THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN LIFE – THEORETICAL, EXPERIENTIAL, AND EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS

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Ultimately, life is a gift and meaning is its reward. So is the art and ability of asking questions. The meaning of life is to be found in the question that becomes encounter. Then every moment becomes a moment of grace. –Elie Wiesel

Searching for meaning in life appears to reflect the essence of being human. Meaning in life is considered one of the central ultimate concerns with which philosophers, religions, social scientists, poets, and laypeople alike have struggled across cultures and throughout history. As suggested by Frankl, the search for meaning is "the primary motivational force" in human beings (Frankl, 1963, p.121) and may constitute a healthy, natural, and engaging process that is often characterized by an openness to ideas about life (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). The inherently private nature of the construct of meaning calls for a multidimensional and holistic view to explore more closely how it is experienced subjectively by individuals themselves.

This article briefly outlines three areas to advance understanding and practice of the human search for meaning: (a) theoretical aspects of the search, (b) experiential exploration of what encourages people to search for meaning, and (c) educational venues to enhance the ability to search for and find meaning from a young age. Each of these areas complements each other, and together they comprise an endeavor to find how meaning unfolds and is experienced. For a more detailed version with illustrations please correspond with the author.

Theoretical Aspects of the Search for Meaning

Frankl asserts that the will to meaning distinguishes us as humans, and stands in contrast to the idea that the primary motivator in a person's life is to experience pleasure and avoid pain (Frankl, 1963). In this sense, logotherapy echoes the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia rather than hedonia (Aristotle, 2000). The hedonic approach to well-being views happiness as analogous to subjective experiences of pleasure and positive emotions, whereas the eudaimonic well-being approach supports the idea that happiness is achieved when individuals live life in accordance with their "true selves," including the experience of self-actualization, meaning, purpose, and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Indeed, research demonstrates that a life framed by meaning is more satisfying than a life centered on pleasure (Park,

Park, & Peterson, 2010; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Waterman, 1993). People's happiness levels are positively correlated with whether they perceive their lives as meaningful (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2013a,b).

Ample evidence suggests the importance of meaning for human coping as well as thriving (e.g., Damon, 2008; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 1998). The concept of meaning thus has significant implications for both existential analysis of human experience and for well-being, as reflected in the emerging field of positive psychology (see Batthyány & Russo-Netzer, 2014). The different and complementary aspects of the search for, as well as the function of, meaning contribute to a holistic view of human life and human nature. Such a view also exemplifies Frankl's claim about the importance of integration between disciplines, and that no therapy is complete without logotherapy. Frankl quotes Magna B. Arnold who said, "Every therapy must in some way, no matter how restricted, also be logotherapy" (Frankl, 1984, p.130).

A dominant element shared by both positive psychology and logotherapy has to do with their person-centered positive focus, aiming towards growth and healthy human development. Rather than being determined by influences of environment or by animalistic instincts, we are free to direct our behavior and choose our attitude toward life (Peterson, 2006; Shantall, 2003). Both perspectives highlight the intact and healthy essence that exists in each and every human being as inner resources to promote our full human potential. Frankl's meaning triangle (i.e., the three avenues to find meaning: creative, experiential, and attitudinal) represents another potential meeting point between logotherapy and the central concepts of positive psychology, which demonstrate the fundamental capability to confirm meaningfulness in all aspects of life, both the joyful and the challenging ones. As Frankl puts it, "human life can be fulfilled, not only in creating and enjoying, but also in suffering" (Frankl, 1969, p.85).

What Encourages People to Search for Meaning?

This aspect was explored through in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who each had made a fundamental change in their lives, as well as through an experiential workshop. The use of qualitative-phenomenological methods contribute to gaining a more profound view of the internal world of individuals and the richness and complexity of the construct of meaning, as experienced through their own eyes (Giorgi, 1997). This focus on listening rather than measuring has the potential of revealing "fresh categories of meaning that quantitative studies may not have discovered" (Blieszner & Ramsey, 2002, p.36). The analysis of the interviews (available from the author) underscores a pervasive theme of crisis and trauma as a trigger or motivator to search for broader meaning to life. Such triggers—that may be experienced as external and/or internal—were perceived by the interviewees as turning points to in-depth and profound self-examination that led to the insight that fundamental change and a search for an alternative were needed. However, the strong desire to search for meaning, to search for the "beyond," appears to be motivated not only by deficiency needs such as arise in the face of adversity and

crisis, but also from growth needs. In other words, the interviewees appeared not merely "pushed" to search for meaning and purpose by a negative life event as is often the case in posttraumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Rather, they were also "drawn" to seek meaning by their inner desire for self-exploration. Such self-search was not necessarily rooted in a background of crisis, but in a sense that something was "missing" even though their lives were, allegedly, successful and full. In this sense, the interviews provide rich evidence and embodiment to conceptualizations found in the literature that meaning is associated with both suffering and positive functioning (e.g., Damon, 2008; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 1998), and shed light on Frankl's statement that the search for meaning is the primary motivation for human beings.

To complement this exploration of what orients people to search for meaning, an experiential workshop was designed according to Frankl's meaning triangle. The workshop provided both theoretical background and facilitation of self-exploration on meaning in life in general and Frankl's logotherapy in particular.

Furthermore, the workshop aimed at translating theory into practice by investigating how corresponding concepts and ideas from logotherapy and positive psychology applied to the actual experience of workshop participants. The first session concentrated on the question of meaning in life, through theory and practice (i.e., what makes the lives of the participants meaningful, identifying personal leading values that serve as signposts and meaning markers in accordance with the meaning triangle). The next three sessions were dedicated to more in-depth exploration of each of the pathways to meaning: the experiential path, the creative path, and the attitudinal path. The experiential path focuses on meaning derived from the ability to be mindful of and participate in the "gifts" of life, explored through experiential practices that exemplify the interconnections between ideas of positive psychology such as savoring, mindfulness, engagement with beauty, and gratitude. The creative path focuses on identifying one's unique "fingerprint" and contribution to the world through exploration of personal strengths, passions, and flow in the creation of personal "meaning portfolios" and a group "art gallery." The attitudinal path emphasizes the triumph of the human spirit; that is, one's choice and attitude toward inevitable setbacks, crises, and adversities in life, the related concepts of growth mindset, resilience, and crafting a personal legacy.

Acknowledging that the search for meaning is an ongoing, multifaceted quest comprised of different dimensions and manifestations, the workshop provided a kind of a "case study" to explore potential venues and anchors that may function as overarching sources of meaning in life that serve as a guide for existence. Together, the theoretical and experiential aspects presented shed light on the holistic and multidimensional nature of meaning as a central, fundamental, and cardinal question, especially in the face of postmodern complexities and challenges. Such concern with the "big questions in life" is even more intense among youth and young adults in contemporary Western societies. Forces and processes, such as industrialization, urbanization, and the decline of the moral authority of religion (Cushman, 1990),

provide a context for disengagement, deconstruction of societal values, and a loss of a sense of meaning (Moules, 2000). Studies over the past few decades show an increase in depression and anxiety rates despite economic prosperity (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2004; Twenge, 2000). More than ever, hunger for meaning has intensified (Frankl, 1969). Alienation and loss of meaning that increase during adolescence may underlie external expressions such as depression and aggression, and risky behaviors such as suicide, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior (Petersen, 1988). Addressing the "ultimate concerns" of meaning and purpose from a young age and especially during these critical periods through education may facilitate the development of a healthy sense of meaning, responsibility, and the shaping of a purposeful path, a meaningful reason for being. How can we develop a meaning-oriented education?

Enhancing Meaning in the Education System

There are a number of ways in which the educational system may strengthen the ability to search for meaning from a young age. The following are a few brief suggestions:

Set an example. One of the salient features that has been found in those with a high level of resilience is a positive figure in their lives that they learned from and drew strength from to deal with difficulties and to succeed (Masten & Reed, 2002). As role models, teachers who encourage children and youth to take an active role in a dialogue of genuine interest and respect establish grounds for nurturing personal meaning (Fry, 1998). Teachers who share their own values, passions, and sources of inspiration and calling with their students enable them to develop a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem and this allows them to broaden their perspective in regard to the possibilities before them in the process of identity formation and life imbued with purpose and meaning (Damon, 2008; Korthagen, 2004).

Say yes to life. Acknowledging and responsibly responding to the meaning of the moment encapsulates the essence of a meaningful life. Every moment in human existence holds a call for meaning; each situation in life is an opportunity to discern meaning. When we encourage students to choose to "say yes to life," and to be fully immersed in the "here-and-now," we help them engage in a vital and authentic dialogue with life itself.

Facilitating a silent space for contemplation. Pausing the rat race and contemplating questions (*who am I? why am I here? what is important for me?*) enable a different pace, a break from external noise, and allow for self-discovery, a "constructive moratorium" in Erikson's terms (see Damon, 2008). The significance of reflection, self-exploration, and awareness is highlighted in light of ample evidence associating such skills with better concentration, comprehension, empathy, creativity, emotional regulation, social competence, coherence, and meaning (Hart, 2003). The daily routine in schools allows for the creation of "rituals" that facilitate a space for self-exploration, such as deep breathing at the beginning of the day or the class, reflective writing, sharing in pairs, and active listening. Also, joint discussions and contemplations inspired by the "big books" such as sacred, philosophical, and other texts may stimulate and broaden awareness of values, morality, virtues, and

dilemmas concerning the question of what it means to be a human being. Furthermore, an exposure to nature and the creative arts (such as songs, quotes, metaphors, symbols, arts, drama, guided imagery, or music) create a broad and holistic foundation for personal expression, exploration, and active learning in regard to the self, life, and the world.

Meaning triangle. Teachers can use any of the three paths to meaning (creative, experiential, and attitudinal) to encourage students to acknowledge their unique contributions to the world, to be mindful to experience the beauty in their surroundings, themselves, and their relationships, as well as to develop a sense of a personal resilient attitude and responsibility to face life's challenges.

Socratic dialogues. Teachers may create different opportunities to encourage meaningful dialogue in class, in small discussion groups, and in pairs. Shifting the focus from "finding the right answer" to providing an opening to asking questions that echo in the students' souls allow for in-depth exploration, insights, and awareness. Examples of such questions may include questions of personal identity (*who am I? who are my heroes? when do I feel authentically myself? what makes me happy? what is meaningful to me?*), questions of calling (*where am I going? why am I here?*), questions of ethics (*what is the right thing to do?*), questions of personal belief (*what do I believe in?*), questions of self-realization (*what is a worthy purpose to me?*), and questions of meaning (*how is my life meaningful? what will I leave behind?*). Practicing the skill of asking questions is important to develop active involvement and creativity, and can be done as part of the curriculum or as part of a daily ritual (for instance, to conclude the day with questions such as *what was meaningful for you today? intriguing? inspiring? important?*).

Encourage active involvement. Facilitating opportunities for students to be involved in contributing to the class, school, home, and community strengthen their personal responsibility, initiative and engagement, and contribute to the experience of mastery and self-esteem (Damon, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2007). This can be done through empowering personal choice and autonomy in the different educational tasks as well as setting self-determined meaningful goals that are derived from intrinsic motivation and inspired by personal values, interests, and strengths.

We, as therapists, counselors, educators, or parents, can instill in children and youth–from a young age through higher education–the inspiration and direction to navigate their way in the face of postmodern uncertainties and challenges and to develop a healthy sense of meaning. By facilitating the conditions and space for the personal search for meaning, values, and "the big questions in life" through self-reflective processes, we can attend to the delicate bud, the spark of meaning within (Frankl, 1969) and help it blossom. As the need for meaning and purpose is a defining characteristic of the human being, identifying implied meanings that are being offered in every moment and every experience of life echoes the deepest human yearnings.

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