have an education that goes beyond the merely vocational and equips them for a challenge larger than that of succeeding in a career. It is for these—teachers, students, and parents—that I have written this book, in puzzlement and anger, yes, but also in the confident hope that the question of what is living for will soon be restored to its proper place in American higher education.