

**The Call for an Existential Positive Psychology:
Embracing the Paradox Between Meaning and Suffering**

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Abstract

This essay argues for an Existential Positive Psychology as proposed and supported by the research and teachings of Dr. Paul T.P. Wong. His perspective helps those who are disenfranchised by the current medical model, favored in the West, to find alternative approaches and ways of thinking about health, wellbeing, and meaning-centered interventions in mental health care. In the United States, outcome-based therapies championed by the medical model are the gold standard for treatment with little or no recognition for meaning-based therapies, such as Existential Positive Psychology. Likewise, further exploration and research of the paradox that exists between suffering and meaning may lead to greater health sustainability than the current system affords. By highlighting the limitations of the present structure, the reader will better understand the need for something that dramatically extends beyond the existing models. Thus, without Existential Positive Psychology and other meaning-centered approaches to therapy, help-givers and help-seekers will continue down a path that is worn thin by the medical model and void of a true north. Therapies lacking an emphasis on meaning, suffering, and creativity will repeat the same tiring questions, which prohibit development in the field of psychology and limit improvement to our human condition.

Keywords: suffering, meaning, logotherapy, medical model, existential positive psychology, true north, pole star

Existential Positive Psychology and Paul T.P. Wong

The seeds for this essay began to take root following my attendance at three International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM) conferences in Toronto, Canada between 2017 and 2021. Each of these events, coordinated by INPM founder Dr. Paul Wong, challenged me to reflect deeper into my personal and professional convictions surrounding meaning, suffering, flourishing, and Existential Positive Psychology. Great minds from around the globe exchanged thoughts and viewpoints that were sometimes just beyond my grasp, but Paul and Lilian Wong's warmth and inclusiveness quickly dispelled any sense of intimidation. INPM's cross-pollination of theories and concepts spoke to me in a way that was both inspiring and welcoming.

Now as an INPM Board Member, currently serving as the Chair of Professional Development and Education, I have the honor of dedicating myself to INPM's mission of promoting Existential Positive Psychology and other meaning-based therapies through education, writing, and conferences. Additionally, in 2023, Paul and I collaborated on two important papers involving suffering and meaning.

The first article, "The suffering hypothesis: Viktor Frankl's spiritual remedies and recent developments," (Wong & Laird, in press) proposes that suffering is a fertile ground for existentialism and the basic human need for meaning. The *suffering hypothesis*, based on Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, offers Paul Wong's Existential Positive Psychology as a promising framework for wellbeing research and meaning-centered interventions (Wong & Laird, in press).

Our second collaboration, "Varieties of suffering in the clinical setting: Re-envisioning mental health beyond the medical model," (Wong & Laird, 2023) argues for the need to think beyond the existing mental health model, with its emphasis on symptomatology and the current reliance on the Diagnostic Statistical Manual—fifth edition (DSM-5). In the post-pandemic

world, people seemingly have a greater awareness of suffering and the inevitable, existential contemplation of their existence (Wong & Laird, 2023).

Paul influences my practice and teaching in both direct and subtle ways. The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethical guidelines regard beneficence and non-maleficence as core principles of therapeutic work, informing clinicians to always benefit their client and to do no harm (APA, 2017). I would add to that code the principle of *know thyself*, as it is related to life balance for help-seekers and help-givers alike. Finally, Paul's belief that a "sustainable durable wellbeing can only be achieved when we are able to realize an adaptive balance between our existential yearnings for love, meaning, and faith" (p. 6) rounds out these three maxims in a highly meaningful way for this author (Wong, 2021).

Paul's work was also inspirational for my development of a meaning and wellness teaching model, PoleStar, which I will review in greater depth later in this essay. Lastly, I am appreciative of Paul's tireless contributions to our field and his dedication to building a *big tent* approach for all through INPM. I am even more thankful for Paul and Lilian's friendship and support. I hope the essay you are about to read further reflects my gratitude and enthusiasm for Dr. Paul Wong's vision.

Embracing the Paradox Between Meaning and Suffering

Following the Second World War, a paradox surfaced in the collective soul of the United States and the West; a puzzle that appeared familiar, but also mysterious and perplexing. A gnawing fear was seeping into the foundation of American pragmatism, and as the post-war sprawl of suburbia further distanced us from once thriving urban centers, the separation between individual, family, and community increased as well (Laird, 2021).

Faced with the horrors of Auschwitz, Dresden, Bataan, and Hiroshima among the thousands of other wartime atrocities, we were forced to ask: How can one satisfactorily address the question of existence while questioning meaning in the meaninglessness of Hitler's Final Solution and Oppenheimer's deadly achievement? And what happens to my values, beliefs, and faith in the face of such questions? Viennese psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, provides some context for these existential questions; "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. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete" (Frankl, 1946, p. 76).

Yet, as the smoke lifted, and the debris of war was cleared in Europe and Japan, a new enemy surfaced in the shadow of America's landscape. This enemy had no discernable features, brandished no guns or bombs, but possessed sweeping and sophisticated weapons of conquest. An enemy born of suspicion, hatred, prejudice, and ignorance helped mold prevailing attitudes and created a further distance between us. Fear, anxiety, and depression prospered, outpacing a booming post-war economy. The solution within the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology seemed to be a further implementation of the medical model, which would, in theory, help explain away, treat, and cure this malaise. In other words, remove suffering by any means necessary, with no regard to the great imbalance such actions might create (Laird, 2021).

Perched on the precipice of a modern renaissance, a possible new age of enlightenment collapsed under the weight of global and domestic violence, racism, extremism, and alienation, as well as spiritual and material bankruptcy. Former President of the United States Jimmy Carter acknowledged this malaise in a televised speech in 1979:

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways...It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about

the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. (para. 31)

Our institutions steadily fell ill, already declining systems became anemic, and the planet was thrust on life-support and has yet to recover. And then, we faced the existential terror and tragedy of the COVID-19 global pandemic. As meaning-seeking creatures we were cast further into a world of meaninglessness as we retreated from any call to action (Laird, 2021). Wong (2014) furthers this point:

Frankl's message seems relevant again in the 21st century, when many people are struggling with such problems as international terrorism, random acts of violence, depression, addiction and the dehumanization of an increasingly technological culture. We may benefit by paying more attention to Frankl's logotherapy, which represents his attempt to re-humanize psychotherapy. He provides us with a spiritually oriented blueprint for a better future for humanity. (p. 150)

Meaning is what we desire, but meaninglessness is often what we are faced with; it is a void in our lives. And as Frankl (1946) points out, whenever there is a void, things rush in to fill it, and these things are typically not healthy. He coined this phenomenon as an existential vacuum. Frankl (1946) suggests that the existential vacuum in our society is formed and fueled out of our own boredom. The paradox here is that we do the very thing we don't desire. Frankl (1946) points out that when people have time to do what they want, they do nothing. For example, retirees report feelings of hopelessness; people binge drink on weekends; or we immerse ourselves into passive technology-based activities every day like television, smart phones, and computers.

We attempt to fill our existential vacuums with diversions that provide momentary satisfaction and pleasure. Junk food, promiscuous sex, or overuse of alcohol and recreational drugs have become temporary solutions for suffering and boredom. Others might seek power and monetary gain or control over others, while conformity becomes the path of least resistance for some. Several of our current issues stem from us not seeing our interconnectedness and interdependence. We are too quick to view others as an opposing “them.” When people cannot identify who they are, but can identify with who they are not, a dangerous precedent is set, which may also give birth to neurotic, vicious cycles, such as fear-driven obsessions or conformity to authoritarianism (Frankl, 1946). However, throughout his work, Frankl maintained an optimism in humankind, and the idea to better understand the healthy striving to create meaning out of suffering, hope out of despair.

The Paradox of Suffering

The ennui of life is nothing new. Certainly, these ideas were explored by Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche years before our present quandary (Kemerling, 2011). However, existential queries can no longer be contained in the remote corners of academia or European intellectual circles. Today, we read and hear the phrase *existential crisis* so often that it has become part of our common nomenclature. To suggest that life is absurd, painful, or meaningless will hardly be contested. The lone voice of disagreement here is the positive psychology cohort whose view of suffering is something to be easily remedied with positive thinking and behaviors. Positive psychology, as a stand-alone approach, has an unbalanced view of optimism. A positive spin is helpful, but like love, it does not conquer all. Yet, when it comes to checking off boxes on an American psyche to-do list, positive psychology on its own makes all the marks. Indeed, a confident attitude coupled with the myth of American individualism

makes it an appealing and easy sell in the states. However, like all things in life that seem too good to be true, it rightfully has its critics. Professor Jim Coyne, a critic of positive psychology and its staunch advocate, Martin Seligman, observed, “positive psychology gives the impression you can be well and happy just by thinking the right thoughts. It encourages a culture of blaming the victim” (Smith, 2019, para. 22).

The challenge for modern psychology to keep pace with our societal malaise is not going well. As a human science, we are failing miserably with the human half. Clinical gaslighting in psychology is widespread, particularly toward women, people of color, older clients, and those in the LGBTQ+ community. Current theories ask help-seekers to change their thinking to cope and simply ignore that the world around them is on fire (Caron, 2022). In many ways, psychology has become less about understanding the science of humankind (if there can be such a thing) and more about placating the medical model, which further distances us from meaning while supporting insufficient methodologies that serve insurance companies and discount social and systemic influences and ignore the needs of the help-seeker. As Churchill and Smith (2022) note:

This reduction is in part a function of psychology’s emphasis on the natural science approach wherein empirical observation is often coupled with material and efficient causal explanation. Indeed, material causal explanations such as accounts of human behavior that appeal to neurobiological structure and/or chemistry are common in the behavioral sciences. While we are not suggesting these accounts are wrong, we are suggesting that they tend to flow out of natural science forms of explanation. (p. 14)

While at face value, this reduction may appear beneficial for the advancement of mental health treatments, it is not exclusively valid. Reductionism strips the individual of all higher levels of being, like art, beauty, love and meaning, to promote cause and effect. Modern

psychology tends to avoid or outright dismiss attempts at a human science with any emphasis on understanding and meaning, while prominence is offered to the natural science tradition with its emphasis on explanation and causation. Specifically, the medical model approach is favored with its cause-and-effect explanations and quantitative methods (Churchill & Smith, 2022).

The growing enterprise of positive psychology should emerge as a logical alternative. Yet, as a standalone solution, not unlike the medical model, it fails to recognize the complexity of the human condition and continues to promote ideas that exclude others, rather than embrace them. In their book, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, Professors Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz (2019), accuse positive psychology of advancing a predominantly Western, one-size-fits-all method to treat the human condition. The authors argue that social and systemic factors, such as racism, discrimination, poverty, and sexual orientation are entirely minimized or dismissed. Positive psychology contends that perhaps *these people* are not trying hard enough to help themselves (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019).

To be clear, psychology rarely takes into consideration the external circumstances that significantly affect suffering. All too often, peripheral factors are seen as a bias on the part of the individual, rather than a systemic reality. Sanah Ahsan (2020) provides some cautionary context:

Will six sessions of CBT, designed to target ‘unhelpful’ thinking styles, really be effective for someone who doesn’t know how they’re going to feed their family for another week? Antidepressants aren’t going to eradicate the relentless racial trauma a black man is surviving. Unsurprisingly, mindfulness isn’t helping children who are navigating poverty, peer pressure and competitive exam-driven school conditions, where bullying and social media harm are rife. (para. 3)

Avoidance of suffering is well known in our species, and the dismissive or reductionist way in which it is avoided in certain academic circles and, more specifically, the clinical setting is unsettling. This avoidance seems peculiar because suffering, like death, is an incontestable term and condition of our human contract. Underscored by the two absolutes of pain and death, which are the only two guarantees in life, suffering is universal and, like death, always nearby. If we choose not to face suffering, it will engulf us. Traditional and well-accepted skill-set therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are not designed to move beyond the medical or cause and effect models. There is not a consideration for the spectrum of human experiences, which includes pain, suffering, joy, meaning and hope. In fact, CBT tends to place blame on the help-seeker if they are not improving, by insinuating the person is not trying hard enough or that they are deliberately blocking progress. This practice is a form of clinical gaslighting (Laird, 2021). Wong and Laird (2023) expand upon this idea and further emphasize the gaps in CBT-oriented treatment:

Likewise, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) handbooks are promoted to explain away any kind of psychic pain in terms of irrational thinking, thus, either blaming or clinically gaslighting clients. In a post-pandemic world, this approach often ignores clients' existential struggles for meaning and happiness and the macro problems such as climate change, internet scams, abuse of AI for personal gains, and the potential for international wars in Europe and Asia. (p. 3)

Self-awareness of the brevity of existence places us in a unique position to glean wisdom from suffering. Understanding the fragility of existence gives perspective to who we are and how we are. Distinctively human fundamentals such as responsibility, freedom, death awareness,

isolation, and meaning speak to our condition and reflect our limitations and choices. We are our choices, regardless of how we justify or take ownership of them (Yalom, 1980).

As psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom (2008) observed, “self-awareness is a supreme gift, a treasure as precious as life. This is what makes us human” (p.1). We are forever haunted by two absolutes; we will know suffering and we will die. Nothing else is guaranteed; One of the central canons of life is that we only exist for a limited time. This awareness comes with a price tag to be paid-in-full, daily, and in the currency of suffering.

Yet, the lessons to be gathered from suffering and anxiety are extinguished in an effort to clinically substantiate psychology as a behavioral science, as if life were purely an intellectual or cognitive exercise rather than an act of creativity. Psychology foolishly professes that a diagnosis will help explain, treat, and cure. However, a diagnosis will also suffocate creativity and reduce us to a statistical inference. In short, the science of psychology serves a menu of antiquated junk science and reductionism that says one flavor satisfies all appetites, and if it doesn’t satiate your cravings, *you’re* doing it wrong.

So how do you quantify the roots of loneliness, despair, and suffering (or even joy or flourishing)? These questions are categorized as inconsequential or even pathological. For psychology, it’s all about the symptoms and the resulting manifest behaviors. In other words, cause and effect, the sequence of natural science rather than consideration of the whole human condition. Look no further than to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—fifth edition (DSM-5) criteria for generalized anxiety disorder as just one example of diagnostic overreach. To contrast this perspective, Wong (2021) comments:

The history of psychology is marked by different waves with different schools dominating in different eras, such as behavioral psychology, humanistic psychology, and

positive psychology. I propose that the future of psychology may belong to a balanced integration of existentialism and positive psychology according to the ancient wisdom of non-duality and self-transcendence. (p.1)

Death and the Search for Meaning

As existential theory professes, we exist between two distinct points in time - a birth date and an expiration date, yet to be determined. Gravestones inform us of this fact, but they do not speak to the quality of one's existence while here on this planet. The important stuff in life occurs in the *dash* that is unceremoniously wedged between one's birth and death dates. Some live well, others not so much, but we all die, and the final content of who we were is consigned to a straight, horizontal line that separates a series of numbers; the final attempt to numerically quantify someone's existence.

If death is how all stories end, then what are we doing with the middle chapters of our tale? Am I writing these pages on my terms, with respect and responsibility to myself and others? What do I value in my life's journey and how will I let my light shine beyond the suffering that is inherent in being? There is a paradox here. As much as facing my fears with courage and insight can heal, it can also cause injury. Sitting in absurdity can defeat life and create a nihilistic state of being, which is why promoting balance between meaning and suffering through a path of creative action is crucial to our individual and collective welfare. Graber (2004) states:

Finding meaning or the will to meaning is the primary motivation for living...the meaning that an individual finds is unique to each person and can be fulfilled only by that one person...Frankl emphasized that the true meaning of each person's life is something that

must be discovered by activity in the world through interaction with others, not solely through introspection. (p. 65)

Toward an Existential Positive Psychology

Culturally, spiritually, and psychologically, we exist in a paradox; an absurd contradiction that reminds us to understand and embrace meaning in life means to understand and embrace our suffering. In their article, Wong and Worth (2017) emphasize that negative experiences in life provide the opportunity for us to tap into our creative reserves. Failures are an opportunity for new perspectives, and loss becomes a motivator for eventual success. By confronting and changing difficult or hopeless challenges we can grow as creative human beings. Moreover, we further retreat from our creative call-to-being by crafting stylish diversions. All neatly self-manufactured to conveniently bypass the chaotic backwoods of our lives rather than direct us on a path through the Terra Incognita.

Our *raison d'être* for exploring the geography of psyche is to uncover deeper and lasting meaning, direction, and rationale through an apparent lack of meaning, direction, and rationale in our world. As Wong and Worth (2017) note, people who are resilient tend to navigate adverse events by assigning them new meanings. This practice, in turn, fosters consistency in times of great stress and life's disappointments, while also supporting the significant role of finding meaning in suffering. Resiliency during difficult times is related to recognizing new meanings, while also establishing ways of coping with stress or a crisis (Wong & Worth, 2017).

Yet, occupation, career, acquisitiveness, and changing technology remain as manic reactions to our depressed culture. Taking the time to work through a crisis, even a relatively minor one, requires us to concede that our bridges are not so stylish, not so sturdy, and not so safe. The map plainly illustrates that the monsters of yore have been replaced with

meaninglessness and a steady byproduct of lives left unquestioned and existential anxiety left unexamined. Sadly, our egos are not well-versed in plotting an effective course, and anxiety swells with no creative outlet as we further devise elevated, objective methods to escape by avoidance. Unchanneled, anxiety further separates us from meaning and creativity. Reality television, smart devices, texting, memes, messages, music and movies, are now instantly accessible, but are also highly symptomatic of our underlying insolvency. These diversions, void of personal meaning and substance, encourage our digressions, and weaken our creative and psychological vigor. They create an attractive noise, but little more.

As Frankl (1946) pointed out, we are bored. We run from our lives instead of toward them, and we often seek shallow comforts to avoid the discomfort of doing something different. Silence becomes an enemy, and stillness somehow equates to the opposite of productivity. Yet, the shared spaces in this paradox between creativity, anxiety, meaning, and suffering can and will produce significant and different results, which is not to suggest that every work of literature, art, music, or film must be the result of suffering or anxiety. Rather, these experiences can fuel the creative process. It is also not to suggest that one must create art in the traditional form to lead a meaningful life. Rather, life itself *is* the art. A person becomes an artist, which can be paradoxically liberating and unsettling (Lieberman, 1985).

To highlight the importance of a creative attitude toward life, Frankl (1986) has identified three values of meaningful living. First, meaning is acquired through experiential values, or experiencing something or someone we value. For example, one might consider Maslow's higher values, such as viewing great art and natural phenomena or nurturing lifelong relationships.

Second, one may find meaning through creative values, using action, not just words. This notion expands the conventional existential idea of discovering meaning by becoming involved

in the project of one's own life, and includes the creative actions involved in producing works of music, literature, inventions, and so on. Frankl (1986) reveals creativity as having an important role in the spiritual unconscious, that is, the conscience, and therefore highlights the absurdity that is a component to artistic expression.

Attitudinal values are the third way people can discover meaning, which includes virtues such as compassion, kindness, courage, humor, and so forth. It is here that Frankl (1986) highlights our capacity to achieve greater life meaning by way of suffering.

With over 140 years of psychotherapy and centuries of psychiatric studies, why do we continue to struggle as a species? How is it that the medical model has, with all its wonderful and noble advancements in treating and, in some cases, curing acute somatic problems, failed us categorically in mental health? Simply put, it is a square peg and a circular hole; It just doesn't fit. Yet here we are, continuing to force the issue, causing damage to those who we are meant to help. Thus, a change is needed to address the psychological concerns and spiritual malaise of our modern times, and this is where Existential Positive Psychology with its roots planted firmly in multiple traditions, should be acknowledged, and more importantly, applied.

Existential Positive Psychology: Dr. Paul Wong

Like Frankl there are others who have discovered potential rather than pathology and have found meaning out of suffering. Dr. Paul Wong has spent a lifetime researching and creating a bridge to span the gap between psychology and philosophy, and suffering and meaning. The result of this labor has been the development of Existential Positive Psychology (EPP). Wong (2010) defines Existential Positive Psychology as “the qualitative and quantitative study of what enables people to survive and flourish individually and collectively in the totality of life circumstances” (p. 2).

Wong (2021) comments on the inspiring nature of Viktor Frankl's perspective and influence as a bridge to Existential Positive Psychology:

I emphasize Viktor Frankl's approach for three reasons. Firstly, he was the first significant pioneer in restoring spirituality and meaning to psychotherapy. This is particularly important in an increasingly dehumanized, technological culture. Secondly, he was the first psychotherapist who made the will to meaning, self-transcendence and responsibility the primary therapeutic objectives, which have been largely ignored by mainstream psychotherapists. Thirdly, I believe that his positive message will complement positive psychology in restoring hope and purpose to all those who are struggling in the negative territories of life. (p 149)

Wong's (2019) research and practice of EPP introduces the following principles for counseling psychology: (1) Accepting and confronting with courage the reality that life is full of evil and suffering; (2) Sustainable wellbeing can only be achieved through overcoming suffering and the dark side of life; (3) Recognizing that everything in life comes in polarities and the importance of achieving an adaptive balance through dialectics; (4) Learning from indigenous psychology, such as the ancient wisdom of finding deep joy in bad situations.

Suffering expands our will to endure when life is emotionally difficult and painful, and it is here where traditional existentialism and positive psychology can potentially help. Dr. Wong deeply recognizes the importance of the paradox, of being able to simultaneously hold two conflicting ideas in the palm of one's hand. Moreover, Dr. Wong acknowledges quite openly that you cannot please everyone when it comes to life or research in the field of psychology. There are always those who will push back on anything new. Wong (2021) states:

Any psychological label or classification is at best a fussy category because of its imprecise nature. I am fully aware that the label existential positive psychology will not please either tribe, but it represents my best attempt to characterize my integrative approach. (p.3)

We should always be mindful that the word *human* in the term *human science* is of the greater value. Authors Churchill and Fisher-Smith (2022) fairly point out:

In our view, what has been forgotten or pushed to the margins is studying the person as a whole from a “human science” perspective that values understanding and meaning. So [it is that] we call upon the reader here to embark not on a psychology conceived as a “science of nature” but rather as a science of the spiritual or human order that shall be irreducible to physical reductionism and mathematical formulations. (p. 14)

The mental health system, annexed by the medical model and managed care, is rife with empty procedural language that effectively writes off humanness as a statistical addendum (Morrill, 2019). Suffering should not be seen as a mistake or abnormal. The flesh fails, but the wisdom we gain from that process is priceless. Wong (2021) states:

It is increasingly difficult to ignore the reality of suffering as humanity is under various existential threats: The pandemic, climate change, extremism, nuclear warfare, and the abuse of digital power. What kind of solution could psychology offer? Existential positive psychology (PP 2.0) seems to be the logical answer because it seeks evidence-based positive solutions to the existential crises facing individuals and humanity. (p.1)

As EPP illuminates, there are many roots that belong to one tree, all moving in different directions but sharing similar qualities. The same could be said for the creative process, be it writing, painting, composing music, or living an authentic and meaningful existence. The link

shared between artist and expression is a channel of communication that is open, deep and provides connectivity to one's own unique PoleStar or true north, which will be explored in the following section (Laird, 2021).

The PoleStar Model

Developed to complement Wong's Existential Positive Psychology (EPP), PoleStar is a teaching model designed by this author to help illuminate meaning in life as an act of creativity and a benchmark for the potential reconciliation of art, science, and spiritual dimensions within an individual (see Figure 1). As I have pointed out, standard research in psychology has failed, attempting to wedge the medical model into the very circle it can never square. Our being is too rich for statistics and too clever to be restrained by the constructs of ordinary research. As psychologist Dr. Elio Martino (2020) quite powerfully asserts:

When the ocean is calm and you can see land, it is easy to navigate true north; you can see the way forward with your own eyes, all you must do is stay the course. However, when the tides of emotion are high, and the skies are cast over with fear, isolation, and confusion, it can appear impossible to know which way you are really heading. You are wrestling just to control the ship, yet alone able to steer 'true north'. It is in these moments of doubt and fear you begin to question which way north truly is, despite what your compass may be saying. (para. 1)

Figure 1

The Polestar Teaching Model



Psychology on its own does not yield understanding or generate self-awareness. Experience helps us structure and give meaning to our world(s). Therefore, we must reflect on how the world has influenced us. By current psychology standards, this practice is viewed as an exclusive cognitive experiment, but it is much more an act of creativity that transcends any cognitive model. Creative processes mean nothing without action, ability, and inspiration. Briefly, the PoleStar model follows a path that is by no means linear, but it does conform to some basic maxims, namely that we are meaning seeking beings with an innate aptitude to create meaning out of suffering. It follows the spirit of Wong's EPP research by embracing the art of meaning and suffering, and it is an instrument that can provide a path away from Frankl's existential vacuum.

1. ACTION: At some fixed point, I will have the capacity and power to act; to create a life worth living, set forth by my ability (Laird, 2021).

2. **ABILITY:** These actions will be exemplified by the uniqueness of my thoughts, integration of my values, beliefs, struggles, and an exploration of meaning as the result of suffering, life circumstances, culture, and social class, that can lead to greater inspiration (Laird, 2021).
3. **INSPIRATION:** Imagination, inventiveness, motivation, vision, having and showing a creative mind, and expressing it through acts of daily living, art, spirituality, engagement, and compassion toward myself and others (Laird, 2021).

However, rarely will a creative endeavor be the result of any one creative action.

Creativity is a complex process that involves many moving parts and occurs across multiple physical, psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions operating in tandem. For instance, many different actions are needed in the creation of a painting, a musical composition, or a written story (Carruthers, 2011).

Meaning making is a creative action as meaning itself is spun out of suffering, and by trying to prevent or avoid emotional suffering or anxiety, we create a paradox that impedes our capacity to find our true north. We flourish most when we connect with each other and to something larger than ourselves through suffering and anxiety.

Exploration of our creative actions will expose a conduit to our PoleStar, and it is here that the spiritual core of an individual may flourish amid suffering, meaning, and joy. Our PoleStar is with us regardless of the weather we encounter, thus life can always be experienced and appreciated as unpredictable and changing. It is an instrument through which we can navigate meaning and meaninglessness, agency and aversion, engagement and isolation, and freedom and attachment, and it is an essential tool in a post-pandemic world (see Figure 1).

Dr. Wong's Existential Positive Psychology and the PoleStar model complement each other as both are concerned with the human condition as it is actualized through suffering, meaning and creativity. Wong (2014) concurs, "Meaning is more likely to be discovered through creative, experiential, and attitudinal values that are motivated by self-transcendence rather than by self-interest" (p. 149).

Each help-seeker's cardinal direction on the PoleStar compass is an existential conversation, not a template for advice, cure, or treatment. Moreover, these conversations place the highest value on sociocultural, spiritual, and economic meanings as well as the other daily realities of one's own unique existence. A PoleStar potentially awakens deeper understanding of what is truly significant in us, and someone following their true north accepts the paradoxical terms and conditions of the human experience. Thus, they may reimagine the world as a creative project that is never complete and never quite perfect. The PoleStar model could potentially aid help-seekers by revealing a life highlighted with integrity, honor, dignity, and creative action, particularly in a post-pandemic world (Laird, 2021). This model would apply across the broad canvas of lifespan development. As Richard Davidson, founder and director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison stated in a lecture concerning the significance of meaning and purpose, "having a clear direction in life and a sense that life has meaning—has been linked with faster recovery from negative events and even with longer life." (para. 12) He also cited a study of people in their seventies and eighties that found those with less of a sense of purpose in life died earlier in the follow-up period than those who reported having more purpose (Feldscher, 2018).

Creative action is never stagnant. Indeed, it can play out in many ways that are either helpful or potentially destructive if one ignores their compass altogether. Our true north may

shift depending on where we are in our lifespan development, but like the sky, it is always there regardless of the weather. Creative values are not stationary ideas, rather these are the things that flourish and change with us. Our own true north grows with us, and it is important for us to take a moment daily to appreciate and acknowledge the relationship we have with our true north (King, 2019).

The next reasonable question is how does one tend to their PoleStar when acknowledgement is not enough? The answer is through creative action; the very thing that initially forged a PoleStar will help sustain it. A true method to wellness does not try to reinvent the wheel or attempt to create a better mousetrap. What follows are suggestions to provide daily attention to one's PoleStar.

1. Creating a 15 to 20-minute daily practice of meditation, or prayer, a time to quietly reflect on life and to understand there is meaning through suffering. Concisely, to focus on things that are most important to one's existence (Laird, 2021).
2. Engaging in daily reflection, keeping a journal, exercising, painting, listening to or creating music, meditative walking or jogging. These are all activities that are grounding and help us focus on what's important, while nurturing an inner sense of well-being (George, 2015).
3. Establish kindness and a sense of community by always being kind and compassionate toward oneself and others. Being kind is good for our physical and mental health. Psychologists have found that performing acts of generosity and expressing empathy boosts levels of happiness and well-being, and even lowers blood pressure and pulse rate (Curry et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2020).

Two decades ago, Psychologist Ernest Keen (2012) made a challenge to the field of psychology with a call to action:

The vehicle of natural science has been important in integrating psychology into American society—in appealing to sources of legitimacy and opportunity and support... But it has also been a straitjacket, distancing psychology from poetry, novels, art, and music, making more difficult and more marginal the insights and approaches of these fields for the logos of the psyche. (p. 228)

Conclusion

The future of good mental health in the United States, and in the West, requires psychology to answer and build on Dr. Wong’s call—a call not only to create, but to nurture kindness, meaning, spirituality, flourishing through action, and acknowledge that suffering shares a space in this complex and paradoxical journey. In short, we must recognize the wisdom found in suffering. Look no further than the daily newsfeed, where we witness unprecedented levels of anger, violence, hatred, stress, and anxiety. A global mental health crisis of this scale is reason enough to revisit and reimagine existential and meaning-based therapies. These different approaches flourished in response to the greatest sufferings in our human story, so why wouldn’t they be applicable today (Laird, 2021)? Yet, no philosophy, science, excessively cited essay, nor moral message, can usurp this fact, for humans to survive as a species, we must first and always acknowledge the unique and creative spirit of existence as it balances delicately in the paradox between suffering and meaning.

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