Chapter 13
Afterword

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In a world of constant change, the experience of loss is inevitable, but disastrous psychic consequences arising from it sometimes are not. Although felt loss may give rise to a sense that meaning and relevancy, too, are gone, some people manage to find an inner strength that allows them to weather the storm and reintegrate into life's flow. Other people, in contrast, become paralyzed. They may be further traumatized, moreover, by their observations of more resilient people who, having experienced comparable loss, nevertheless, move forward with their lives.

What determines whether a particular person will find the strength to recover after suffering a profound loss? What allows one person to extricate himself from despair's grip, but not another? Are the psychic resources upon which the resilient rely capable of being developed by everyone and, if so, how, and in what circumstances? We introduce some thoughts on this topic with two poems, the first addressing the experience of loss of a child and the second the loss of a lover.

> *A Fly's Eye View of Somalia*
>   The disease wind swirls, fly black, enveloping
>   The nameless, skeletal mother
>   Close to breast, she holds her small, brightly colored
>   Rag-wrapped someone
>   Beneath the red-stain tatters, wiping away the ineluctably
>   Ravenous grains
>   Still silently caressing, with twig-weak limbs and
>   Hopeless loving glances
>   Soon only the flies will be left here, their million
>   Fly-eye images
>   Reflecting a sea of wind-whipped
>   Shreds of rag – and
>   Sands that have absorbed countless mothers'
>   Half-waterless tears
>   Beneath their own, final
>   Suffocating
>   Embrace.

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Only Her
       Wanderer of your endless corridors of memories
       With their cracked and angular realities
       Their shattered mirrors and
       Columns of impenetrable mist
       The ancient cathedral still rises before your
       Inward eye, there, in the midst of delirium, where
       Subjectivity dissolves, erasing your name
       But not her name, no, never hers
       Adrift in the endless
       Blue of crystals
       Adrift in the transparencies of
       Fountains
       Wanderer of the halos of being your eyes still
       Strain to pierce the petrified smoke
       As echoes of her nearly silent
       Footsteps emerge in your oblivion
       And there, as the mist begins to glow
       There as the ground begins its slow thaw
       There as the intractable slowly becomes
       Tractable
       In the deepest delirium of your
       Nearly forgotten memories . . .
       In the purple guilt of the night
       You still see only her . . .
       Only her.

Philosophical and Psychological/Sociological Problems of Meaning

Preliminarily, we distinguish solutions posited by philosophers responding to what is sometimes referred to as the "philosophical problem of meaning" from what we refer to, here, as the "psychological-sociological problem of meaning." The former arises from the intuition that human beings are fundamentally distinct from the world, alienated from it and each other, completely alone. Separation from the world, in this view, is a structural feature of reality. Our lives lack meaning not because of the loss of objects or people but because nothing does or should be understood as providing any real meaning, in the first place.

The psychological-sociological problem of meaning focuses on psychological difficulties arising from aftermath of the loss of a valued person, object, or condition, one who or which may have been largely constitutive of the person's day-to-day reality. From a therapeutic perspective, the most important question is what steps, if any, can be taken to bolster such a person's resilience? How can the person having suffered loss regain a positive sense of himself, his life, and role in the world?

From the perspective of the philosophical problem of meaning, efforts to address the psychological-sociological problem may seem a specious "quick fix" covering,

not resolving a deeper problem. The person suffering a loss of meaning or relevance might feel "better" in response to a therapeutic program, for example, but a recalcitrant, structural irrelevance lies just around the corner. The best to be hoped may be an understanding of the human condition, and, perhaps, finding a means to deal with the realization that reality is, at bottom and at best, utterly neutral to human existence.

Our thesis, however, is that solutions to the philosophical problem of meaning may positively inform discussion of practical, therapeutic strategies designed to help people suffering a sense of lost relevance. We outline well-known positions of several philosophers in the theistic and nontheistic traditions of European existentialist and American pragmatic thought, as a prelude to discussion of how their insights may inform certain therapeutic strategies.

Four Philosophers on the Philosophical Problem of Meaning

In the nontheistic existential tradition, the early existentialist, Friedrich Nietzsche, argued that because there is no God (he famously declared in his major work that "God is dead"), there is no ultimate foundation for meaning or values, especially not the type institutional religions proffer. Nevertheless, he argued some people can, by virtue of their creativity, personal gifts, and superior biology, create their own values, independent of the systems of meaning societies impose on members. As creators of their own standards of good and evil, the godless universe is, for Nietzsche's "superman," a canvas on which those capable of transcending convention can paint their own affirmations of existence. Such men would, as he put it, dance on the edge of the abyss, with the quality of their lives intensified by dint of their own efforts, allowing them to transcend a "herd morality." The death of God that Nietzsche announced would be, as he said, the springboard for the "superman" to leap to a higher form of human, overcoming man and nihilism in one single act of self-creation.

In the Christian existentialist tradition, Soren Kierkegaard worried that if God does not exist, all values lack ultimate meaning. If one's values turn out to be transient, human creations of no cosmic significance, then every person's life, too, will be meaningless. Christianity presented a unique solution to Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling" and "sickness unto death." Posit the existence of God. Freely choose to passionately believe in God, particularly if doing so flies in the face of human rationality—take a "leap of faith." The true "knight of faith," Kierkegaard thought, would be driven to make that leap to seek solace for a soul tortured by the possibility that existence is utterly pointless.

The solution for the Christian is God's mystery, the Trinity, specifically, his commitment to something beyond and inconsistent with logic. Because the logic of the Trinity is contrary to reason, the believer's act of faith intensifies his "inner passion," his psychic experience allowing the believer to deal with a profound sense of dread arising from the possibility that God may not be the ground of being. When the believer makes Kierkegaard's leap (hopefully into the arms of a waiting God),

he, of course, knows God may not be there to catch him. If he falls, the abyss will swallow his existence, and life will turn out to have been as meaningless as he thought. Intensification of the Christian's inner passion, brought into being by a freely chosen act of faith, allows the believer to deal with the possibility his worst fears are true.

In the nontheistic pragmatist tradition, the American philosopher, John Dewey, viewed meaning (and meanings) as functions of shared, community values. Dewey believed the benefits religious people attribute singularly to religious faith are present in the experience of people living in close, humanistic relationships in their communities. Meanings, for him, do not derive from sources outside the natural order of human experience and are not found in "leaps of faith." Human experience, itself, has an "aesthetic" quality which is a potential source of meaning in reflective individuals' lives. As people grow to adulthood, their values and meanings, evolving over time in response to changing circumstances, help people address the concrete problematic situations they face each day. Lack of an ultimate, nonnaturalistic foundation for value or meaning was not a problem for Dewey. Lack of an absolute foundation allows meanings to evolve and aid in the development and continuation of communities and entitled to a presumption of current, practical usefulness. Like natural organisms evolved to better respond to their environments, extant meanings and values, having survived so far, have a historical pedigree. Similar to legal systems which require respect for and application of legal precedents, society's meanings and values have proven their worth. As with scientific hypotheses that inevitably will be superseded by theories that better accommodate new data and replace falsified theories, instrumentally superior meanings and values replace those in current use, not a fact to be bemoaned but applauded.

William James was a psychologist, philosopher, "radical empiricist," and philosophical pragmatist. Like Dewey, he believed instrumental knowledge derives from human experience, but his concept of "experience" was "radical" in that he believed mystical or religious experience (of God or other supranatural objects) could be just as valid a source of human knowledge (and meaning(s)) as traditionally understood sensory knowledge. James argued that the individual could be rational in accepting a religious hypothesis (e.g., the existence of God, heaven, or transcendent meaning(s)) if that belief worked in his life. "Working," in the pragmatist tradition, is broadly understood in psychological and philosophical terms, and pragmatic "truths" are not absolute statements of fact corresponding to a "state of affairs" in the world, but propositions the individual accepts because they allow him to effectively deal with changing, experienced conditions. Because meaning(s) serve a pragmatic function, they are, for Dewey and James, "instrumental hypotheses." For James, meanings and values one adopts will be "true" for a person where, in a broad sense, they "work" in that person's life.

Summarizing, Nietzsche argued creativity in defining one's meanings and values, regardless of society's views, allows the person suffering existential anxieties to find a self-created meaning in a godless universe. Kierkegaard's leap of faith, in

the face of contrary evidence and logic, is Christianity's proposal for dealing with the realization that God may not be there to save man or his values. For Dewey, provisional acceptance of society's values is a rational, naturalistic solution to the problem of philosophical meaning, whereas, for James, faith in the religious or nonreligious object (or hypothesis) may be justified so long as the beliefs in issue remain "workable" within the believer's global corpus of beliefs. So creativity, the ability to act in faith, notwithstanding risk, acceptance of values and meanings as rational guides to future action, and the rational ability to believe, where doing so has instrumental value, are their solutions.

The Psychological-Sociological Problem of Meaning

Hierarchies of relevances structure human lives, helping to define who we are and what commitments we make. "Relevance" connotes importance and what we perceive as "important" is a function, broadly speaking, of our own life histories. Because societies self-organize in ways which facilitate their continuation, society's members are rewarded when they are perceived as contributing to a community's continuation. Self-perception of relevance has a social and pragmatic basis as one is likely to perceive himself as relevant and important to the extent he perceives his contribution to the community comports with the community's ideas of what conduct is valuable. A sense of relevance is a likely by-product on one having internalized society's values, in this regard.

The loss of one's means of support and one's inability to replace it, for example, may impair or destroy the individual's sense of self-worth. No longer contributing to society, the jobless person may view himself as a drain on its limited resources. Under American cultural norms, including its long history of rugged individualism and its lauding of the person who provides for his family and succeeds or dominates in business, careers are largely constitutive of who we are.

When a career is lost, it may have devastating consequences. It may, for example, result in severing business and social connections, derailing forward momentum in one's career, and impairing the effective use of one's resources to alter the current situation. Rather than feeling a sense of integration in society, the person may experience detachment, a sense of being alone and a stranger in the world. Life may seem an aimless struggle, a floating through time where the individual, adrift, is unable to take what might seem to be reasonable steps to try to change the status quo. No longer perceiving himself important to society, his previous sense of relevance disappears, connections attenuate, and meaning, as a consequence, unsurprisingly, dissipates.

"Resilience" connotes a person's capacity to recover from loss. Resilient people seem to be able to continue to feel connected and relevant even where circumstances suggest feelings of detachment might predominate. How can someone suffering from feelings of a lack of relevance or meaning arising in such situations be helped? We discuss several therapeutic strategies in light of the philosophical

insights discussed above and suggest ways in which they may inform and enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic strategies discussed below.

Achievement and Self-Worth: Attitude, Goals, and Actions

Feelings of self-worth and meaning arise naturally from our experience of love, friendship, and the fruits of our creative efforts. The setting, pursuit, and attainment of goals contribute to the development of feelings of self-worth, and such feelings are fostered by accomplishing goals we set. Achievement makes patent that positive change is possible, regardless of current adversities. Acceptance of the serious possibility of success may, in fact, be a first step to increasing resilience. Nietzsche lauded the concepts risk, creativity, and danger. Kierkegaard viewed the risk and danger of his leap a necessity for Christian salvation. For both of them, risk-taking was both a sign of strength and a source of joy, notwithstanding an omnipresent possibility of disaster. For Dewey and James, creative, instrumental solutions are how we rationally approach fashioning strategies to increase the chances of attaining self-directed goals, notwithstanding the omnipresent risk of failure. Encouraging creative solutions and problem solving, bounded by pragmatic knowledge, and as the title of one of James' essay says, the "Will to Believe," may help the person suffering a loss of meaning realize his situation is not hopeless.

Trying new strategies, creating new solutions to current problems, and taking risks will likely be part of the afflicted person's recovery. Helping to identify solutions most likely to result in incremental successes is critical as success frequently breeds success, and more ambitious goals may be pursued with some sense of optimism if initial success is achieved. Dewey and James were, as indicated, believers in rational problem solving. Dewey wrote of man's experience in nature as a series of efforts to solve "concrete problematic situations," and his pragmatism, generally, is optimistic and goal directed.

The mentor, coach, or friend should encourage the person suffering a loss of meaning to develop a pragmatic program to accomplish short-term, relatively easily accomplished goals. Small accomplishments may help rebuild self-esteem and, with it, feelings of relevance and meaning. Focus on the past should not be overemphasized as these may be counterproductive; however, the past cannot be ignored, entirely, as consideration of past failures may facilitate avoiding unworkable, past-tried strategies.

Because the ability to exercise control over some significant domain of one's experience may impel action, it is important that such areas be identified. If we feel competent in our lives, we can afford to think of other people, but if fixated on our failures, a sense of paralysis may result.

The idea should be to foster efforts to rationally and actively effect change, inside and out, and to help develop a positive attitude regarding the possibility of effective action, in pursuit of reasonably attainable goals.

Identity and Self-Worth, Independent of Achievement

To describe a person as "resilient" is to attribute to him a personality trait that describes how he has responded historically to negative experiences. It usually means he has shown sufficient resources to effectively address adverse events and the psychic, economic, or social consequences to which they give rise. Loss, to the resilient person, does not define him, and irretrievable damage, in many cases, is no necessary consequence of experienced adversity.

People's worth in society is often defined by what they do and what they earn. Other sources of value obviously exist, but empirical data indicates material well-being is and has been an increasingly dominant factor in the way American society and its members assess other people's value. This has been the case for decades, and for this reason, unsurprisingly, it has become an increasingly important factor, generally, in the formation of one's sense of personal identity. From a therapeutic point of view, it is important for the person suffering from a loss of meaning to understand that while goal-directed action in the world has a strong tendency to generate positive feelings, the experience of being conscious and a member of society has value, regardless of what a person accomplishes. But how does the person who has suffered a loss shift from a likely abstract assent to the proposition that value and self-worth exist independently of material success (or the persistence of cherished objects, including people) to a causally efficacious realization that life itself has meaning, when meaning has already disappeared?

Focus may be directed on past contributions or future possibilities of productive action, but effort should focus on enhancing the recognition that the ability to experience life, in and of itself, the ability to help others, if one so chooses, and the capacity to reach beyond the confines of one's own subjectivity are valuable, in themselves. The past does not wholly determine the future, and return of a sense of meaning and relevance is not irretrievably precluded merely because current circumstances are problematic. Focusing the person who suffers loss on his potential to act in and impact the world, in positive ways, independent of material achievements (or lack of them), may help avoid a naturally narcissistic focus on current, severe problems. It underscores the present possibility that meaning may yet be found, regardless of past success or failure, in a manner not contingent on the outcome of life's vicissitudes.

For Kierkegaard, the free choice to engage in self-directed action creates the possibility of salvation regardless of the state of his current anxiety, and for Nietzsche, human choice creates meaning by an act of will. Their solutions derive from the subject's identity and consciousness, not achievements. For Dewey and James, all people have inherent value. In "The Will to Believe," James argues man's willingness to believe, even where a particular outcome is underdetermined by traditional sensory experience, can be the means by which he saves himself.

From a therapeutic perspective, the potential for meaning inheres in human creative capacities and the possibilities it creates. Recognition by the person suffering loss that such capacities exist should be encouraged and focus on creative problem

solving, and potentiality can provide a source of optimism, even in particularly adverse, current circumstances. Because such potential exists in everyone, it should be a cornerstone of efforts to repair a lost sense of meaning.

Accountability of the Individual

Accountability for one's conduct is a form of connectedness bridging the gap between one's inner experience and the world around him. Kierkegaard's so-called knight of faith, the person who makes his leap, was fully accountable for his own act of faith in affirming God's existence. For Nietzsche, every individual is accountable for either accepting his culture's morality and inauthentic values or creating his own and whether or not he will transcend society. For Dewey, the individual bears responsibility for realizing his potential as a member of society, and for James, every person has the freedom to rationally decide what he will believe, guided by beliefs that have worked for him in the past. Fostering accountability should be a primary goal of any program designed to foster a sense of relevance and meaning. The person suffering from a loss of meaning and perceived irrelevance may be inclined to blame other people, organizations, or events for his situation. Where such a person comes to understand he is accountable for his life and to take steps to address his circumstances no matter what adversities life's vicissitudes present, he will be more likely to recover what he has lost.

Conclusions

The following poem addresses the subject of lost meaning, the possibility of optimism, and the limits of human reason.

> *A Chained Melody*
> Endless array of thoughts -- Eternity's
> Cold embrace locks'round you like a tomb
> But in the womb of your mind
> Behind your blackest mirror
> Behind the ice-images of derelict ships
> Half-sunk in your own stagnant seas
> Eternity's endless liquid still flows there
> Like sunlight, through darkest green crystal
> Souls quench their thirst there
> Impossibly free
> And as the perfection of imprecision
> Becomes your own lyric
> And as time's terrible torment becomes
> Your own-chained melody
> Wonder -- if all motion is illusion, as Zeno says,
> Time and change, too, must be illusions. . .

Do you hear the laughter at all our
Quantifications?
Can you string-along your own
Chained melody – in eleven dimensions?
The bells chime without reason
How attenuate human cognition.