**Preface for Frankl’s Psychobiography**

**Frankl’s Cure for a Soulless Psychology and a Sick Society**

“Viktor Frankl, one of the most influential and enduring writers and psychotherapists of the 20th century, continues to speak to new generations. His voice is prophetic, because it heralds the current positive psychology movement, the resurgence of spirituality, and promises hope to a needy world threatened by global terrorism (Wong, 2001a, 2001b) and the AIDS epidemic (Wong, 2003).

However, like prophets in Biblical times, he is often misunderstood or dismissed. For example, within the positive psychology movement, especially among those who research on hope and optimism, Viktor Frankl’s contributions are seldom acknowledged.”—(Wong, 2007)

Unfortunately, the above quote about Frankl remains more truthfully relevant today than two decades ago. With the mental health crisis in the era of COVID-19 (Pittaro, 2020), we need Frankl’s wisdom more than ever (Wong, 2020a). That is why the present book, *A Psychobiography of Viktor Frankl by Nataliya Krasovska and Claude-Hélène Mayer*, is both timely and important.

It is timely, because so many people are depressed, anxious, and desperate for some psychological help (Kirkey, 2020) in order to overcome suffering and to restore their sanity and positive mental health. Frankl’s cure seems uniquely suited for the existential crisis during the pandemic.

It is important because it explains why we need to understand Frankl’s uniquely spiritual approach to healing and thriving. More specifically, it sheds light on how and why Frankl’s life and wisdom on suffering provides the foundation for existential positive psychology (PP 2.0) (Wong, 2011, 2019a, 2020a). In a time of death and suffering, avoidance is no longer an option. The new science of embracing what we fear may be the most promising way to save a sick society, riddled with problems of addiction, suicide, and injustice (Williamson, 2020).

For many people, concepts like responsibility, self-transcendence, and suffering are much more difficult to understand and accept than happiness, success, and flourishing. It is difficult because most people view life through the lens of hedonism, materialism, and egotism. They tend to react instinctively by rejecting and avoiding anything that makes them uncomfortable. They prefer distractions or instant relief to the bitter medicine provided by Frankl. However, when none of the quick-fixes has worked and the society as a whole is broken, why not give Frankl a chance? His wisdom on suffering is worth listening to because he has overcome hardships and traumas much worse than we can imagine.

## Frankl’s struggles and the development of logotherapy

As a Jew living in Vienna, Frankl sought to assimilate into the majority of his society, aspiring to be among the metropolitan elite, but still had to struggle with the issue of maintaining his own cultural identity. This resulted in developing an open-minded approach to integrate opposing ideas. Such an integrative approach paved the way for the broad appeal of logotherapy.

He went through the great depression of the 1930’s and two world wars, being under Nazi occupation as well as in Nazi concentration camps. He also had to work through the grief of losing his wife and family, the collective guilt of collaboration with the Hitler’s regime, and the reality of facing death up close and personal as a Jew and a physician. In addition, as a precocious child, his first encounter with the terror of death was when he was 4-year old; throughout his teenage years, he struggled with the meaning of life in the face of death (Pytell, 2020). This led to his conclusion that it is difficult to live a meaningful life without some understanding of the meaning of death and suffering. As a very intelligent and creative person, he aspired to learn from the best. He studied with Freud and Adler, the two greatest psychotherapists at his time about the genesis of mental illness and its cure. He had to struggle between getting full acceptance into their school of thoughts or speaking up about the shortcomings of their approaches. At the end, he chose to remain true to his own conviction and values.

Between Freud’s individualism and Adler’s communalism, Frankl chose the third way—to develop a “height psychology” in which an individual is held accountable to a higher authority for a living a socially productive life. Thus, the individual is absorbed in the community, and yet still personally responsible for charting one’s own authentic path. To him, this is the best way to avoid the extremes of nihilism and abuse of personal freedom and the authoritarianism of Hitler’s Fascism or Stalin’s Marxism. He discovered the universal balancing principle to arrive at the middle way,

Therefore, his logotherapy (therapy through meaning), a fundamental part of the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy, has something very unique to offer to the world. He repeatedly emphasized that logotherapy is a spiritual therapy because his own spiritual struggles at the Nazi death camps revealed to him that the horrors of the Holocaust was also an opportunity to discover the ultimate meaning through faith in God (Frankl, 2000). This faith provides the grounding for objective values and meaning in the face of death as well as the necessary spiritual fibre to say ‘Yes’ to life no matter what. Thus, while cognitive psychology restored the mind to psychology, Frankl’s logotherapy restored the spirit or the soul to psychology as the noetic dimension of personhood.

Frankl reasoned that since life was surrounded by death in the Nazi concentration camps, the meaning of life could not be derived from the pleasure principle or the power principle. Therefore, it could only be derived from outside the person—something transcendental. The will to meaning is a spiritual act of volition to direct one’s life toward transcendental goals in order to rise above the evitable suffering and death (Frankl, 1988).

Through his prolific writings, especially through his own life, Frankl has demonstrated compellingly that meaning in terms of the pursuit self-transcendence is the most promising way to survive and thrive in a difficult and dangerous world. Even for those who do not believe in a personal God, they can still understand self-transcendence as a spiritual resource essential in overcoming suffering and death (Maslow, 1971; Smith & Liehr, 2018).

To both Frankl and Maslow, self-transcendence represents the highest values. Maslow (1971) has provided a comprehensive definition:

“Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos” (p. 269).

## The vital role of meaning in wellbeing and success

According to Frankl (1946/1985a):

“The 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. 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.” (p. 110-111)

The present book shows us how Frankl’s personal history and the social cultural milieu of his time interacted to shape his noble view of human life and the key concepts of logotherapy— the tragic triad (pain, guilt, and death) and the spiritual triad (freedom of the will, will to meaning, and meaning of life).

These spiritual laws are needed to transform the Tragic Triad into the Light Triad of *responsibility* to repent and make positive changes, *conscience* to do what is right by transcending one’s egotistic and deterministic forces, and *faith* in the ultimate meaning of life and God. The alternative reaction to the Tragic Triad, according to egotistic desires or the voice of the Devil, is maladaptive and may result in the Dark Triad of narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism.

From his own experience, Frankl discovered the spiritual transformation of the tragic triad. Guilt and shame over wrongdoing can be best wiped out by taking personal responsibility: to repent and own up to one’s mistakes, and to make positive changes to redeem oneself. Thus, personal responsibility is the key to repairing the worst and bringing out the best in any individual. One cannot have rebirth without death to the old self. Each person “has to answer to life answering for life; he has to respond by being responsible; in other words, the response is necessarily a response-in-action” (Frankl, 2000, p. 29). Thus, one can live a second time as if one has lived wrongly the first time.

Alternatively, if one covers up their guilt and shame by overcompensating and resorting to one’s will to power and superiority complex, one becomes a narcissist, who is always anxious of being exposed as an imposter. For example, when one feels guilt for not getting a task done, then any gentle reminder of this delinquency will be interpreted as a scolding or a personal attack and will be met by an angry reaction resulting in an unnecessary fight. Thus, avoiding one’s responsibility can lead to personal anxiety and toxic behavior towards others.

With respect to suffering and pain, one needs to follow one’s conscience, which helps discover the best way to respond to them in a socially worthwhile way. As we exercise the will to meaning, invariably, the “unconscious God” (Frankl, 1946/1985b) would reveal the highest value of self-transcendence, the objective value to serving someone bigger than oneself.

Alternatively, one resorts to scapegoating and demonizing others for one’s suffering. This leads to aggression and psychopathy. One may also resort to becoming addicted to drugs, alcohol, or food as a way to escape from suffering. Either way, egotistic ways of coping with suffering contribute to psychopathology. A more sinister scheme is to destroy others who are more successful; it would lead to the evil of hurting others without benefiting one’s self as demonstrated in mass killings or terrorism.

Finally, with respect to death or the finitude of life, the only effective antidote is to make the best use of one’s available time on earth and to believe that life has intrinsic and ultimate meaning, no matter what. This affirmation of life stems from one’s faith in God and in one’s own unique worth.

The alternative of trying to get as much as one can, regardless of legal and ethical consequences, inevitable leads to machiavellianism, which often accompanies narcissism and psychopathy. This may lead to pathological lying, betrayal, double-crossing, sabotaging, and corrupting due processes. That is why we have so many leaders in corporations and politics clearly showing characteristics of the dark triad (Furtner et al., 2017; Morin, 2019).

At present, we really have a leadership crisis in our government and corporations. Frankl’s emphasis on conscience, objective values, and highest ideals are much needed in leadership and management. He shows us the wisdom of living and behaving as if there is a God to whom we are all accountable. Frankl’s light triad provides a cure for a society drunk in its mad pursuit of pleasure, power, and pride as the expense of innocent and vulnerable people. It is an empirical question whether Frankl’s spiritually oriented Light Triad has different correlates from Kaufman et al.’s (2019) humanistically oriented Light Triad; regardless, there is the need to focus on the light forces and overcome the dark forces to make this world a better place.

In addition, Frankl has successfully resolved several existential issues facing individuals, especially leaders. For example, for the ontological dilemma of staying the same vs. making changes for a better future, Frankl argues for taking the risk of moving forward with the risks of uncertainly and possible failure because life is not about maintaining the status quo or hemostasis, but about growing and embracing the necessary tension and risks of life expansion— this is what makes us feel fully alive. His logic is that human beings are an open system in a complex evolving society, where the only constant is change. That is why we need to have the courage to embrace change in order to move forward. It is like the Chinese saying: when we paddle upstream, not moving forward is going backward. Progress always involves a struggle and overcoming risks and setbacks.

Another common existential issue is realism vs. idealism or meaning vs. expedience. We want to pursue our dreams, but we also need to survive and make a living. Frankl’s answer to this dilemma is that it all depends on the context or situation. For example, he chose to compromise in order to practice medicine in Nazi controlled hospitals or psychological institutes. He has been criticized for working for the Nazis (Pytell, 2020). But the alternative might have been the end of his brilliant career or personal death. Most scientist had to somewhat compromise their values in order to work in Nazi Germany or Nazi controlled Europe, because open resistance is not only futile but suicidal.

It is unfortunate that Frankl’s ideas have not been taken seriously by researchers in mainstream psychology, probably due to his emphasis on the spiritual dimension. I hope that the present book will help change this bias by showing us how Frankl discovered the paradoxical truth from his own suffering, and that a tragic sense of life is the necessary foundation for healing and flourishing in spite of suffering, guilt and death (Frankl, 1946/1985a, Unamuno, 2014).

## Wong’s extension of Frankl’s work into PP 2.0

Born in war-torn China and facing discrimination and marginalization as a racial minority in North American (Wong, 2020b), it is natural that I really resonate with Frankl’s writing. I had the privilege of talking to him several times while working on The Human Crisis for meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998). I also worked closely with Joseph Fabry (Wong, 1999).

I have taken on the mission to translate Frankl’s concepts to testable models (Wong, 2007, 2012). More specifically, I have expanded Frankl’s work in two directions: (a) PP 2.0 as a theoretical framework for research and practice (Wong, 2011, 2016a) and (b) integrative meaning therapy (Wong, 2009, 2016b).

Based on Frankl’s teaching and my own lifelong research (2019b), the following summarizes the main three insights from PP 2.0:

1. **True positivity is the ability to see the light in the darkness**. Cultivating the resilient mindset (Wong, 2020) and the attitude of tragic optimism (Leung, 2019; Wong, 2001) allows one to see the bright side of the worst situation and suffering as a blessing in disguise (Jans-Beken & Wong, 2019). This ability needs to be awakened and stretched. Such effort is worth it because it results in sustainable positive mental health even during the worst circumstances.
2. **True success is to embrace the dark side and turn it into the foundation for achieving one’s highest value.** The next step is to strive towards one’s dream made up of one’s highest ideals. This will involve coping with the difficulties and failures by developing the necessary resources according the deep and wide hypothesis (Wong & Worth, 2017) following the resource-congruence model of effective coping (Wong et al., 2006). With problems that are beyond human control, the most congruent way of coping are religious coping and meaning-focused coping.
3. **The good life is a balancing act of navigating between opposite forces in each situation.** This would require practicing the dual-system model (Wong, 2012) or the Yin-Yang dialectic to maintain a dynamic balance between two opposite forces. Sustainable mature happiness can be achieved through the practical wisdom and the successful managing of the opponent process of Yin-Yang (Wong & Bowers, 2018).

The above three principles can also be expressed as the four basic tenets of PP 2.0:

(1) Embrace the dark side of life as the other half of complete circle of wellbeing.

(2) Practice the Yin-Yang dialectic as the way to achieve optimal balance & harmony in life.

(3) Facing life with the meaning mindset and the resilient mindset is a precondition for resilience and flourishing.

(4) Pursuing meaning (self-transcendence) is the most promising way to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment.

Paradoxically, when we are courageous and humble enough to remove all our personas and defence mechanisms, and embrace suffering openly, we will be liberated from the negative emotions surrounding the initial wounding, such as fear, anger, and resentment, and be free to pursue faith, meaning, and love needed for personal growth. In this inward journey, we not only find healing but also our destiny to become what were meant to be—a self-transcending human being (Wong, 2016).

The added value of the psychobiography of Frankl is that it shows how the best tenets of Wong’s PP 2.0 are related to Frankl’s key concepts of responsibility, will to meaning, and self-transcendence. In terms of practice, PP 2.0 also emphasis the will to power or the mental muscle of self-control.

I want to propose 12 exercises to build up your spiritual fibre and mental muscles so that you can face whatever life throws at you without losing your balance and serenity and develop the Light Triad according to Frankl’s three avenues of value—creative value, experiential value and attitudinal value (Frankl, 1946/1985a):

1. Know the difference between right and wrong and always do what is right according to your beliefs, core values and practical wisdom.

2. Have the courage or defiant attitude to stand up to the dark forces even when they are beyond your control.

3. Know your vulnerabilities and what upsets you most. Try to practice facing what you fear or hate most until you learn how to accept it with equanimity because it really does not matter when death comes.

4. Be prepared for the worst so that you can take measures to prevent it from happening and you will not be shocked when it does happen.

5. Believe that you can turn every setback to your advantage and accomplish your goal eventually, even though the situation looks hopeless.

6. Keep your ritual for stillness (or wu wei) whether it is meditation, prayer, tai chi, or spending time with nature. Do it as often as you can. It is the time to experience solitude and quietness, to clear your mind of the endless chatter, and to recharge your battery.

7. Train your mind to focus on the task at hand so that you will not ruminate over troublesome issues or worry about negative outcomes.

8. Discipline yourself so that you know how to balance work with play, caring for others and the self, realism and idealism.

9. Refuse to waste your time with toxic people and refuse to allow them to rob you of your inner peace.

10. Stop chasing after happiness; instead, learn to maintain a positive mental state of calm and deep joy in spite of the constant presence of stress and pressure.

11. Appreciate all your experiences, both positive or negative.

12. Keep the fire burning in your belly so that you can persevere in pursuing your dreams.

**References**

1. Frankl, V. E. (1946/1985a). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Washington Square Press.
2. Frankl, V. E. (1946/1985b). *The Unconscious God.* Pocket Books.
3. Frankl, V. E. (1988). *The will to meaning: foundations and applications of logotherapy*. New York: Meridian Books
4. Frankl, V.E. (2000). *Man’s search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
5. Furtner M. R., Maran T., & Rauthmann J. F. (2017). Dark Leadership: The Role of Leaders’ Dark Triad Personality Traits. In M. Clark & C. Gruber (Eds.), *Leader Development Deconstructed. Annals of Theoretical Psychology, vol 15*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64740-1\_4
6. Jans-Beken, L. G. P. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (2019). Development and preliminary validation of the Existential Gratitude Scale (EGS). *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2019.1656054
7. Kaufman, S. B., Yaden. D. B., Hyde, E., & Tsukayama, E. (2019). The Light vs. Dark Triad of Personality: Contrasting Two Very Different Profiles of Human Nature. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 467. 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00467
8. Kirkey, S. (2020). More than 200 days in, COVID-19 is taking a psychological toll and that’s entirely normal. *National Post.*  <https://nationalpost.com/health/more-than-200-days-in-covid-19-is-taking-a-psychological-toll-and-thats-entirely-normal>
9. Leung, M. M. (2019). Tragic optimism: An integrative meaning-centred approach to trauma treatment. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2019.1633497
10. Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. Arkana/Penguin Books.
11. Morin, T. (2019). Dark leadership is killing organizations and making us miserable. *Work Feels Good.* https://workfeelsgood.com/dark-leadership/
12. Pittaro, M. (2020). Crisis fatigue and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychology Today.* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-crime-and-justice-doctor/202008/crisis-fatigue-and-the-covid-19-pandemic>
13. Pytell, T. (2020). *Victor Frankl’s search for meaning: an emblematic 20th-century life*. Berghahn Books.
14. Smith, M. J., & Liehr, P. R. (Eds.). (2018). *Middle range theory for nursing* (4th ed.). Springer Publishing Company. (See Reed’s chapter on self-transcendence)
15. Unamuno, M. (2014). *Tragic Sense of Life.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
16. Williamson, M. (2020). The origins of America’s mental health crisis. *Newsweek.* <https://www.newsweek.com/marianne-williamson-origins-americas-mental-health-crisis-opinion-1539782>
17. Wong, P. T. (2001). Tragic optimism, realistic pessimism, and mature happiness: An existential model. *Positive Psychology Summit, Washington, DC*.
18. Wong, P. T. P. (1999). Joseph Fabry: A visionary storyteller*. International Network on Personal Meaning.* Retrieved from http://www.meaning.ca/therapy/therapists/Ther\_pages/joseph\_fabry.htm
19. Wong, P. T. P. (2007). Viktor Frankl: Prophet of hope for the 21st century. *Meaning.ca* https://www.meaning.ca/article/viktor-frankl-prophet-hope-herald-positive-psychology/”
20. Wong, P. T. P. (2009). Meaning therapy: an integrative and positive existential psychotherapy. *Journal of contemporary psychotherapy, 40,* 85-93. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10879-009-9132-6
21. Wong, P. T. P. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne, 52(2), 69–81. [https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022511](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0022511)
22. Wong, P. T. P. (2012). Toward a dual-systems model of what makes life worth living. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications* (2nd ed., pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Routledge.
23. Wong, P. T. P. (2012). What is the meaning mindset? *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy,* 4(1), 1-3.
24. [Wong, P. T. P.](http://www.drpaulwong.com/viktor-frankls-meaning-seeking-model-and-positive-psychology/) (2014). [Viktor Frankl’s meaning seeking model and positive psychology](http://www.drpaulwong.com/viktor-frankls-meaning-seeking-model-and-positive-psychology/). In A. Batthyany & P. Russo-Netzer (Eds.), Meaning in existential and positive psychology (pp. 149–184). New York: Springer.
25. Wong, P. T. P. (2016). [Self-transcendence: A paradoxical way to become your best](http://www.drpaulwong.com/self-transcendence-paradoxical-way/). International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://journal.existentialpsychology.org/index.php/ExPsy/article/view/178/141>
26. Wong, P. T. P. (2016a). Existential positive psychology. International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://journal.existentialpsychology.org/index.php/ExPsy/article/view/179/158>
27. Wong, P. T. P. (2016b). Integrative meaning therapy: From logotherapy to existential positive interventions. In P. Russo-Netzer, S. E. Schulenberg, & A. Batthyány (Eds.), *Clinical perspectives on meaning: Positive and existential psychotherapy* (pp. 323-342). New York, NY: Springer.
28. Wong, P. T. P. (2019a). Second wave positive psychology’s (PP 2.0) contribution to counselling psychology. Counselling Psychology Quarterly [Special Issue]. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2019.1671320
29. Wong, P. T. P. (2019b). Why and How I Developed the Positive Psychology of Suffering. *Dr. Paul T. P. Wong*. Retrieved from <http://www.drpaulwong.com/why-and-how-i-developed-the-positive-psychology-of-suffering/>
30. Wong, P. T. P. (2020a). *Made for Resilience and Happiness: Effective Coping with COVID-19 According to Viktor E. Frankl and Paul T. P. Wong.* Toronto, ON: INPM Press.
31. Wong, P. T. P. (2020b). The Unheard Cry of a Successful Asian Psychologist. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied.* https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2020.1820430
32. Wong, P. T. P., & Bowers, V. (2018). Mature happiness and global wellbeing in difficult times. In N. R. Silton (Ed.), *Scientific concepts behind happiness, kindness, and empathy in contemporary society.* Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
33. Wong, P. T. P., & Fry, P. S. (Eds.). (1998). *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
34. Wong, P. T. P., & Worth, P. (2017). The deep-and-wide hypothesis in giftedness and creativity [Special issue]. *Psychology and Education, 54*(3/4). Retrieved from http://www.psychologyandeducation.net/pae/category/volume-54-no-3-4-2017/
35. Wong, P. T. P., Reker, G. T. & Peacock, E. (2006). [The resource-congruence model of coping and the development of the Coping Schemas Inventory](http://www.drpaulwong.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Coping-Schemas-Inventory-Revised-CSI-R-Wong-Reker-Peacock-2006-Paper.pdf). In P. T. P. Wong, & L. C. J., Wong (Eds.), Handbook of multicultural perspectives on stress and coping (pp. 223-283). New York, NY: Springer.