

Adventures with Viktor Frankl and Advances in Logotherapy

(AEPP01) Lesson 5: The Hidden Power of Self-transcendence

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Lesson 4 Recap

The last lesson emphasized the real power of meaning, which is integrative and transformative. Meaning is capable of integrative various domains of meaning in an adaptive and balanced manner. It is also capable of integrating the bright and dark sides within each domain, thus fundamentally transforming the dark side of human existence. The following figure is a summary of the different aspects of the power of meaning.

What is the Real Power of Meaning?

To anyone who thinks that they can craft their own meaningful work or meaningful life painlessly: think again! That is because life happens – a mean new boss can throw a monkey wrench into your work, and a sudden reversal of fortune may completely change your life trajectory.



For instance, COVID-19 has claimed millions of lives and fundamentally disrupted countless other lives and their best-laid career plans. Random terrorist attacks can destroy many happy families and create heart-wrenching tragedies for survivors. All of one's dreams can instantly become a nightmare with the prognosis of terminal cancer. Where is your power of meaning in such tragic circumstances?

I want to show you that the real power of meaning lies in transforming the deepest Hell into the highest Heaven.

Here are the life-changing potentials of meaning that can make you undefeatable:

1. When terrible things happen, you will naturally ask "Why" and seek an answer.
2. When you reach the end of the rope, you will be more willing to accept a lifeline from God.
3. When you are confused about all the disinformation and counterfeits, you will need the existential wisdom to discern the true meaning of the situation beneath the surface.
4. When you are torn by conflicting values and loyalties, you will realize the need to remain true to your core values and beliefs.
5. When you are betrayed or abandoned, you will learn the power of forgiveness and agape love.
6. When you hit rock bottom, you will need to fight with all that is within you for every step, and hang on to the wavering faith to make the impossible possible
7. When suffering becomes unbearable or the situation becomes intolerable, you will need to summon up your courage and faith to endure it because of life's inherent value and meaning.
8. When you are in your darkest hours, you can see the brightest stars by faith and you can be the light by rekindling the light of meaning in your life and in others around you.

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Abstract

As we wrap up Frankl's theory of self-transcendence, Lesson 5 finally reveals the narrative arc of Viktor Frankl's story on the hidden power of self-transcendence. This lesson helps resolve 3 conflicts that have puzzled meaning seekers for a long time:

- (1) How can one be liberated from all their shackles and enemies in order to become what they were meant to be?
- (2) How can one find the best path when all the well trodden paths have led to either dead ends or disasters? The spiritual intelligence to understand the best path is the path of self-transcendence.
- (3) How can one be transformed into a phoenix after going through suffering and death?

The key to resolving the above existential puzzles lies in four spiritual principles of transformation from sinking one's roots into the soil of suffering and rising as a flourishing tree with an abundance of good fruits.

In terms of applications, self-transcendence is needed for every stage of development, but it is most needed during old age, terminal illness, or the rock-bottom phenomenon for drug addicts. This lesson will end with examples of practicing self-transcendence in nursing and leadership.

Introduction

The more clients I see, the more I am convinced that most of the psychological disorders can be attributed to spiritual and existential issues as Viktor Frankl (1949/1986) hypothesized long ago.

In a materialistic and consumerist culture with ego at the center and Mammon as the God. Most people manipulate others as objects for selfish gains, and no longer treat each other with respect and compassion as fellow human beings.

I suggest that we are like fish without water – we need to get back to God and the transcendental values of faith, hope, and love (Wong, 2023a).

Here is an illustrative case study based on several of my clients to demonstrate the spiritual power of meaning. Mrs. Young is a hard-working single mom with a depressed teenage son. She has referred her son, Jimmy, to a family doctor, a psychiatrist, and even a hospital's emergency service, but nothing has worked. In desperation, she takes her Jimmy to me.

After a few sessions, it becomes very clear to me that Jimmy is not a case of mental illness, but a victim of being kind and sensitive person in a broken world. Firstly, he is being suffocated to death by his mother's smothering love. Secondly, he is "gaslighted" by his mom who wants to gain complete control over him. She would make him feel useless and that he cannot do anything right without her approval. Thirdly, Jimmy is also angry with his mom for not allowing his father to visit him frequently. Finally, he feels lonely and helpless in a private school, which stresses science and mathematics while he is only good and interested in arts.

When Jimmy's frustration and anger reaches a breaking point, he would temporarily lose control and explode in violent outburst. During an episode of temper tantrum, he would destroy anything in sight, let out a primal scream, hurt himself, and curse the day he was born.

It takes a while before Mrs. Young finally realizes that she is the main source of Jimmy's misery. Her love for Jimmy, while intended for his good, actually only served her emotions; her gaslighting of Jimmy stems from her fear of losing him. It has never dawned on her that all she needs to do is to let Jimmy be himself, and not use Jimmy as a bargaining chip to squeeze out more money from his dad. She also realizes the need to allow Jimmy to go back to his neighborhood public school, where he can have friends and no longer feels like a failure. Finally, realizes that she needs to go back to her church with Jimmy and to stop her self-handicapping manipulations to meet her own needs.

As a result of these changes, Jimmy becomes he feels happy that he can be himself: a quiet, kind, and sensitive boy. More importantly, he feels comfortable talking to his mom, and he can pray to God for his issue that he wants privacy. Now that his life is more meaningful and hopeful, he is happy and calm without any medication. All I have done is to help both mother and son discover their basic need for meaning, love, and faith. (For more illustrative cases, see Wong & Laird, 2022).

[END OF LESSON PREVIEW]