

Preface for The How of Meaningful Living (for a forthcoming book)

©Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

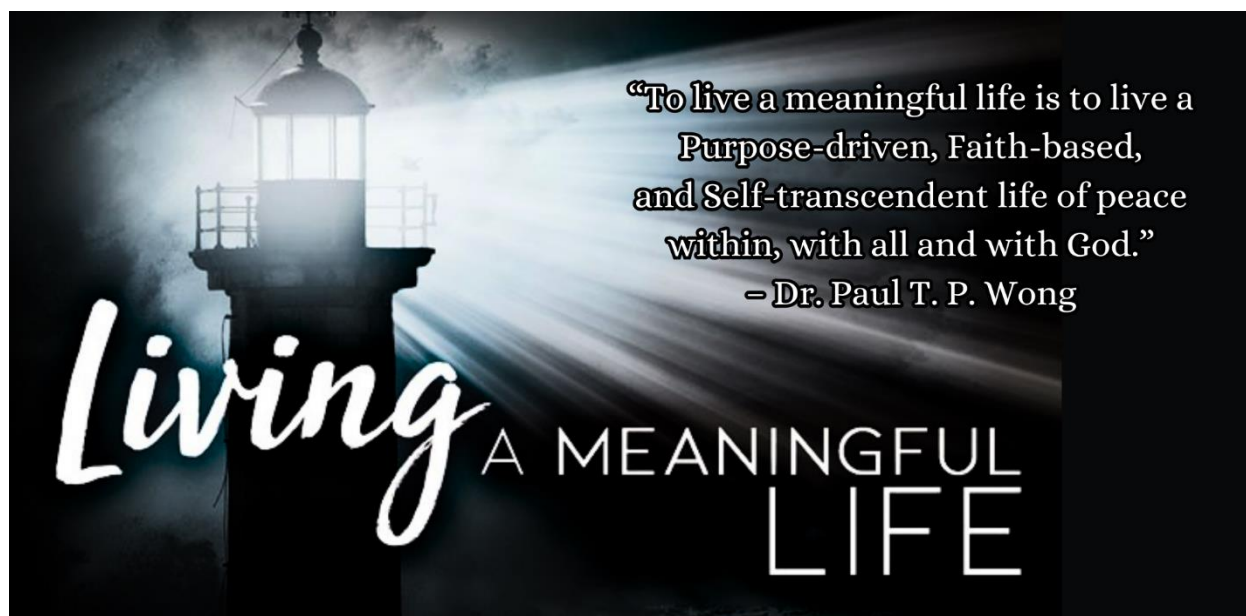


Image from ESG United Church (2021)

Viktor Frankl is always relevant as long as there is human suffering and pain. That is why he was the most mentioned psychotherapist during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Wong, 2020). As you journey with Frankl, you will find a roadmap to answer the following questions:

- How can I find meaning and happiness in a cruel and unfair world?
- How can I know my true self and my rightful role in the world?
- How can I make sense of this crazy and absurd world?
- How can I discover the hidden beauty and goodness all around me?
- How can I overcome traumas and evils and become better rather than bitter?
- How do I realize my most cherished dream without resources and opportunities?
- How can I find peace and joy in the midst of suffering?
- How can I remain optimistic in hopeless and helpless situations?
- How do I find my soul mate or true love?

Eventually, the quest for meaning will lead to your encounter with God, who is in our genes (Newberg et al., 2002) and who can shed light to all the mysteries of life such as the mystery of suffering.

The genius of Viktor Frankl is that he is able to translate his profound insights from his extreme sufferings into deep psychological insights into meaning and mental health in a way that may resonate with ordinary people.

I invite you to explore what Frankl has to offer which may enable you to have a new start and a new hope for healing and transformation.



**“What profit hath a
man of all his labour
which he taketh
under the sun?”
(Ecclesiastes 1:3)**

This book is based on the lessons featured in my course, “[Adventures with Viktor Frankl And Recent Advances in Logotherapy.](#)” It represents the culmination of my 40 years of studying Frankl and doing meaning-centered research and therapy.

You will also discover the need for a meaning-centered existential positive psychology, when all your signature strengths have failed you and you have come to the end of your rope. I have experienced such helplessness in my near-death experience, as described in the following graphic.

“While alone, surrounded by darkness, anxiety, and fear, I discovered a spiritual or transcendent kind of good life, based on the wisdom of understanding the finitude of life, the humility of letting go, the spirit of repentance and forgiveness, an attitude of loving-kindness toward all, and bearing fruit of righteousness.” – Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

Many years ago, during my long and painful stay in the hospital after a near-death experience, I discovered existential positive psychology (EPP or PP2.0).

In simplest terms, EPP is a meaning-centered and faith-based approach to discovering the best possible life in all seasons, especially during the darkest hours of human existence.

Metaphorically, EPP is like learning how to live a deep life, with roots sinking deep into the soil of suffering and branches reaching towards Heaven and spreading far and wide, bearing fruits for the hungry people from all nations. In scientific terms, EPP is the integrative and holistic science of how to flourish through transforming suffering with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy as its theoretical foundation.

While I still have a sound mind, I want to know who wants to help carry on the touch to help people see and be the light in their despair.

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Both by his example and writing, Dr. Frankl boldly declared that biology is not destiny and environment is not fate, because even in Nazi death camps, one could have the freedom to say “Yes” to life in spite of everything.

Here are three life-changing principles from Frankl's teaching that may pique your interest to learn more about this book. More importantly, these spiritual principles may open up new vistas of the transforming power of meaning for your life and vocation.

1. The Power to Transform Your Suffering into Blessings

The first thing we need to learn is how to face the dark side of life in order to be made whole. Suffering is a gift that no one wants, but paradoxically, no one can survive and thrive well without accepting suffering and finding the meaning to transform it into strength and joy.

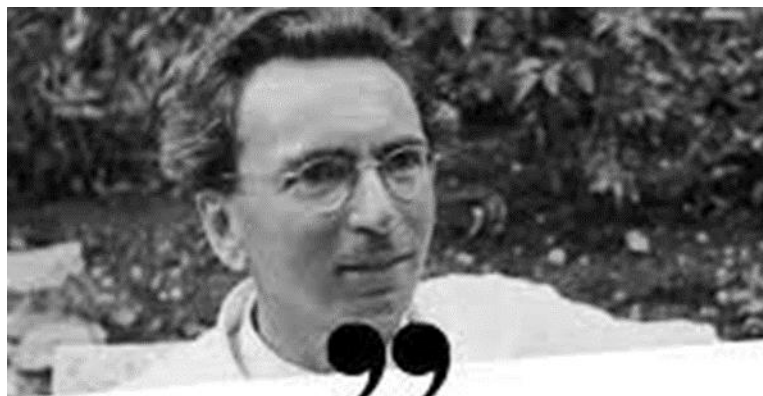
The central message of logotherapy is that life can be hard and cruel and no one is exempt from suffering. But we are all endowed with the capacity to embrace suffering as an opportunity to live life as a deeper level and transform suffering into our highest achievement.

Frankl epitomized this principle in many ways.

For example, he had every reason to seek revenge for all the suffering, degradation and devastation inflicted on his family and people. But to enact revenge may make you a monster as well. In addition, his conscience told him that “no one has the right to do wrong, even if wrong has been done to them.”

To him, the best revenge is to harness all the negative energies of anger, resentment, and pain to transform them into positive energies of forgiveness, love, and becoming a stronger and better person. Thus, with God’s help, the transforming power of meaning and spirituality still works even in circumstances that usually bring out peoples’ darkest impulses.

In his soul-crushing pain, he was able to discover “the truth — that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.”



“No one has the right to do wrong, even if wrong has been done to them.”

VIKTOR FRANKL
@VIKTORFRANKLLBOOK

Frankl also confirmed our capacity to transform shame into strength: “But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer.”

According to the biblical story, shame, guilt, and anxiety are the existential emotions that have plagued humanity ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. These three self-conscious emotions, passed onto us through the collective unconsciousness, are responsible for many emotional disorders. For example, shame is related to self-loathing, self-harming and social withdrawal.

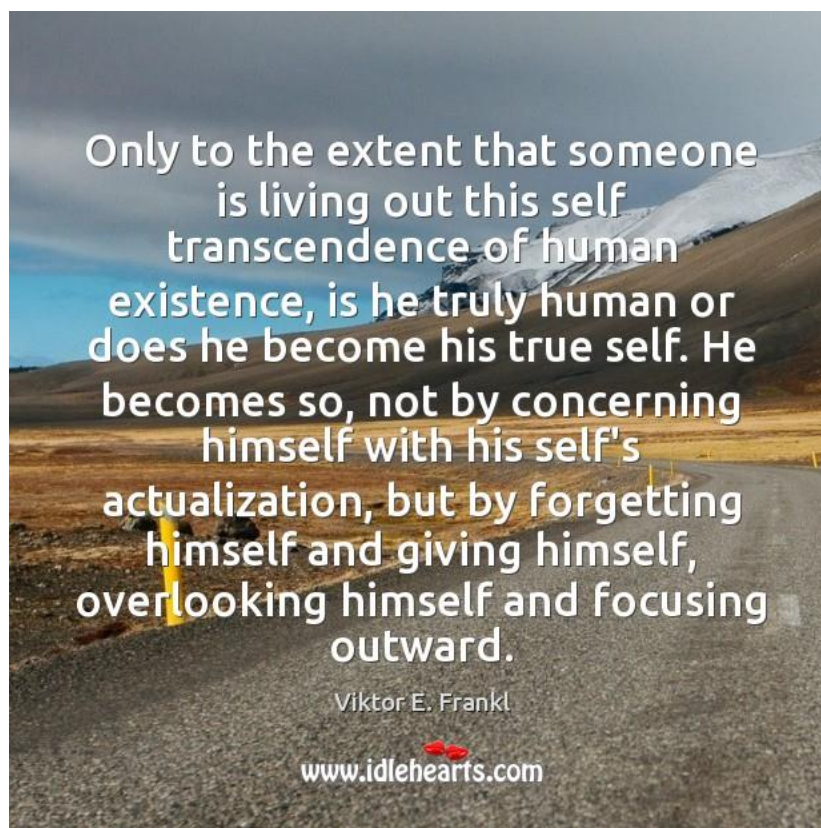
Logotherapy (or meaning therapy) focus on both the courage to endure and the courage for self-affirmation; both self-acceptance and self-transcendence (Wong, 2019).



2. The Power of Self-transcendence Beyond Ego

Frankl's biggest contribution to psychology is his discovery of will to meaning, as the unfulfilled meaning to life's demand: *What are you going to do with your life* (Frankl, 1978)? The most important task for each of us is finding an answer to this persistent question.

There are many answers to this question, but we will more likely find the right answer if we understand the quest for meaning as the primary motivation to seek self-transcendence – something greater than ourselves.



Humans are meaning-seeking and meaning-making beings. We naturally ask: “Why me?” “Why now?” (Wong & Weiner, 1981). Our suffering and anger will not go away until we find a positive meaning for our ordeal.

We also need something transcendental to fill our inner void even after reaching the zenith of success. Tolstoy is an exemplar. In spite of his enormous success and wealth, he sank into deep depression and even thought of ending his own life. In his dark night of the soul, he found God and meaning: “Tolstoy notes that, whatever the faith may be, it “gives to the finite existence of man an infinite meaning, a meaning not destroyed by sufferings, deprivations, or death” (Popova, 2014). In his book *A Confession* (Tolstoy, 1879/1988), he reached the following conclusion:

“Faith is the strength of life. If a man lives, he believes in something. If he did not believe that one must live for something, he would not live... For man to be able to live he must either not see the infinite, or have such an explanation of the meaning of life as will connect the finite with the infinite.”

This book will discuss several spiritual exemplars who are able to turn suffering into blessings and achievements through their faith in God.

Frankl’s concept of self-transcendence includes both the vertical dimension of transcending the finite material world and faith in God, as well as the horizontal dimension of serving humanity especially the suffering masses. In this upward and outward reorientation, ego with its pride and greed is dethroned from the centered by agape love.

The following golden triangle capture the essence of the self-transcendence paradigm (Wong, 2023).

The Self-transcendence Paradigm of Global Wellbeing & Flourishing

The golden triangle of mental health and wellbeing is about how to live a meaningful life through expanding one's innate capacity for connections in 3 life domains in spite of hardships.

FAITH
(Spirituality)

Connecting with God, a higher power, or nature by transcending doubts and disbelief.

AGAPE

HOPE

(Agency)

Connecting with one's soul, calling, or authentic self by transcending one's limitations and egotism.

LOVE

(Communion)

Connecting with others and loved ones by transcending relational conflict and frustrations.

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3. The Tension and Peace of Dialectic Interactions Between Good and Evil


Inner peace and mental health result from the tension (or balancing act) of dancing on the edge of a knife: wrestling with God and ourselves in deciding between what we are and what we should become, between the desire to be or not to be, between loving oneself and loving all people, between self-expansion and self-transcendence.

This delicate and dangerous act of dancing is made possible only with existential courage, wisdom, and meaning based on faith, hope and love. But the risk is worth it: it is the only solution to the problem of finding meaning and joy amidst the terrors of human existence by connecting our finite and fragile life with the infinite and almighty Creator.

The best resolution to the dilemma that God's justice demands punishment of sinners and God's love demands forgiveness of sinners is the cross on which Christ died for sinners in order to redeem them. This has given hope and new life to many who could not forgive themselves and could not move forward.

Quote of the Week
by Viktor E. Frankl

“(...) mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being.”

A photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a light-colored shirt, sitting at a table and reading a book. On the table in front of him are a white coffee cup on a saucer, a glass of water, and another coffee cup. The background shows a bookshelf. In the foreground, there is a green sofa with a white cushion and a small white table with books on it.

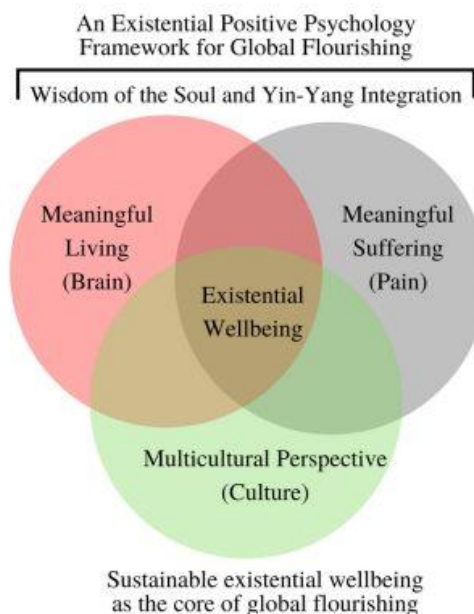
The books will conclude with the existential positive psychology paradigm which is based on Frankl's logotherapy as the foundation.

The Four Main Themes of EPP

The following diagram can be described as the four main themes of **existential positive psychology** (EPP or PP2.0)

1. **The science of existential wellbeing and sustainable flourishing** (including existential wisdom, dialectical integration and the deep life).
2. **The science of meaningful living** (including meaning of work, meaning of ethical leadership, meaning of love, social justice, and self-**transcendence**)
3. **The science of meaningful suffering** (including meaning-focused coping and transformation, religion, spirituality and existentialism)
4. **The science of multiculturalism** (including existential universals, fundamental human rights, and indigenous psychology).

Properly understood, from being a limited special interest, EPP is actually a new paradigm that affect all major domains of psychology.



For example, it adds breath to positive psychology by going beyond PERMA to include the joy of suffering and the existential wellbeing of being liberated and made whole.

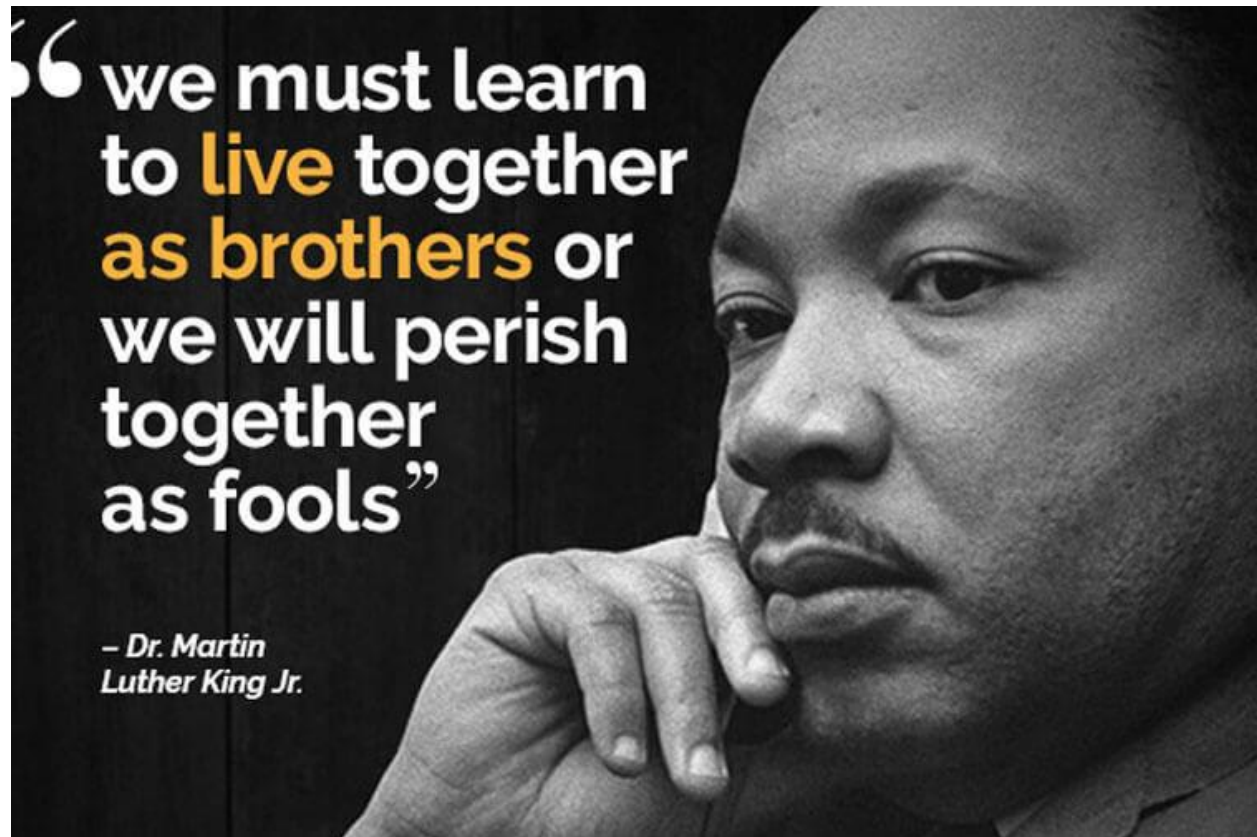
It also adds depth to positive psychology by incorporating elements of overcoming inherent human limitations, vulnerabilities, and cultural differences. In sum, EPP covers a wide swarth from negative 10 to positive 10 with deep roots.

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I want to end this Preface with an inspirational message: Why don't we make one day in January as the *International Day of Meaningful Living*?

World peace is possible only if all people from all nations recognize that, at the deepest level, we are all the same: each one of us is a soul yearning for meaning and spirituality.

Only when we recognize that we are self-transcendent beings can we rise about all the things that divide us: egoism, nationalism, race, sexual orientations, and religion.



Peace is possible only when more and more people learn to live a meaningful life. We will be able to live in peace with ourselves, with others, and with God when we choose to practice self-transcendence.

If you support this grand vision, [please add your signature to my petition for a day of Meaningful Living](#) as a precondition for world peace.



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