

**Whole-Person Flourishing:
Paul Wong and Loving Awareness of the Existing (and Suffering) Individual**

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My appreciation for Paul Wong as a scholar and—more importantly—as a human being, runs deep. To spend even a single moment with Paul is to understand that his research springs from the core of his being and that his mission is an urgent one. As a self-described “perennial outsider,” he has been tireless in advocating for researchers to see, with what I would label as *loving awareness*, human beings as they actually exist. As other existentialist psychologists like Viktor Frankl have noted, only love allows us to fully know another human being. It is clear that Paul’s work is a labor of love. His approach helps us avoid the tendency to render people as abstractions defined in terms of a handful of (reductionistic) attributes. Furthermore, Paul does not view suffering as the opposite of flourishing. Instead, people, as they actually exist, do suffer. Period. Because suffering cannot be avoided, it must (!) be integrated in healthy ways, leading to what he calls “mature” happiness. Paul often quotes Carl Jung: “It is said no tree can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell.” This sentiment stands in sharp contrast to shallow and escapist forms of psychological coping that self-deception leads us to re-define as happiness in the short term but that ultimately fail in the long term. Such deceptions certainly collapse from a spiritual perspective, as a founder of existentialism (Kierkegaard) pointed out so long ago. It is the task of existential psychology, which Paul represents so well and has helped to advance so much, to assist the *actually existing person* in their quest for holistic flourishing.

It is increasingly common for scholars to give greater attention to understanding the symbiotic relationship between suffering and flourishing. Thanks to the work of Paul and the tradition(s) that he represents, we better appreciate the role of suffering in fostering greater potential for openness and appreciation, personal growth, and deeper spiritual development. From a nondualistic perspective that is so foreign to Western psychology, we might say that flourishing involves remaining fully present with all of life’s experiences, regardless of conventional psychological valence (i.e., labeling as pleasant or unpleasant). We might prefer to say, “remaining lovingly present.” Whole-person flourishing, then, might be rendered as *wholeness amidst adversity*. In the fullness of time, adversity might even be appreciated as a gift. Forty years ago, the existentialist psychologist Rollo May wrote in *The Discovery of Being*

that psychological science had a tendency towards “defining out of the picture the characteristics which make [a particular] individual an existing person.” Paul is nudging the discipline back to the existing person. That he does this with a reliably warm smile, despite perennial outsider status and “my many bad encounters with discrimination” (as he wrote in 2020 in the *Journal of Psychology*), is a humbling reminder of the spiritual wisdom that love conquers all.