

In Search of Meaning: Belief, Doubt, Wellbeing, Meaning-Making — “A Dynamic Calculus”¹

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Prelude

I write in praise of Professor Paul T. P. Wong, on the occasion of his retirement as a distinguished academic, scholar, and humanitarian. In my opinion, no other person has done as much as Professor Wong to advance the importance of “personal meaning” inextricably associated with the thought and writings of Dr. Viktor Frankl (1908-1998). Professor Wong’s writings constitute the essential core of thought for the 20th century theories of “human meaning” in contemporary psychology, philosophy, and theology. The present paper further explored the important relationship between belief systems and behavior associated with personal meaning, human health and wellbeing, and doubt. Acquired information, processed via our senses, is ultimately constructed into complex belief and behaviour systems, including worldviews, life-philosophies, religions, mythologies, and “spiritual paths.” Though differing in content, these complex belief systems and behaviours guide our behavior, providing us with a sense of purpose, direction, predictability, and control. To achieve optimal health and meaning-making, however, meaning-making must also include a willingness to doubt. It is the dialectical tension between belief and doubt that gives rise to a spiritual sense of being characterized by awe, reverence, harmony, and unity. This spiritual sense has salutary consequences.

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Amid the complex dynamics of these variables, Professor Wong has been a constant source of theory, research, and practice. His legacy endures for future generations. The present paper further examined the role of belief and meaning from the perspective of worldviews and culture and emphasized the dialectical approach to faith and doubt (Wong, 2013).

Introduction

Not non-existent was it, nor existent was it at that time; there was not atmosphere nor the heavens which are beyond. What existed? Where? In whose care? Water was it? An abyss unfathomable? ...
Who after all knows? Who here will declare from whence it arose, whence this world? Subsequent are the gods to the creation of this world. Who then, knows when it came into being?
This world—whence it came into being, whether it was made or whether not—He who is its overseer in the highest heavens surely knows—or perhaps he knows not.

Creation Hymn — X. 129
Selections from the Rgveda
Maurer, W. (1986, p. 285)

Meaning: The Endless Dance of Belief and Doubt

Asserting and Refuting

The inspiring words from the *Rgveda's Creation Hymn X. 129*, written more than 3,500 years ago, document and affirm the age-old human quest for personal meaning. For me, the special enchantment of the *Creation Hymn* resides in its delicate juxtaposition of the human impulse to know (i.e., to make sense of the world) and to doubt (i.e., to question that which is known and accepted). What profound words: “He who is its overseer in the highest heavens surely knows, or perhaps he knows not.”

The process of “asserting” yet “refuting” expressed in the *Creation Hymn*, captures the essential force behind human progress through the ages. It is an adaptive dialectic enriching and extending human possibilities and potential. Even as we reach a hard-won conclusion, doubt

emerges to move us toward yet other possibilities. Unlike other beings whose behavior is fixed by reliance upon instinct and reflex, human beings have the capacity for reflective thought. We can reach a conclusion in one moment and modify it a moment later.

The human impulse to know and to doubt provides an insight into the origins and nature of our religious, philosophical, and mythological belief systems, especially our pursuit of meaning (Wong, 1998, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998). These too, spring from our impulse to know and to doubt.

There is within our nature an imperative to ask why, and to order our answers in increasingly complex systems of beliefs designed to reduce our uncertainties and to increase our sense of control and mastery of the world. This is a reflexive and automatic response. So too is our inclination to doubt. Yet, because of the discomfort associated with uncertainty, it is often necessary for us to exert greater conscious effort so that we may move beyond reflexive acceptance toward the discomfort associated with disbelief.

Thus, the human mind—that experienced sense of intention and agency that emerges from the simultaneous interaction of organism and environment—establishes order, coherence, and meaning from the vast array of stimuli flooding the senses.

At some point, within a cultural context, it constructs elaborate and ritualized beliefs and/or practices regarding human meaning that provide us with a sense of certainty, comfort, and significance from the vicissitudes of life's experiences. The process of meaning-making and doubting has important implications for our health and wellbeing.

Meaning, Doubt, and Belief Systems

1. Renewed Interest in Human Meaning. The pursuit of meaning is, in many respects, the most human of behaviors—the defining characteristic of our species *homo sapiens*. Within the past

few decades, there has been a renewed interest in the study of human meaning among clinicians and scientists (e.g., Richards & Bergin, 1997; Thoresen, 1998; Wong, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998).

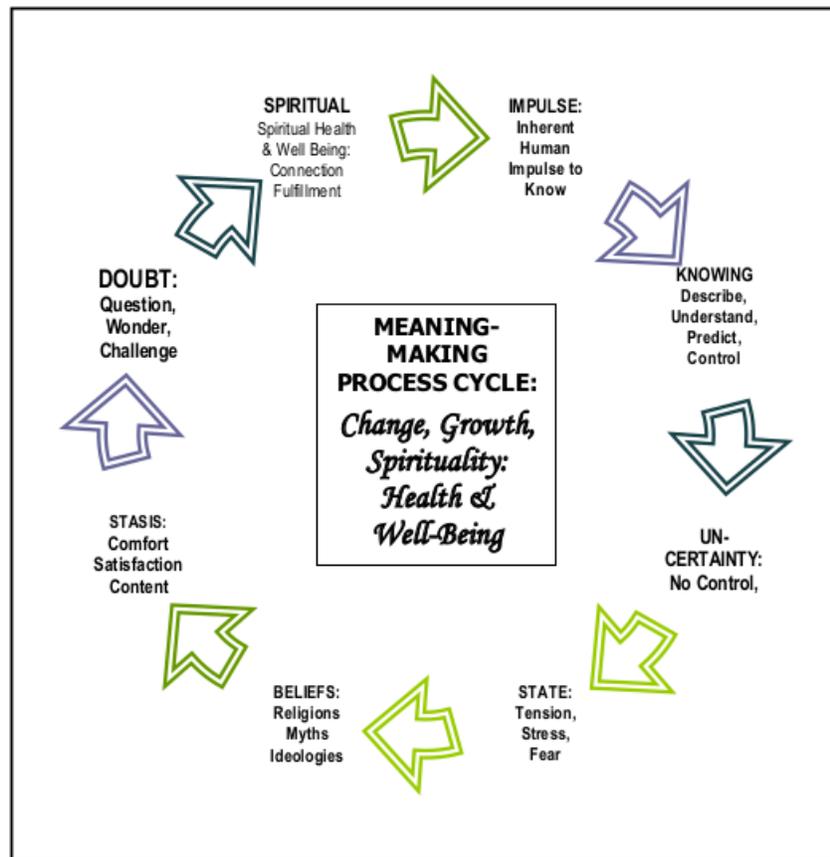
Wong and Fry (1998), in the introduction to the first edition of the exceptional book, *The Human Quest for Meaning*, write:

After a hundred years in the wilderness of philosophical and religious discourse, the concept of personal meaning has emerged as a serious candidate for scientific research and clinical study. ... There is now a critical mass of empirical evidence and a convergence of expert opinions that personal meaning is important not only for survival but also for health and wellbeing. (Wong & Fry, 1998, p. xvii)

Chart 1 displays the process cycle. As indicated, the meaning-making process begins with the inherent human impulse to know.

Chart 1

Meaning-Making Process Cycle



Contemporary theorists agree that the pursuit of meaning is critical for our adaptation and adjustment (e.g., Klinger, 1998; Maddi, 1998). These theorists have built upon the contributions of previous theorists in psychology such as Allport (1955), Frankl (1946/1959), Fromm (1947), Kelly (1956), Maslow (1968), and May (1967). Viktor Frankl (1905-1998) is perhaps the most notable figure in our century to call attention to the human quest and need for meaning. Professor Paul Wong, in my opinion, has done the most to advance Viktor Frankl's views, and along the way add much to them, especially empirical support based on research.

Frankl, a Nazi concentration camp survivor and the developer of logotherapy (Frankl, 1973), in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), argues meaning is the central motive of

human life. He suggests that above all else, our capacity to ask why with regard to our existence indicates that “meaning” is at the core of our health and wellbeing.

For Frankl, human survival depends on finding and preserving “meaning” amidst the madness of our world, and on filling the “existential vacuum.” But, more importantly for Frankl, “meaning” is not something that occurs reflexively within the human mind, but rather something that demands an active pursuit—the “will to meaning”—in which we actively seek a meaning in life. In Frankl’s opinion, the “will to meaning” is a primary human motive that supersedes the pursuit of pleasure and power. Wong (1998) points out Frankl’s life epitomizes Nietzsche’s dictum: “He who has a *why* to live for, can bear almost any *how*.” Human history is replete with examples affirming Nietzsche’s dictum.

Frankl’s views have often been considered more of a “secular religion” (see Wong, 1998, p. 400) than a science, and for this reason, they have not always been popular among behavioral scientists. Today, data are accumulating in support of Frankl’s views. For example, the book by Wong and Fry (1998) provides data from numerous studies of personal meaning based on quantitative (e.g., Personal Meaning Profile; Life Regard Index) and qualitative measures (e.g., personal narratives) that affirm Frankl’s assumptions.

2. Brain and Meaning. Klinger (1998) argues that the human quest for meaning is rooted within the brain itself and that goal-striving is a biological imperative of all zoological organisms. He notes that it is humankind’s cognitive and symbolic capacity that elevates this biological drive to the transcendent experience of higher purpose and meaning (Wong, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998). Indeed, Klinger concludes that failures to make meaning may have pathological consequences.

The highest calling of the brain, aside from its basic reflexive survival functions, is its efforts to generate meaning and purpose from the vast array of sensory-coded experiences our

billions of brain cells accumulate. This accumulation process—this storage of lived experience—both supports our survival and drives us forward in search of higher principles for organizing and connecting our acquired experience. Through memory and learning, continuities are established with our individual, collective, and cosmic past and imagined future.

Thus, the brain is more than a simple sensate mechanism for reflexively recording external and internal stimulation in organized substrates. The undamaged human brain not only responds to stimuli, it also organizes, symbolizes, and connects stimuli, and in this process, it generates an emergent pattern of meaning that facilitates our survival, growth, and development. These higher-order functions of the brain push us toward the pursuit of meaning, and with this, a felt sense of understanding, predictability, and transcendence.

Recent developments in neurosciences support the existence of intimate relationships between brain structures and processes and cognitive behavior. Each day, new discoveries seem to appear regarding the neurological basis of consciousness, sensation, emotion, memory, and learning. It is estimated our brain possesses more than 15 billion neurons that work in organized units through trillions of complex vertical and horizontal connections. The structure of these cells—the cytoarchitectonics—and their myriad connections, constitute an essential element of human psychology (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Marshall & Magoun, 1998).

3. The Inherent Impulse After Meaning. Efforts after meaning begin with the human brain's inherent impulse to order, organize, and structure sensory data. This impulse, acted out within a cultural context, leads to the construction of higher-order cognitive beliefs, schemata, and information patterns that we associate with worldviews and various philosophies, religions, and mythologies.

Humans move from simple information processing of sensory inputs to complex belief systems that guide and frame our lives—belief systems associated with existential concerns—purpose, hope, identity, life, death, self, choice, and morality. We cannot separate these existential concerns from human health and wellbeing.

The importance of establishing organized and systematic belief systems for our health and wellbeing cannot be denied, and although these vary considerably across individuals and cultures, they seem to be universal in their function of bringing comfort, purpose, direction, predictability, and control to our lives (e.g., Frankl, 1959; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994; Wong, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998). Taggart (1994) stated:

... our belief systems are ... the basis for our existence; they are symbol systems that enable us to derive meaning from a chaos of stimuli and instincts and to decode the mystery of our existence. Our separate core beliefs, whether secular or religious, anchor us in the dizzying vastness of the great unknown we call reality. (p. 20)

Throughout history, humans have advanced numerous atheistic and theistic belief systems (see Sheinkin, 1986) replete with rituals, rites, ceremonies, and dogmas. At a personal and cultural level, these belief systems help position and root us within the mysteries of the cosmos. They order chaos, reduce complexity, and give purpose (e.g., Allport, 1950; Brown, 1994; Frankl, 1959; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994).

Wong (1998) suggests personal meaning has three components: *cognitive* (beliefs, schemas, making sense), *emotional* (feeling good, feeling fulfilled), and *motivational* (goal striving, purpose, incentive value). Referring to his model, Wong (1998) notes:

Thus, the structural definition of personal meaning is that it is an individually constructed, culturally-based cognitive system that influences an individual's choice of

activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth, and fulfillment. This definition identifies the key elements of meaningful existence, and indicates their interrelations. (p. 407)

The Importance of Doubt

Even as we seek to confirm and sustain core beliefs, there is, I believe, a simultaneous disposition to ponder, to question, and to doubt whether the “truths” we prize are in fact more relative than absolute, more questionable than certain, and more temporal than enduring.

Humans seek meaning, but they dislike doubt.

The American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839-1914) noted that human beings will tolerate many things—but not doubt (Peirce, 1997). When faced with doubt, he claimed they will often resolve the tensions by deferring to authority or simply maintaining their beliefs with renewed tenacity. Obviously, we must guard against this tendency. As Andre Gide (1959) reminds us: “Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it.” (p. 146).

Here, I also think of the words of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the famous Danish existential philosopher, who was concerned with the question of human choice and responsibility, and especially of our “fear of nothingness.” In one of his later books, *A Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1849/1954) writes:

. . . the good is the opening toward a new possibility and choice, the ability to face into anxiety; the closed is the evil, that which turns away from newness and broader perceptions and experiences; the closed shuts out revelation, obtrudes a veil between the person and his own situation in the world. (p. 124)

Within the traditions of academic psychology, George Kelly (1956) advanced a theory supporting Kierkegaard’s observations about the consequences of closed and open minds.

According to Kelly (1956), the impulse to establish a set of organized beliefs about the world and our role in it flows from our natural inclination to process information from the world about us for the purposes of describing, understanding, predicting, and controlling our lives.

Kelly contends we do this by establishing a system of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate cognitive constructs (i.e., templates) that emerge from our personal experience and that serve to mediate our reality. Our perceptions of our world, and our responses to it, are dictated by our “constructs.” Most important for Kelly it is through lived experience our personal construct system is continually revised, adjusted, and reorganized.

Thus, for Kelly, experience serves to modify the sub-ordinate/super-ordinate relationships of our personal construct system, yielding new perceptions of reality and alternative behavior patterns that keep us open to new possibilities.

Meaning, Worldviews, and Culture

Even as we speak of personal meaning at an individual level, it is essential to understand that all individuals are embedded within cultural contexts. These contexts constitute the basis for socializing and for promoting ways of life across generations particular to a group of people. Culture is the context in which mind is acquired, and thus, mind reflects culturally constructed realities.

Defining Culture

Culture can be defined as a shared learned experience transmitted across generations for the purposes of survival, adaptation, and adjustment. Culture is *externally* represented in such forms as artifacts (e.g., clothing, foods, technologies), roles (e.g., parents, mother, occupations), and institutions (e.g., family, religion, education, economic). Culture is represented *internally* in such forms as worldviews, values, beliefs, attitudes, consciousness patterns, epistemologies,

cognitive styles. Behavior cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it develops and is sustained. Culture influences all aspects of our lives, including the following presented in

Table 1.

Table 1.

Cultural influences on human behavior

1. Values, attitudes, beliefs, and standards of normality/abnormality, and morality.
 2. Notions of time, space, and causality (i.e., epistemology, ontology, praxeology).
 3. Patterns of human communications and social interaction (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, and para-verbal communications).
 4. Expressive styles and preferences in clothing, food, art, and recreation; a sense of aesthetics.
 5. Familial, marital, and child rearing practices and preferences.
 6. Preferred cognitive styles, and coping and problem-solving styles.
 7. Interpersonal relationship patterns, especially regarding authority, gender, elderly (i.e., social structure and social formation).
 8. The structure and dynamics of institutions such as the family, schools, government, religion, and the workplace.
 9. Personal, racial, and social identities.
 10. Creative arts and artifacts (e.g., food, dress, make-up).
 11. Our biological nature including our brain structures and processes.
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Cultural systems are generally constructed around an ethos, or set of core assumptions. These assumptions eventually find themselves represented in institutions (e.g., political systems, economic systems), activity settings (e.g., family activities, work activities), and personal behavior patterns.

The popular culture of the United States has an ethos of individualism, materialism, and competition, supported by macrosocial and microsocial institutions, which encourages these qualities and promotes them via socialization. A contrasting ethos valuing an unindividuated (collective) self, spirituality, and cooperation, will produce another socialization context.

Cultures vary in their concepts of selfhood or personhood (e.g., Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985). Within the United States, the dominant cultural emphasis is placed on socializing an individual who is autonomous, detached, and independent. Health, wellbeing, and maturity are often equated with self-sufficiency and independence. But in many Asian cultures, a collective or unindividuated self, is preferred. This self is considered to be inseparable from the group, and individual happiness and wellbeing are derived from meeting one's social roles and expectations.

East Asian collective "Ethei" have a strong Confucian orientation. Confucius (c. 551-479 BCE) advocated meeting one's social obligations and responsibilities as a basic virtue. In meeting these obligations and responsibilities, one helps promote social harmony, civility, and conformity to virtuous standards (e.g., kindness, faithfulness, decorum, wisdom, and character). The worth and purpose of individuals is often assessed against their group and/or societal contribution.

These differences in preferred views of selfhood help demonstrate the consequences of the cultural construction of reality. According to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) who fought

against the domination of learning by the physical and natural sciences and their methods, our “worldview” is a subjective, experientially derived set of beliefs developed “to resolve the enigma of life” (as qtd. in Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957, p. 25).

Table 2 presents a listing of the steps involved in the cultural construction of reality. It begins with birth (actually it begins with the nature of the human brain and mind). The arbitrary designation of six steps describes the process.

Table 2

The cultural construction of “reality”

1. There is an inherent human impulse to describe, understand, predict, and control the world about us through the ordering of stimuli into complex belief systems that can guide behavior.
 2. The undamaged human brain not only responds to stimuli, it also organizes, connects, and symbolizes them, and in this process, it generates patterns of explicit and implicit meanings and purposes that promote survival, growth, and development.
 3. The process and product of this activity are to a large extent culturally generated and shaped through linguistic, behavioral, and interpersonal practices that are part of the socialization process.
 4. This storage of accumulated life experience, in both representational and symbolic forms, generates complex shared cognitive and affective organizational and process systems that create continuity across time (i.e., past, present, and future) for both the person and the group.
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5. Through the process of socialization, individual and group preferences and priorities are rewarded through chance and choice, thus promoting and/or modifying the cultural constructions of reality (i.e., epistemologies, cosmologies, ethos, values, and behavior patterns).
 6. Reality is culturally constructed!
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Worldviews (*Weltanschauung*): The Need for Meaning

Without a sense of purpose and meaning, as reflected in our philosophical, religious, and mythological belief systems, we would find ourselves confused, disoriented, and dislocated, an organism compelled to respond to each situation without a reason or rationale beyond immediate adaptation and adjustment. Societal life would be impossible, for it is the shared beliefs that enable us to live together with some degree of mutual concern and intent.

It is out of our impulse to know and doubt that arise our capacity and motivation to address questions about the nature of human life and existence, and to develop a worldview or *weltanschauung* (e.g., Dilthey as qtd in Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957; Kearney, 1984; Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Cultural variations in worldviews have long been a topic of interest (see Kearney, 1984). The social anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), wrote:

What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his *Weltanschauung*, the breath of life and reality that breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life. In the roaming over human history, and over the surface of the earth, it is the possibility of seeing life and the world from the various angles, peculiar to each culture, that has always

charmed me most, and inspired me with real desire to penetrate other cultures, to understand other types of life. (as qtd. in Kearney, 1984, p. 37)

Richards and Bergin (1997) note that our worldview—our *weltanschauung*—is about the nature of reality and our existence:

For example, how did the universe and the Earth come to exist? How did life, particularly human life, come to exist? Is there a Supreme Being or creator? What is the purpose of life? How should people live their lives in order to find happiness, peace, and wisdom? What is good, moral, and ethical? What is undesirable, evil, and immoral? How do people live with the realities of suffering, grief, pain, and death? Is there a life after death, and if so, what is the nature of the afterlife? (p. 50)

Kearney (1984), who wrote a popular text on the topic of worldviews, states:

Worldview studies seek to discover, at much greater levels of abstraction, underlying assumptions about the nature of reality, assumptions that can then be stated by the anthropologist as formal propositions. The theoretical bias here is that these assumptions are systematically interrelated, and that they form a basis for culturally patterned decision making (influenced by values which also derive from these existential assumptions), and for other culturally specific cognitive activity. (p. 36)

Both implicitly and explicitly, the thoughts of great religious leaders reflect particular worldviews (e.g., Bahauallah, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Jina, Lao Tze, Moses, Muhammad, Nanak, Zoroaster). These worldviews emerged from the leaders' personal encounters with the mysteries of life and from the historical and cultural context of their lives. Much as we do today,

these religious leaders struggled with the search for meaning—Who after all knows? Who here will declare from whence it arose, whence this world?

Meaning, Health, and Wellbeing

1. Defining Health. Health, according to the World Health Organization (1975), is “a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (p. 17). I think the WHO is correct in pursuing a “holistic” rather than “deficit” model; however, what is missing in the WHO definition is the spiritual dimension.

Humans can have struggles of the spirit. For Viktor Frankl, living without a sense of meaning, without meaningful values, spirituality, or responsibility results in a “Noogenic Neurosis,” a life characterized by aimlessness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness.

2. Disorders of Meaning-Seeking and Meaning-Making. When our efforts after meaning-making are thwarted or denied, and when our efforts to engage doubt are halted or restrained, we are faced with life situations that may place our health and wellbeing in jeopardy. Meaning-seeking and meaning-making are essential. This is the process by which we order, prioritize, and prize our beliefs with respect to our culturally constructed realities. It is the process that permits us to assert: “This is meaningful! This is not meaningful! This is right! This is wrong! This is good! This is bad!”

No matter what the formal source of our beliefs may be (i.e., religion, life philosophy), without meaning-seeking and meaning-making, we are left devoid of guideposts for life’s journey. It seems to me that many discomforts, disorders, and diseases of our time are related to an absence of meaning-seeking and meaning-making. At the individual level these include

despair, angst, boredom, alienation, psychosis, and suicide. At the cultural level these include cultural disintegration, societal decay, and national collapse.

3. Problems of Blind Belief. The quest for meaning can result in blind commitment to a belief system that demands unconditional acceptance. While this may bring a respite from pangs and perils of uncertainty, it cannot provide the basis for spiritual health and wellbeing. Belief must be combined with doubt to be meaningful!

Doubt is an essential part of human growth and becoming. While the mind of the “true believer” (see Eric Hoffer, 1968/1989) may find comfort in the certainty associated with uncontested belief, their closed mind will prevent them from evolving toward new levels of knowledge and possibility.

Total and complete adherence to “religious” systems often has proven useful in dealing with many psychological and social problems (e.g., alcoholism, substance abuse, criminal behavior); but, it needs to be appreciated as a temporary station rather than a final destination.

There is considerable research (see Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994; Thoresen, 1998) suggesting human health is better and happiness is greater among individuals who have meaningful belief systems, regardless of whether the system is a formal religious system or an anti-religious system. But, unless doubt is present and the relativity of beliefs is acknowledged, we will remain in a static state, rather than a state of becoming. To have meaningful outcome in the quest for meaning, a continual dialect between belief and doubt must occur.

For meaningful meaning-making to occur, *beliefs must be doubted and accepted, then doubted again, in an endless cycle of inquiry, reflection, and contemplation.* This, I think, is a life of the spirit; this is a life honoring spirituality.

4. Pursuing Meaning in Therapy. While the present paper is not the forum for a detailed discussion of the need to include meaning-related matters within the therapeutic encounter, it is clear to me that therapists must increasingly address this topic. Some therapies (e.g., existential therapy, logotherapy) are specifically concerned with the patient's quest for meaning and make it the focus of the therapeutic encounter; for others, however, it is only incidental.

For many problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) and many groups (e.g., refugees, alcoholics), personal meaning is at the core of the difficulties they experience. It seems to me that having a sense of personal meaning is essential, and that mental health professionals must do more to introduce it into assessment and therapy activities (see Wong, 2012, 2016; Wong & Fry, 1998).

Guideposts for a Spiritual Life

1. The Ecology of the Spirit and Spirituality. There is an ecology of the spirit that can be understood and nurtured to assist us in our quest for meaning. Table 3 displays assumptions of the ecology of the spirit framework.

Table 3

Ecology of the spirit and spirituality

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- There is a real but chaotic world.
 - Our sensate brain (seeks, organizes, and assigns meaning) with this information, constructing more complex systems of order, helping to generate meanings.
 - There is an active effort after meaning-making.
 - The effort after meaning-making orders beliefs within a cultural context; there is a cultural construction of reality.
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- A sense of “mind” and “consciousness” emerges from the interaction of the organism’s perceived meaning template and the environmental milieu.
 - Belief and belief systems guide mind and behavior bringing comforts of stasis and certainty; however, it is “doubt” which offers opportunity for becoming and continued growth in pursuit of constant meaning-making.
 - The continuous cycle of meaning-making generates a sense of spirituality as unity and connection emerge from meaning-making activities.
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Erich Fromm (1947) acknowledged the power and importance of doubt for meaning-making when he stated: “The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers” (p. 45). Thus, ultimately a sense of spirituality emerges from the joust between belief and doubt. Much as character is built through positive responses to adversity and life’s ordeals, evolving higher-order values and systems of meaning emerge from the dialectic between belief and doubt.

The Experience of Spirituality

The term spirituality has so much “religious” overlay that it is frequently disregarded by many scientists and professionals as soon as it is used. My use of the term is unrelated to the traditional religious views of the term “spirit” as an immaterial substance associated with divine forces. For me, spirituality is a construct that can be used to explain certain behaviors characterized by a sense of wonder, awe, mystery, enhanced acuity, reverence, humility, and oneness or unity.

More than 50 years ago, Deikman (1966) noted certain states of consciousness result in the “discovery of mind,” including:

1. feelings of intense realness;

2. unusual modes of perception;
3. feelings of being at one with something or someone (often described as an oceanic moment, aesthetic moment, mystical moment);
4. an inability to place the experience in words (i.e., ineffable); and
5. an encounter in which all of these may occur simultaneously.

These are qualities also associated with spiritual experiences.

Spirituality emerges from our efforts after personal meaning-making. But, it is the interaction of belief and doubt that is the essential key to spirituality. As noted previously, the dialectic between belief and doubt encourages a willingness to explore and to push the boundaries of our perceptions and experiences to new limits. This, it seems to me, is the essence of spirituality, and this, it seems to me, is the basis of good health and wellbeing.

Conclusions

This paper discusses a spectrum of topics related to meaning, including belief, doubt, mind, culture, and spirituality. In addition, the paper argues that human health and wellbeing involve spirituality. Humanity, by its nature (i.e., ontology) is in constant pursuit of meaning. Chart 1 (see opening pages) describes the “constant” quest for meaning, and speculated steps along the way.

Discussions of meaning, meaning-making, culture, and human health and wellbeing, support the following conclusions:

1. The real world presents itself as chaos to which the sensate brain responds by assigning order, coherence, and meaning as part of an inherent impulse to describe, understand, predict, and control the world about it. The brain builds upon the data that is sensed,

stored, and managed to create higher order systems of beliefs that are imbued with personal and cultural meaning.

2. Each belief system is rooted within a cultural context and is culturally constructed. This shapes the content of our beliefs and the process by which we seek, affirm, and doubt them. Belief systems take the forms of worldviews, life philosophies, religions, and mythologies.
3. Worldviews are concerned with essential existential questions of life including answers to questions about the nature of god(s), life after death, nature and the cosmos, human relations, and moral patterns of behavior—all of which are critical for our sense of personal meaning.
4. Yet, even as we pursue meaning, in both its reflexive and conscious dimensions, we are challenged by the need to doubt the very belief systems we have constructed. It is through the dialectical process of belief and doubt that meaning-making assumes its most potent possibilities as spirituality. Doubt requires giving up the certainty, control, and sense of mastery that often accompanies commitment to a belief system. Yet, it is doubt that moves us to new possibilities and choices and doubt that affords us the chance to affirm old beliefs.
5. Spirituality is a subjectively experienced sense of self that is accompanied by awe, reverence, mystery, tranquility, connection, and unity. The spiritual sense of self opens us to new levels of experience and new perceptions of meaning enabling us to develop and grow with an even greater sense of mastery and transcendence.
6. Optimal health and wellbeing require this state of spirituality. Thus, it is crucial we reconsider previous notions about health and wellbeing associated with deficit models,

and include spiritual health and wellbeing as required criteria for health. At the heart of spirituality, is doubt. To tolerate doubt, to accept doubt, to embrace doubt as the inherent motive of inquiry guiding mind, is essential.

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