

# The World Still Cries for Meaning: Are We Still Listening?

William F. Evans

## Introduction

My first encounter with the life and work of Dr. Viktor E. Frankl occurred while participating in a Holocaust Remembrance week during the spring semester of 1977 when I was a graduate student at Duke University. I was introduced to his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1984), which I read that week for the first time. It was a timely encounter for me, personally, for my father had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, my mother, who had struggled with bipolar disorder most of her adult life, had just been hospitalized for severe depression, my career path seemed suddenly uncertain, my relationship with my girlfriend seemed tenuous, and my entire worldview felt extremely fragile. I desperately needed meaning in my life, and this introduction to logotherapy, and the life and work of Dr. Frankl, came just in the nick of time. Thankfully, I was able to regain my bearings, and the truths of logotherapy gave me a strong foundation upon which I was able to grow and develop, both personally and professionally. I was starving for a solid sense of meaning in my life, and logotherapy provided the structure: freedom of will—will to meaning—meaning in life; “deeds done—loves loved—learning to suffer with courage and dignity” suddenly became for me a solid foundation for rebuilding my life.

I have read and reread *Man's Search for Meaning* at least once every year since the spring of 1977, and some years three or four times. It always provides me with a clearer perspective on what is really important in life, and I am reminded time and again of the need for, and the ability to pursue and find, meaning in life. I have read all of Dr. Frankl's books that have been translated into English, but this book remains foundational for me. In 1977, as surely as before and after, I was crying out for mean-

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ing in my life. In logotherapy, and in the life and work of Dr. Viktor Frankl, I discovered many profound truths, simply and clearly stated, that I desperately needed to live meaningfully and well. The truths of logotherapy as lived and taught by Dr. Frankl are as needed and as timely today as they were during the Holocaust for him and for me in 1977 and since. The world still cries for meaning! Are we still listening?

## The Search for Meaning as a Universal Human Quest

Every human being desires to live a meaningful life. I find support for this idea in Viktor Frankl's statement: "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life." (Frankl 1984, 105); and in Bjorklund and Bee's writing: "The quest for meaning is a basic human characteristic... the search for meaning is an integral part of the human experience." (Bjorklund and Bee 2008, 268).

The real essence of this quest for meaning as the ultimate concern of human beings is called self-transcendence (Frankl 1984, 1997). This is clearly more than simply fulfilling the need for self-actualization as constructed by Abraham Maslow. By self-transcendence I refer to a longing for something or someone beyond ourselves that we desire to give ourselves to. Viktor Frankl defined self-transcendence this way in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (1997): "Human existence is always directed to something, or someone, other than itself, be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter lovingly. I have termed this constitutive characteristic of human existence "self-transcendence." What is called self-actualization is ultimately an effect, the unintentional by-product, of self-transcendence." (Frankl 1997, 84) "A human being is actualizing itself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself and he is forgetting himself by giving himself, be it through serving a cause higher than himself or loving a person other than himself. Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence." (Frankl 1997, 138).

## Key Issues

So, then, how does the study of psychology and psychotherapy relate to the human quest for meaning? Originally, the field of psychology was defined as the study of the human soul or psyche. This meant studying that, which appeared to be uniquely human: consciousness, reason, love, will. However, as Erich Fromm noted in his classic book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, that practice was soon discarded for other goals, especially the desire for respect in the world of science:

"The tradition in which psychology was a study of the soul, concerned with man's virtue and happiness, was abandoned. Academic psychology, trying to imitate the natural sciences and laboratory methods of weighing and counting, dealt with everything but the soul... Psychology thus became a science lacking its main subject matter, the soul, it was concerned with mechanism, reaction formations, instincts, but not with the most specifically human phenomena: love, reason, conscience, values." (Fromm 1950, 6).

Therefore, as Viktor Frankl also noted, “A psychology that a priori shuts out meaning and reason cannot recognize the self-transcendent quality of the human reality and instead must resort to drives and instincts.” (Frankl 1997, 132) Psychology became the study of naturalistic biochemical machines. “Whereas behaviorism, championed by such advocates as John Watson, stressed the mechanistic and overt aspects of human functioning, Freud and his followers developed a theory premised on covert intrapsychic determinism.” (Corsini and Weddington 2008, 301).

In the process of seeking to understand this biochemical human machine, psychologists have often admitted that something appears broken within human beings, something that definitely needs repairing. Yet I’ve often wondered how one flawed biochemical machine can somehow fix itself in such a way that it is then capable of fixing another flawed biochemical machine? It always seemed much like the blind leading the blind to me, which, of course, would result in both stumbling and falling.

However, the existential approach to psychology, espoused by Frankl, Fromm, May, Yalom, and others, “rejects the deterministic view of human nature espoused by orthodox psychoanalysis and radical behaviorism. [Whereas] psychoanalysis sees freedom as restricted by unconscious forces, irrational drives, and past events; behaviorists see freedom as restricted by socio-cultural conditioning... Existential therapists... emphasize our freedom to choose what to make of our circumstances. This approach is grounded in the assumption that we are free and therefore responsible for our choices and actions... We are not victims of our circumstances; we are what we choose to be... Existential therapy is a process of searching for the value and meaning of life. The therapists’ basic task is to encourage clients to explore their options for creating a meaningful existence.” (Corey 2001, 143).

The school of existential psychotherapy called logotherapy by its founder, Dr. Viktor Frankl, sought to rehumanize psychology and turn it back to the study of the human soul. Frankl believed that the essence of being human lies in searching for meaning and purpose. His life was an illustration of his theory, for he lived what his theory espoused. (Corey 2001, 141) “Logotherapy aims to unlock the will to meaning and to assist the patient in seeing a meaning in his life.” (Frankl 1997, 128) Logotherapy is “height psychology” as opposed to “depth psychology” (Frankl 1997; 1984) Frankl often wondered, “If meanings and values really are ‘nothing but’ defense mechanisms and reaction formations, is life really worth living?” (Frankl 1997, 105).

Now, regarding religion and its relationship to existential psychology, and more specifically, logotherapy, Frankl stated: “We have seen that there is not only a repressed and unconscious libido, but also repressed and unconscious religio” (Frankl 1997, 55), and “A religious sense is existent and present in each and every person, albeit buried, not to say repressed, in the unconscious.” (Frankl 1997, 151). Furthermore, Frankl acknowledged, “Religion provides man with more than psychotherapy ever could—but it also demands more of him.” (Frankl 1997, 80) By this “more” he meant ultimate meaning, or what he termed, “self-transcendence.” (Frankl 1997).

As a practicing psychiatrist, Magdalena Naylor wrote, “The purpose of psychotherapy is to help us become free to be aware of and experience our possibilities... Ultimately, the mission of the psychotherapist differs little from the priest – to teach

us (1) how to be, (2) how to care for our soul, and (3) how to die.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 186–187) This is true to a point, with one main exception... the priest, pastor, rabbi, or religious leader almost always will bring into focus one’s relationship with God, or should, I think, whereas the psychiatrist is free to leave God out, and often does. How one can study the human soul without addressing a person’s spiritual world view would seem to me, at best, a daunting task.

## **Philosophical Foundations for Life Meaning**

Frankl espoused three philosophical foundations: (1) freedom of will, (2) will to meaning, and (3) meaning in life. As to freedom of will—Frankl often stated that human beings had the ability to choose at any moment who we will be, and that we needed to take responsibility for our lives. “Between stimulus and response, there is a space, and in that space is our ability to choose our response.” (Vesely 2010). As for the will to meaning, Frankl believed this to be the primary motivation and the deepest longing of every human being, as stated earlier. Regarding meaning in life, he believed that meaning could be found, and that it was the responsibility of every human being to seek this meaning. He did not believe the psychotherapist could give meaning to any individual, but the therapist could, and should, convince the client that there is a meaning to be found. Please note that while Frankl believed these maxims to be absolute truths about human life, he also saw the fulfillment of each as relative to a person’s unique discoveries, creations, and experiences (Frankl 1984, 1997).

## **The Necessary Conditions for Meaning in Life**

In addition to these three philosophical foundations, Frankl also believed there are three necessary conditions for meaning in life. According to logotherapy, human beings “discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed, (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone, and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering” (Frankl 1984, 115), in other words, by “the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.” (Frankl 1984, 151).

As to love, is it possible to live a meaningful life without at least one genuine loving relationship with another person? I cannot imagine it. “Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire,” wrote Frankl (Frankl 1984, 49). “Life without love would be nothing.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 99). “To have only ourselves to love, to have no greater project in life than ourselves, is surely the very depths of meaninglessness.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 101).

As for work—it appears to me that the giving of ourselves to some cause or project that utilizes our best skills and abilities to make some positive difference in the

world is certainly a great human need. And yet, “The number of people who enjoy their work and find it truly meaningful are a minority in the population.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 158).

I consider myself a very fortunate person to work in an academic environment where the mission statement reads, “We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives” (JMU Mission Statement 2010). This mission gives me the freedom and the responsibility to create and facilitate a learning environment that enables me to work meaningfully. I genuinely love my work as a professor of psychology, and my goal is to influence people in this learning community in such a way that, together, we fulfill the mission statement of our university.

As for suffering with courage and dignity, I believe it is taking an unalterable fate and allowing it to make us a stronger, wiser, and more compassionate human being. No one needs to invite suffering, as it seems to be a commonality among all human beings—more for some, of course, than for others. “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death” (Frankl 1984, 76). “No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden” (Frankl 1984, 86). “It is possible to say ‘yes to life’ in spite of all the tragic aspects of human existence” (Frankl 1984, 13). Each person, then, will have the choice as to what to make of his or her unique suffering. One may become a bitter person, a victim, or one may become a better person, a victor, more capable than ever before of compassionate understanding toward other people in their times of pain and suffering.

## The Effects of Low Meaning

Regarding the state of the human quest for meaning, Frankl stated, “Today, man’s will to meaning is frustrated on a worldwide scale. Ever more people are haunted by a feeling of meaninglessness which is often accompanied by a feeling of emptiness – as I am used to calling it, an existential vacuum. It mainly manifests itself in boredom and apathy. While boredom is indicative of a loss of interest in the world, apathy betrays a lack of initiative to do something in the world, to change something in the world.” (Frankl 1997, 139).

Erich Fromm once stated, “we are a society of notoriously unhappy people: lonely, anxious, depressed, destructive, dependent—people who are glad when we have killed the time we are trying so hard to save.” (Fromm 1996, 5–6). “Man is a being in search of meaning,” wrote Frankl, and... “Today his search is unsatisfied and this constitutes the pathology of our age.” (Frankl 1997, 112). So, what are the effects of this lack of meaning? Frankl called this the “existential vacuum,” defined as “a feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness” which has three facets: depression, aggression, and addiction (Frankl 1984, 143).

Regarding depression, many studies have demonstrated a significant negative correlation between life meaning and depression (Batthyany and Guttman 2005), including my own research, which has shown a significant negative correlation between the Purpose in Life (PIL) scale and the Beck Depression Inventory,  $r(184) = -.61, p < .001$  (Evans et al. 2010a). Frankl noted that “depression often results in suicide.” (Frankl 1997, 99) For youth in America between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is the third leading cause of death (Center for Disease Control 2010). In my research, I have also discovered a clear negative correlation between purpose in life, as measured by the PIL, with both “suicidal thoughts,”  $r(183) = -.25, p < .01$  and “suicidal attempts,”  $r(180) = -.21, p < .01$  (Evans et al. 2010a). Without a clear reason to live, it seems many cannot cope with all the difficulties and pain life can inflict.

As to addiction, empirical research has also noted the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse among those who measure low on life meaning (Batthyany and Guttman 2005). I have recently conducted research among university students supporting these claims, measuring substantial negative correlations between Purpose in Life and the consequences of excessive alcohol use, measured by an adapted CORE Alcohol Survey, such as “being arrested while under the influence of alcohol,”  $r(184) = -.23, p < .01$ ; “being taken advantage of sexually,”  $r(184) = -.20, p < .01$ ; and “poor academic performance,”  $r(184) = -.21, p < .01$  (Evans et al. 2010a). Frankl observed that in one study, “90% of alcoholics looked upon their existence as meaningless and without purpose.” (Frankl 1997, 102) According to a recent Alcohol-Related Disease Impact tool, “from 2001–2005, there were approximately 79,000 deaths annually attributable to excessive alcohol use. In fact, excessive alcohol use is the third leading lifestyle-related cause of death for people in the United States each year.” (Center for Disease Control 2010).

Here are some recent statistics related to alcohol use among college students in America:

- Deaths: 1700 college students die each year from alcohol-related injuries, including motor vehicle crashes.
- Drunk Driving: 2.1 million students drove while under the influence of alcohol last year.
- Injury: 599,000 students are unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol.
- Assault: more than 696,000 students are assaulted each year by another student who has been drinking.
- Sexual Abuse: more than 97,000 students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape each year.
- Unsafe Sex: 400,000 students report having unprotected sex while more than 100,000 report being intoxicated while consenting to have sex.
- Academic Problems: about 25% report academic problems related to their drinking habits, including missing classes, falling behind, poor performance on exams, and receiving lower grades as a consequence (Hingson et al. 2002, 2003a, b, 2005, 2009).

As Naylor et al. recognized, “People take drugs because they are alienated and powerless and have no sense of meaning in their lives.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 65)

As for aggression, Frankl wrote, “people are most likely to become aggressive when they are caught in this feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness.” (Frankl 1997, 104). “Drug abuse and violent crime are among the most destructive ways in which Americans deal with alienation and separation.” Naylor and associates report, “Homicide is the 6th leading cause of premature death in the United States, occurring at a rate of 4.4 times higher than in the next most violent Western industrialized nation.” (Naylor et al. 1994, 63) According to the Center for Disease Control, “Violence is a serious public health problem in the United States. In 2006, more than 18,000 people were victims of homicide and more than 33,000 took their own life” (Center for Disease Control 2010).

Without a revealed life meaning, it appears that many individuals may lapse into bitterness and victimization, resulting in depression, addiction, and aggression as a consequence of the existential vacuum. This is no less true today than it was in 1938, 1946, or 1977; indeed, the existential vacuum and the unheard cry for meaning may be more pronounced in the twenty-first century than ever before in human history!

May I be so bold as to add anxiety as another aspect of the human condition in the twenty-first century? Anxiety, it appears to me, is a pervasive attitude among the students I teach and relate to, stemming, I believe, from a lack of meaning and purpose in life. In my research conducted during the 2010–2011 academic year, I discovered that there was a highly significant negative correlation between anxiety and life meaning, as measured by the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the PIL,  $r(116) = -.475$ ,  $p < .001$ . I also discovered that there was a significant negative correlation between death anxiety and life meaning, as measured by the Collett-Lester Fear of Death scale and the PIL,  $r(117) = -.300$ ,  $p < .001$ .

After conducting separate *t*-tests on death anxiety for both the experimental and control groups, for the experimental group, at pretest ( $M = 94.59$ ,  $SD = 20.95$ ), participants reported significantly more death anxiety than at posttest ( $M = 82.47$ ,  $SD = 21.23$ ),  $t(60) = 2.263$ ,  $p = .027$ . For the control group, at pretest ( $M = 84.72$ ,  $SD = 23.69$ ), participants did not significantly differ in death anxiety than at posttest ( $M = 81.97$ ,  $SD = 26.14$ ),  $t(56) = .421$ ,  $p = .675$ .

The experimental group consisted of my death-and-dying classes compared to all my other classes, which served as the control group. In my death-and-dying class, reading, discussing, and writing a reflection paper on Dr. Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* is required of all students. They are challenged to think deeply about the sources of meaning in their lives, or the lack thereof. They are also encouraged to construct a life mission statement and their “bucket list” of goals they want to achieve in their lives.

The pretest occurred during the first week of the semester and the posttest during the last week. I honestly believe that it is the encounter with Dr. Frankl’s life and legacy that made the meaningful difference for these students. So, I now share his life and work in all of my classes, and in most of them, I also require a component of service for the community in order to promote self-transcendence (Olivieri et al. 2012). In my research project conducted last semester, I discovered that a “motivation to serve others” is clearly related to Purpose in Life (PIL):  $r(245) = .295$ ,  $p < .01$ ; also, “civic action” demonstrated a strong positive association with Purpose in Life (PIL):  $r(245) = .363$ ,  $p < .01$  (Langridge et al. 2012).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, please allow me to restate some key points. First, every human being aspires to live well and meaningfully. Second, I sincerely believe that we need to pursue holistic health in our study of psychology and psychotherapy and our quest to understand the nature of human nature. By this I mean that we need to ask ourselves constantly and consistently, “will this enhance life; will it empower one to make a positive difference in the world; will it foster healthy human relationships; and will it enable one to suffer with courage and dignity?” Third, logotherapy, in all its aspects of inquiry, teaching, and therapy, can help us understand the nature of human nature, including the human need for meaning in life and the possibility to discover and create this meaning in life that is so desperately needed in our world. Fourth, let us learn to honor the human quest for truth, a pursuit of the best we can know that leads us to the highest aspirations of humankind, i.e., height psychology, or self-transcendence.

Charles Darwin, after a lifetime devoted to his work, wrote that if he had his life to live over again, he would read a little poetry every day and listen to music at least weekly. He stated, “My mind seems to have become a machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts... the loss of these emotional tastes is a loss of happiness... the erosion of higher sensibilities may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more possibly to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.” (Darwin 1897, 81–82).

Darwin appeared to realize a human longing for something more in life. Albert Einstein also seemed to recognize a human need for meaning in life when he wrote, “The man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.” (Einstein 1984, 3).

We have the freedom to choose how we will view life and how we will live. Will we define life as Shakespeare did in *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 4:

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard of no more;

It is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.” (Shakespeare 2005)

This option, of course, is pure nihilism. Or, will we define life more meaningfully, as Frederick Buechner did it in his autobiography:

“Listen to your life; see it for the fathomless mystery that it is:  
In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness.  
Touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it. For in the last analysis,  
all moments are key moments,  
And life itself is grace.” (Buechner 1992, 2)

My sincerest hope is that, with the best and highest that can be known through the study and practice of logotherapy, we will all grow to see that life, lived well and meaningfully, is a precious, fragile gift, meant to be treasured. The world still cries for meaning! Are we still listening? How will we respond?



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