The Meaning Challenge

One of the major concepts of logotherapy is the ‘meaning-of-the-moment.’ Every situation constitutes a once-in-a-lifetime offer to do something meaningful with life’s givens. Similar opportunities may present themselves in the future, but they will only be similar, never exactly the same. At each never-to-be-repeated moment in time, the individual and the situation converge to produce a unique meaning-opportunity.

The meaning potential of a situation will reflect how a general or universal value applies to that particular situation. Who am I? What is the meaning of my presence here? What kind of response does this particular situation require of me?

When societies (or families or organizations) focus on the collective to the exclusion of the individual, what happens? The individual is lost, and with this the meaning-of-the-moment is lost. Instead of identifying how a value should apply in a particular situation, all of the individuals are expected to embrace the collective value.

Even if the value is highly moral, such an approach will necessarily feel oppressive. Some people will be struggling to meet a standard they cannot reach. Thus, it is not surprising that societies with expectations of high achievement end up with high suicide rates. Different people have different needs, different abilities and different tasks in life.

Social oppression results in what Frankl calls ‘collective neurosis, namely fatalism, determinism and nihilism. People think they cannot change, that their past determines their future and that nothing they do matters to anyone.

A purely individual focus is equally disastrous. Individuals in such a society become self-obsessed in a search for happiness, while ignoring their responsibility to others. For this reason, Frankl insisted that just as there is a ‘statue of liberty’ on the east coast of the United States, there needs to be a ‘statue of responsibility’ on the west coast.

Logotherapy is a philosophy of life that suggests a different way, a more humane way. It does not focus on the collective or the individual but on ‘meaning.’ The individual counts! He or she is valued within the context of a bigger picture, not because he is promoting the collective cause like a dutiful worker-ant who could easily be replaced, but because his singular attributes are an integral part of the whole. As Frankl explains, the whole of a mosaic is missing if just one stone is missing.

Each of us has something important to contribute. And when a citizen or family member senses that his life matters this generates what Frankl called a ‘common will to common meaning,’ where each life is valued and all are aiming for an all-inclusive meaning-goal that incorporates all of the unique meanings of all of its members.