

Adventures with Viktor Frankl and Advances in Logotherapy (AEPP01)

Chapter 2: Who is Viktor Frankl? What is Logotherapy and Existential Analysis?

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Abstract

This chapter covers several basic concepts about **how to know who you really are**. First of all, you need to know that you are not just a computer or an animal; rather, you are a spiritual being – a meaning-seeking, ethically responsible and relational being – with both the depths of the unconscious and the heights of higher consciousness. From this spiritual-existential perspective, who you really are is determined by how you use your freedom to make your choices in responding to all the trials and tribulations in life. Furthermore, meaning in life is not mainly determined by your subjective feelings towards life, but by your exercise of volition by choosing the will to meaning – to strive towards a worthy goal. Finally, when you view life with a meaning mindset, you are more likely to see the hidden goodness and truth in ordinary circumstances and care for others as your brothers and sisters.

Why is Frankl so Important to the Suffering Masses?

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) lived through the great economic depression, the Holocaust and two World Wars. All though his adolescence and adulthood, he had to wrestle with the problem of human suffering. He even suffered mentally as a precocious child with an inquisitive mind and a very sensitive heart; he was already struggling with the prospect of personal death at the tender age of 4 years old (Krasovska & Mayer, 2021; Frankl, 2000).

Some may question the credibility of this account. Some parents may even worry that their anxious child might need professional help from a physician or a child psychologist. In fact, some of my own clients did consult me, wondering whether there may be something wrong with their child if the child looked sad and was pre-occupied with dark thoughts. To dismiss such concerns, I want to share with you some my own childhood experiences.

Did you know that I too was anxious about death, worrying that my parents might accidentally die when I was still in Grade 2? This death anxiety may be traced back to the trauma of being forced out from our home by Japanese soldiers, with bayoneted rifles pointing at us, when I was only 4 or 5 years old.

Overnight, we became homeless. I was sent to a relative's place that evening, and my siblings were taken care of by other relatives. I spent the night alone in a dark basement on a wooden board infested with lice and bedbugs. All night, I fought against the horror of being alone in darkness and being eaten alive by all the lice. I could not understand why the world could be so cruel and unfair.

As a war baby (born in 1937), I witnessed human tragedies up close and experienced firsthand the terrors of human evil and depravity. You may wonder why I did not grow up with PTSD or other kinds of mental disorders. But my life and my writing prove that suffering can add depth to one's life as it did to Frankl and me. We can both credit our deep insights about the meaning of life to our trauma and suffering.

We are still living in a dangerous world full of suffering: from the carnage of war to the mass killings; from the vast underworld of drug trafficking and human trafficking to the less visible but more dangerous industry-military complex.

In addition, we are living in a toxic materialistic culture in which love for money and indulgence in pleasures have made our soul sick and miserable. This [2017 article](#) about the perils of chasing after money is still relevant and true today (Mathewes & Sandsmark, 2017).

Suffering remains an inevitable and important aspect of life. Frankl (1946/1985) has taught us the importance of wresting meaning from suffering and turning it into human triumph. This transformation requires the courage to embrace suffering, the determination to pursue something bigger than ourselves, and the faith to do the impossible.

All these endeavors cannot be only based on our own efforts and ability without involving the spiritual or noetic dimension. More specifically, we need enlightenment, detachment, and self-transcendence. In other words, we need the wisdom of the soul (Wong, 2023) and the spiritual laws in order to see the light and be the light even in the darkest hours. Here are the 3 spiritual laws based on Frankl's teaching of self-transcendence:

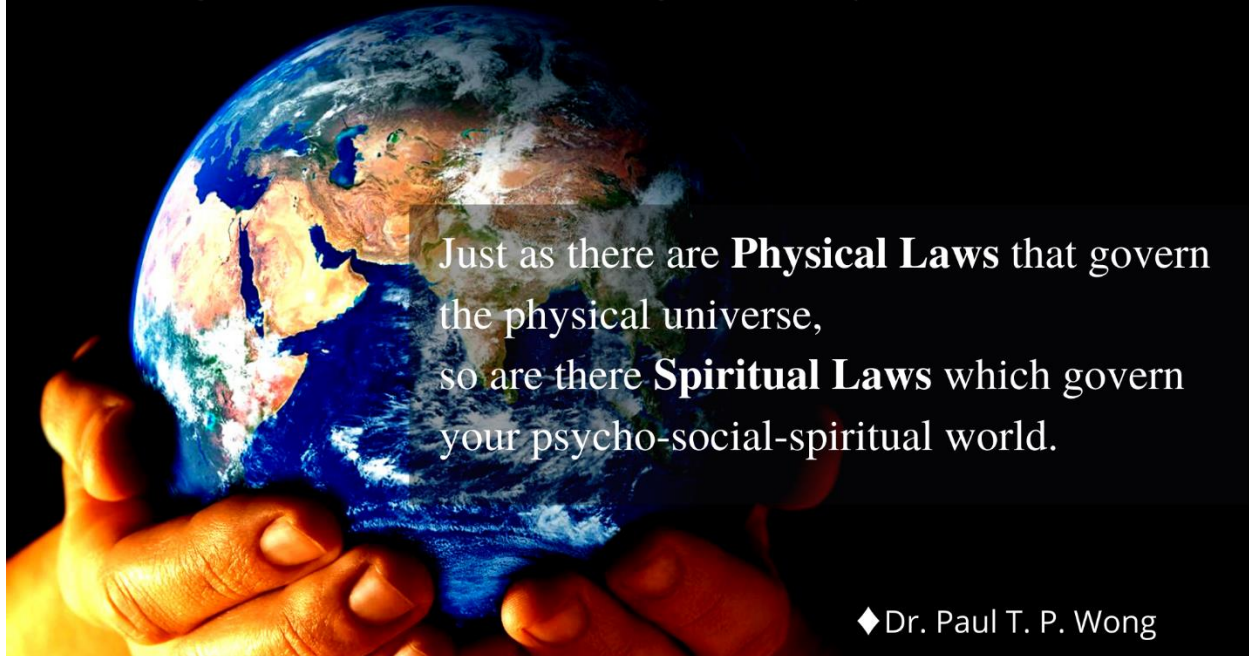
- (1) Love your true self by transcending your inherent limitations,
- (2) Love others by transcending individual and cultural differences, and
- (3) Love God, the source of life, by transcending what the world offers: money, power, and fame.

THE 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS

that govern your relationships and contribute to your positive mental health:

- 1) **Love yourself** by staying connected with your calling and becoming what you were meant to be.
- 2) **Love others** and make a unique and significant contribution to your family, community and humanity.
- 3) **Love God** with all your heart, soul, and mind so that you can attain oneness with the Creator and his creation.

A meaningful life is the result of following the above spiritual laws.



How was Frankl Different from Freud and Adler?

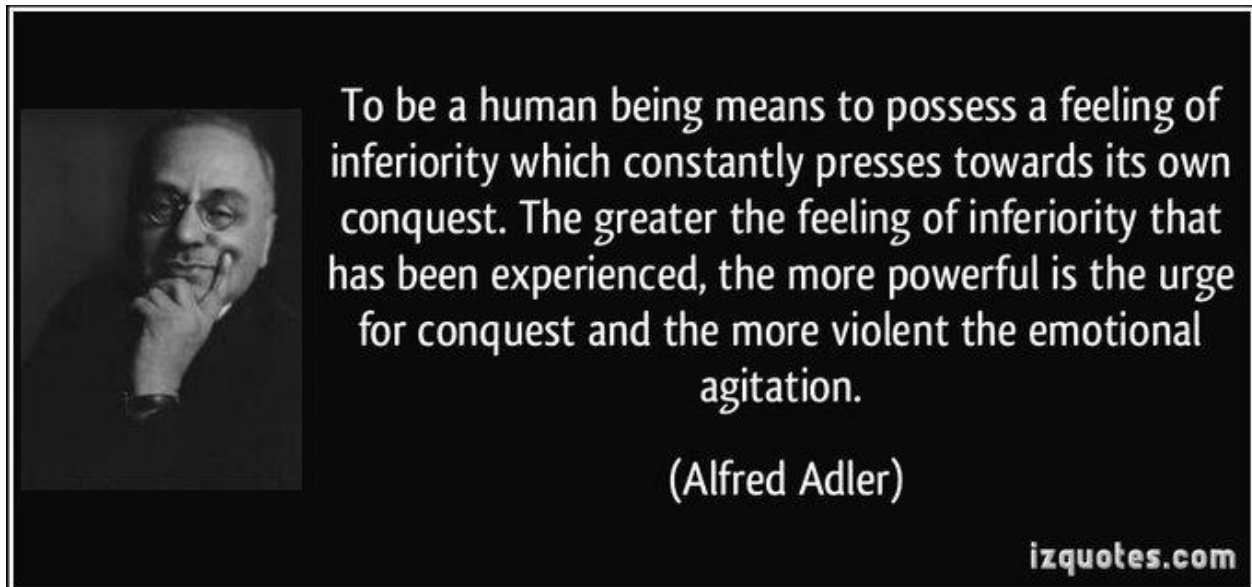
On the theoretic front, Frankl's obstacles were equally formidable. His rejection and ostracism by both Freud and Adler were probably more painful than his physical suffering. Personally, I know how painful this could be from similar experiences (Wong, 2020). I also understand that what gave Frankl courage to stand up against these two towering giants whom he admired was not so much his intellectual arrogance, but his courage to be true to his own convictions, core values, and personal history.

A major difference is that both Freud and Adler focused on the human desires at the instinctive level and past influences while Frankl focused on the spiritual yearning and the future meanings to be fulfilled. According to Wong (2017):

Unlike Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology, Frankl considers logotherapy as a spiritually-oriented approach towards psychotherapy. "A psychotherapy which not only recognizes man's spirit, but actually starts from it may be termed logotherapy. In this connection, logos is intended to signify 'the spiritual' and beyond that 'the meaning'" (Frankl, 1986, xvii).

Frankl challenged Freud's pleasure principle as pan-determinism and pan-sexualism, because human beings are complex and multidimensional; human development could not be only determined by how one resolves infantile sexuality and the Oedipus Complex (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

With Adler, it is more complicated. On the one hand, Frankl shared Adler's idea that individuals have the freedom and responsibility to discover their meaning in life; on the other hand, he challenged Adler's will to power as the driving force to overcome one's inferiority complex. That is why his expulsion from the Adlerian Society was even more soul-crushing.



Yes, sex and power are powerful motivations. In crimes of passion, people are willing to betray and even kill each other because of passionate love, and pathological jealousy (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Love triangles, unrequited love, betrayal, lonely or wounded hearts, sex addiction, and sexual abuse are just some of the common themes in interpersonal relationships.

The struggle for power and the abuse of power have contributed even greater human evil and suffering because it can happen on a much larger scale. Dominance hierarchy, power struggles, discrimination, income inequality and toxic culture exist on an organizational level, whether within the institutions of governments, academia, businesses, or hospitals. These common human failures are sources of human distress and suffering, contributing to disengagement, quiet resignation, and work-related mental illness.

For Frankl, human problems are basically spiritual problems which need spiritual solutions because we are spiritual beings. In contrast to Freud and Adler, Frankl emphasized the *will to meaning* as the primary human motivation, which is also related to the human need for Ultimate Meaning. This spiritual orientation focuses on spiritual values such as ethical responsibility,

compassion towards all people, accountability to a Higher Power, humility, speaking the truth, a sense of meaningful purpose, and the hope of becoming what one is meant to be. These spiritual values are the antidotes to inordinate carnal desires, inflated egos, and the painful consequences.

Frankl (1946/1985) wrote that “Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self.” He also observed that “Only in his heights is man truly himself.” In short, Frankl developed a psychology of heights and depths, while Freud and Adler functioned on a horizontal level. In so doing, he restored the soul to human beings and provides the cure to a toxic society (Wong, 2021).

What is Logotherapy and Existential Analysis?

“The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.” – Viktor E. Frankl (1946/1985)

Logotherapy means therapy through meaning, and it refers to Frankl’s spiritually oriented approach to psychotherapy. *Existential analysis*, on the other hand, refers to the analytical therapeutic process involved in making clients aware of their innate capacity for meaning and spirituality (Frankl, 1949/1986). In Frankl’s writing, the two terms are used either interchangeably or together as a compound term; however, he prefers to use logotherapy to represent his approach.

Logotherapy is generally regarded as a distinct branch of existential/humanistic school psychotherapy because of its focus on the human spirit and “the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for such a meaning.” (Frankl, 1946/1985) What sets Frankl apart from North America’s existential psychotherapy is his unconditional affirmation of life’s intrinsic meaning. The main objective of logotherapy was to facilitate clients’ quest for meaning and empower them to live meaningfully and responsibly, regardless of their life circumstances.

According to Frankl’s dimensional ontology (Frankl, 1949/1986), human beings exist in three dimensions – physical (somatic), mental (psychic), and spiritual (noetic). These different dimensions must be understood holistically because a person is a unit with complexity. The spiritual dimension is the very core of our humanness, the essence of humanity and the source of mental health.

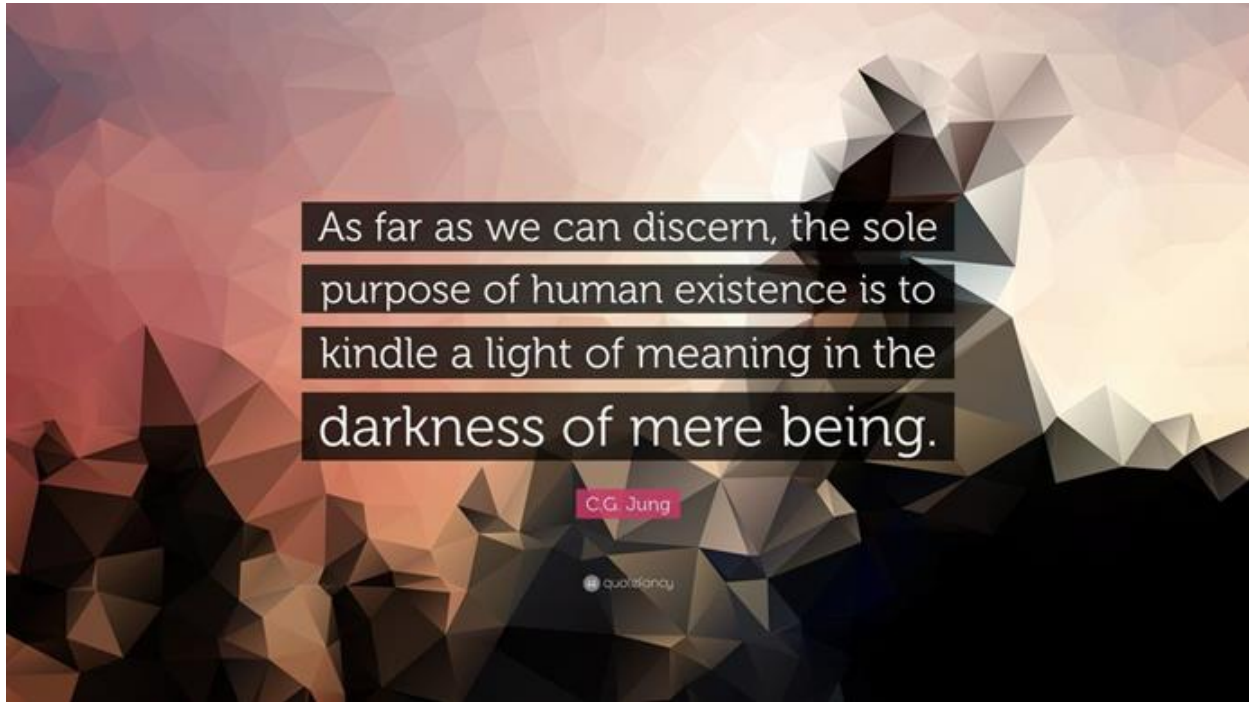
One of the propositions of logotherapy is that the human spirit is our healthy core, which does not get sick. The human spirit may be blocked by biological or psychological sickness, but it will remain intact. The main objective of existential analysis is to remove the blocks and free the human spirit to fulfill its tasks. (See the video of [how Logotherapy came about](#))

According to Fabry (1968/2013), the noetic dimension is the “medicine chest” of logotherapy, which contains various inner resources, such as love, the will to meaning, purpose in life, creativity, conscience, the capacity for choice, sense of humour, commitment to tasks, ideals, imagination, responsibility, compassion, forgiveness.

What kept Frankl alive in Nazi death camps was precisely his faith in defiant power of the human spirit, faith in eventual liberation, and hope of reunion with his love and spreading the message of logotherapy globally. All these spiritual resources are from the noetic dimension. In essence, a meaningful life is based on a golden triangle of faith, hope, and love for a better future even in hopeless circumstances (Wong, 2023).

May you discover these spiritual treasures by meditating and practicing Frankl’s life-transforming teaching. (If you haven’t done so already, please view my video on [Frankl’s](#)

[contribution to meaning therapy](#)). May you also kindle a light in others who are struggling in their dark hours in whatever capacity you work.



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