Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-being

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Introduction

By declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic "the self-transcendence of human existence." It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence (Frankl 1985, 133).

A man struggling for existence will naturally look for something of value. There are two ways of looking… if he looks in the right direction, he recognizes the true nature of sickness, old age, and death, and then he searches for meaning in that which transcends all human suffering. In my life of pleasures, I seem to be looking in the wrong way (Buddha 1966, 8).

What is the best way to prepare people for all the suffering in life, such as sickness, old age, and death? What is the best way to equip people to realize their potentials and live a fulfilling and worthy life? The answer to both questions is meaning-seeking and self-transcendence, as illustrated by the above two quotes from two very different sources—one from Western psychology, another from Eastern religion.

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The main purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework based on Viktor Frankl's (1985) concepts of meaning-seeking and self-transcendence for achieving well-being for individuals and society (Wong 2014). Such a conceptual framework may contribute to a meaning-centered curriculum for Life and Death Education that emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility to develop the spiritual values of will to meaning and serving the greater good.

I also want to emphasize that this meaning framework is particularly relevant for people working in hospital and hospice settings. In such situations, the health workers not only have to wrestle with their own suffering and death anxiety, they also have to confront on a daily basis the suffering of their patients. Sometimes they may feel overwhelmed by the huge demand for relief of suffering, but there is no effective medical treatment to cure human suffering and fear of death. Frankl's (1986) logotherapy, as a medical ministry, offers patients the choice to relate to suffering in such a way that they still can have the freedom and responsibility to live meaningfully.

Spiritual Nature of Meaning-Seeking and Self-Transcendence

In recent years, meaning-seeking and meaning-making have received much attention from researchers (Hicks and Routledge 2013; Shaver and Mikulincer 2012). Most of them recognize Viktor Frankl's contribution, but very few of them bother to investigate what Viktor Frankl actually said. Typically, these researchers take a cognitive and mechanistic approach to studying meaning, in contrast to Frankl's focus on existential meaning and spirituality.

Frankl's major contribution to human psychology is his concept of *will to meaning*, which represents the deepest and universal human need to reach beyond oneself and serve something greater. Interestingly, there is almost a consensus among research psychologists that meaning is experienced when people serve something greater than themselves (Baumeister et al. 2013; Seligman 2011). These psychologists simply presented this as an empirical fact, without offering a compelling and comprehensive theoretical explanation. Frankl, on the other hand, started with a theoretical framework about the anthropology of human nature and attributed self-transcendence to the spiritual nature of human beings. This theoretical framework has profound implications for how we understand ourselves, and the human phenomena of religion and spirituality. Frankl is almost unique in elevating self-transcendence as the hallmark of spirituality and as the end state of becoming fully human.

Frankl emphasized that spirituality is the part of human nature that separates us from other animals. Humans are by nature meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. We are motivated by both the need to understand the world in which we live, and the yearning to search for something of value and significance that makes life worth living in the midst of suffering.

This emphasis on spirituality as inherent in human nature has a long and venerable tradition in psychology, going back to William James (1902/1997). His book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, continues to impact psychology. In philosophy, interest in spirituality can be traced back even earlier (e.g., Kierkegaard, Pascal).

The essence of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy is to awaken people's sense of responsibility to live a meaningful life based on self-transcendence. It is through recognition of the basic human need for meaning and transcendence that we are able to fully appreciate what is right and noble about human beings. It is through pursuance of the path of self-transcendence that we become fully human. In other words, only by fully developing our spiritual nature can we become optimally functioning human beings.

The construct of self-transcendence as developed by Viktor Frankl serves as a useful conceptual framework for both theistic and non-theistic spirituality. More importantly, it provides a spiritual vision for the future of humanity based on awakening and harnessing of our spiritual values of sacrificial love and serving others.

Three Levels of Self-Transcendence

But how do we practice self-transcendence? How do we translate it into daily living? How does self-transcendence contribute to meaningful living and well-being? Based on my research on Viktor Frankl, I propose that there are three levels of self-transcendence, which can be summarized as following:

1. Seeking ultimate meaning—To reach beyond our physical limitations within the confines of time and space and gain a glimpse of the invisible glory of the transcendental realm. For non-theistic seekers, seeking ultimate meaning means seeking the ultimate ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty.
2. Seeking situational meaning—To reach beyond our mental and situational constraints and connect with our spiritual values. This involves being mindful of the present moment with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and compassion.
3. Seeking one's calling—To reach beyond self-actualization and pursue a higher purpose for the greater good. This involves engagement and striving to achieve a concrete meaning in life, a life goal of contributing something of value to others.

At all three levels, we are motivated by the intrinsic need for spiritual values. If we can cultivate all three levels of transcendence, we will develop a spiritual lifestyle that is good and healthy for individuals and society. We will explain how we can practice these three kinds of self-transcendence.

Seeking Ultimate Meaning

Frankl differentiates between ultimate meaning and situational meaning. He refers to ultimate meaning as Supra-meaning or God; it is something that we can vaguely understand but never truly comprehend. Ultimate meaning reflects our intuitive knowledge and presuppositions, which are beyond rational analysis. We typically seek ultimate meaning through self-reflection and philosophical or spiritual inquiries.

This level of meaning is metaphysical and transcendental; it has to do with a person's philosophical assumptions, worldviews, religious beliefs, and global beliefs. It may also include myths and metanarratives about the spiritual, transcendental world. At this level, meaning-seeking is a continuous process because ultimate meaning is by definition unreachable.

The global belief in ultimate meaning has many functional values. For example, it reassures victims of crime of ultimate justice, even if the perpetrators were able to get away within the human justice system. Faith in ultimate meaning also gives hope and consolation that physical death is not the end of everything and there is some form of immortality.

The belief in ultimate meaning also provides a conceptual framework to make sense of the chaotic, unpredictable nature of life. It affirms that everything happens for a purpose, even when people feel confused and overwhelmed. To a scientist, such beliefs might seem primitive, but their prevalence and enduring popularity indicate that they serve some adaptive functions and that religious beliefs and practices will always remain a human phenomenon.

An important derivative from belief in ultimate meaning is the affirmation of the intrinsic meaning and value of every individual life. Frankl (1985, 1986) often appealed for the intrinsic value of life in order to rescue patients from their suicidal ideation. Often when patients learn about their prognosis of being a terminal case or the verdict that they are paralyzed for life, the typical reaction is to declare that there is no more meaning in their lives and that there is no point in living an undignified existence without hope for recovery. Frankl had to convince them that their suffering actually gave them a rare opportunity for human achievement. Frankl argued that, in spite of their physical limitations and their need to depend on others to take care of them, they can still live with dignity as long as they take a heroic stance and maintain an attitude of freedom and responsibility for their own happiness.

Seeking Situational Meaning

Frankl puts more emphasis on situational meaning than on ultimate meaning, because we can never fully understand the ultimate meaning, but we can discover the meaning potential of each situation. His phenomenological approach is very similar to the Buddhist practice of mindful awareness. Frankl suggests that we not only pay deliberate attention to all the details of our inner experience and external circumstances from moment to moment, but that we also need to relate to our immediate experience in an open, curious, and responsible way. In each situation, we need to ask "what is the right thing to do?"

At this level, self-transcendence is achieved by being detached from self-interest, social conditioning, and all kinds of preconceptions and biases that may distort our perception of what is actually happening at the present. Self-detachment or self-distancing not only enables us to have a more accurate observation of our experiences, but also allows us the spaciousness to access our spiritual values such as conscience, compassion, will to meaning, and responsibility.

Self-detachment is a unique human capacity to distance oneself and take on the perspective of looking at our situations and ourselves from "the outside". This is not splitting from oneself, because one is totally aware of one's own psychological integrity at all times. It is more like perspective-taking and detaching oneself from all kinds of anxieties related to self-interest. This capacity to step away from ourselves allows some space and time to choose to respond with the right attitude in accordance with our spiritual values.

Seeking One's Calling

In between ultimate meaning and situational meaning, there is also the existential meaning of one's sense of calling for a mission or vocation. A sense of calling straddles between ultimate meaning and situational meaning. If you believe that the world is organized according to some higher purpose and grand design, it is easier for you to believe that you have a special calling to fill a unique niche in the larger scheme of things. Secondly, a particular event may trigger one's desire to pursue a certain mission consistent with one's values and passion. For example, a person may have the desire to serve the poor and disadvantaged. When he learns about the opportunity to serve in a leper colony, he may accept this mission as his calling.

At the third level, one attains self-transcendence by pursuing an achievable life goal that is greater than oneself. Calling is not just about work and career—it is also about how one responds to life's demand of the self. It is about not what I can get from life, but what life wants from me. Calling comes to those who are not only aware of their strengths, the need of the hour, and the opportunities available, but also who have a sense of responsibility to serve the common good. One's life is meaningful to the extent that one has discovered one's purpose in life or raison d'être based on calling.

Dik and Duffy (2009) define calling as: "A transcendent summon, originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary motivation." (p. 427)

This definition echoes Frankl's emphasis on self-transcendence. A general sense of calling, regardless of one's occupation, is the call to devote one's life to serving others and to improving oneself in order to fulfill one's potential. A specific sense of calling is to discover a special niche or life role that makes use of one's unique talents, temperament, and experiences. This calling may change according to an individual's stage of development, station in life, and the demands of each situation.

A sense of calling endows one's life with a sense of meaning, responsibility, and dignity. Calling necessarily needs to entail some sense of societal contribution above and beyond personal happiness and success. There is near-consensus that calling is linked to meaning and purpose, as well as the betterment of society (Dik et al. 2013; Dik and Duffy 2009; Hardy 1990). From Frankl's perspective, pursuing a sense of calling as a concrete meaning in life entails both the global belief in ultimate meaning and the mindful awareness of situational meaning.

Empirical Findings in Support of the Role of Meaning in Well-Being

Ultimate Meaning and Religious/Spiritual Beliefs

All three levels of self-transcendence contribute to well-being. I want to discuss some of the empirical findings relating self-transcendence to well-being.

Regarding ultimate meaning, there is a huge literature on the adaptive benefits of religious beliefs and spiritual practices (e.g., Koenig et al. 2001; Pargament 1997; Wong et al. 2012). In addition to the commonly mentioned benefit of contributing to a sense of coherence and community, Fredrickson's (2002) research findings suggest that some of the health benefits of religious beliefs might be mediated by positive emotions.

Research on death acceptance (Wong 2008; Wong and Tomer 2011) is another fertile area that has demonstrated how religious and spiritual beliefs help prepare people to embrace and celebrate death and new possibilities. Recently, I developed the Life Orientation Scale (LOS; Wong 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) to measure global belief in ultimate meaning. This is a new scale with important implications. Future research with this scale will determine whether many of Frankl's ideas about ultimate meaning can be confirmed.

Situational Meaning and Mindfulness

Research on mindful meditation or mindful awareness has clearly demonstrated the health benefits of such practices (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 2005; Siegel 2010). There are also research findings suggesting that mindfulness is related to meaning in life and well-being (Brown et al. 2007; Wong 2012c). Another line of relevant research is the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). When one is engaged in work or play, one can reach the flow state when the perceived challenge stretches personal skill and when there are clear proximal goals. The third line of research has to do with discovering and remembering meaningful moments.

My research on adaptive types of reminiscence (Wong and Watt 1991) showed that both instrumental and integrative memories are beneficial to the elderly. In instrumental reminiscence, the seniors remembered an incident or a moment when they were able to overcome a difficulty or resolve a problem. In integrative reminiscence, they remembered cases in which they were able to achieve reconciliation with an alienated loved one or gain a spiritual insight about an unresolved issue. Recalling such memories at the end of each day may also have the same adaptive function.

Recently, I encouraged people to write down meaningful moments at the end of every day, rather than toward the end of their lives. Meaningful moments are defined as moments that are full of emotional significance, both negative and positive, and have considerable impact on their lives. Future research will determine whether simply writing about meaningful moments can improve one's well-being.

Life's Calling and Goal Striving

There is increasing research evidence that personal meaning is often linked to a sense of mission and pursuit of calling (Baumeister 1991; Dobrow 2006; Hall and Chandler 2005; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). Positive psychology research provides evidence that one experiences life as meaningful when one's calling is to serve some greater good (Hunter et al. 2010; Seligman 2002; Steger et al. 2009). There is also a vast literature on the benefits of goal striving (Emmons 2005) and personal projects (Little 1998), providing further support to the importance of pursuing a worthy life goal.

The biological imperative of having a purpose has been well documented (Wong 2012b; Wong and Fry 1998). The present self-transcendence hypothesis states that all purposes are not equal. Misguided life purposes, such as pursuing pleasure and power with total disregard for ethical and legal issues, eventually will result in self-destruction. However, when we strive to serve a higher purpose and greater good, then each step of the journey is rewarding and inspiring, even when we do not receive recognition or reward (Wong 2012a).

Self-Transcendence, Aging and Well-Being

Logotherapy or meaning therapy is uniquely designed to meet the spiritual and existential needs of the aging population. In the areas of aging and spiritual care, self-transcendence is a central issue. As our capacities decline with advancing age, and as our familiar world recedes because of disabilities and chronic illnesses, our spiritual capacity to transcend our physical limitations becomes a promising source of well-being. Research has clearly shown that self-transcendence has become an important topic for spiritual care, especially for the very old (e.g., Coward and Reed 1996; Nygren et al. 2005; Reed 1991).

For the elderly, the adaptive functions of self-transcendence can be found in increased well-being (e.g., Coward 1996; Ellermann and Reed 2001; Runquist and Reed 2007) and spirituality (e.g., Emmons 2005, 2006; Grouzet et al. 2005). Self-transcendence is especially important for the elderly and patients with terminal illnesses (e.g., Burr et al. 2011; Coward and Reed 1996; Haugan et al. 2013; Iwamoto et al. 2011; Matthews and Cook 2008; McCarthy and Bockweb 2013; Reker and Woo 2011). Some researchers have even applied logotherapy or meaning therapy to increase the well-being of cancer patients (Breitbart 2002; Noguchi et al. 2006). Much research needs to be done to discover how each level of self-transcendence can enhance the well-being of the elderly and the terminally ill.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose that the perspective of meaning-seeking and self-transcendence may be helpful in developing a curriculum for Life and Death Education. At present, there is a great deal of interest in positive education (Seligman

et al. 2009) at the public schools, but advocates of positive education mostly emphasize the science of happiness and the signs of character strengths as championed by Seligman (2002, 2011). In contrast, I advocate a meaning orientation for the following two reasons: (1) To focus on the pursuit of personal happiness and success may lead to egotism, disappointment, and psychological disorders. In the present climate of low employment and little opportunity for fulfilling personal happiness and ambitions, too much emphasis on positivity may lead to negative results for individuals and society (Coyne 2013). (2) History has shown both the pros and cons of capitalism. A materialistic culture based on overproduction and overconsumption is not sustainable given the limited resources on our planet. The world will not have enough resources to support China when its population is able to consume at the same rate as Americans (O'Leary 2006).

In view of the above two concerns, I am proposing the meaning framework, which emphasizes the importance of **personal responsibility** towards fellow human beings, the environment, and the Creator. The trumpet call from Viktor Frankl is to awaken people on their responsibility of fulfilling their spiritual destiny of serving a higher purpose and the greater good.

A little-known logic related to self-transcendence is that it demands continual self-improvement if we are to realize our full potential. There is no limit to personal growth, at least in the spiritual realm. Therefore, when one is motivated to transcend both external and internal limitations and realize one's full potential, one is expressing self-transcendence. Almost the entire literature on personal improvement focuses on the self, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-actualization. In contrast, Frankl's self-transcendence construct emphasizes that the path towards fulfillment of one's potential is not through constant self-referral, but rather serving others as a reference point. We are able to fully develop our potential only when we devote our time and energy towards a mission greater than ourselves.

In sum, self-transcendence offers a vision of the best possible future, not only for individuals, but also for humanity. In a paradoxical way, self-transcendence points out that we have to redirect our focus from self-interest to others, in order to live the good life. It is in awakening and cultivating our spiritual values of will to meaning and self-transcendence that we find a sense of fulfillment and significance. If we continue to expand our interest beyond ourselves to include an ever growing circle of influence, we will eventually lose our "small selves" in finding our "larger selves."

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