

# Adventures with Viktor Frankl and Advances in Logotherapy (AEPP01)

## Chapter 3: The 3 Basic Tenets of Logotherapy

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*“The meaning of my life is to help others find meaning in theirs.” – Viktor E. Frankl*

### Recap from Chapter 2

What was Viktor E. Frankl's important discovery that can help others find meaning in their lives? The answer is that Frankl not only restored the soul to psychology but also discovered the spiritual truth that our quest for meaning originates from the deepest spiritual yearning from the soul (Wong & Laird, in press).

In Chapter 3, I want to explain why the three basic tenets of Logotherapy are the preconditions necessary for a fruitful and exciting journey of searching for meaning. There are good logical and empirical support for Frankl's propositions.

### Abstract

This chapter explains **how you can discover meaning through three universal values**: the creative value of work, the experiential value of expressing gratitude, and attitudinal value of taking a courageous stance towards suffering. Frankl's argues that one finds meaning not from searching within oneself, but on discovering what life or society demands from the individual. Thus, for creative values, both leaders and workers need to do their best with all their heart and soul in whatever job he or she may be doing and rise to the challenge by finding creative solutions to meet society's needs. For experiential values, you need to learn the blessings of focusing on the good qualities of other people and appreciate the little things that reveal their kindness. You can always find something good even in bad situations with an appreciative attitude. Attitudinal value is daring to be a rebel with a cause; it means having the courage to do what is right and take a stand against injustice and evil.

### Who Are You Really?

That is the first question we need to answer before we go deeper. I have to credit Jens Zimmermann for making the case that one's understanding of “meaning and concepts of selfhood are inseparably interwoven” (Zimmermann, 2012, p. 57).

There are different perspectives of selfhood (Smith, 1978) with difference consequences. For example, if one holds the view that human beings are nothing but intelligent animals, a super-computer, or a consumerist creature, then it follows that such a cognitively-oriented or drive-oriented view of selfhood will not be motivated by an existential yearning for meaning and spirituality.

Therefore, Zimmermann argues that only a spiritual/existential perspective of selfhood can lead to the existential understanding that to be a human being means to be an (a) interpretative meaning seeking being, (b) an ethically responsible being, and (c) a relational being, who is connected with a community, our planet earth, and the Creator.

Such a high and noble view of selfhood is also necessary for a Christian perspective of human flourishing in a technological world (Zimmermann, n.d.). Zimmermann's theoretical framework is very similar to Frankl's view, as articulated in the next section of Chapter 3.

Frankl (1946/1984) was probably the first psychiatrist or psychotherapist who advocated this spiritual/existential framework. According to his formulation, Logotherapy is a medical ministry, an adjunct to the practice of medicine, nursing, social work, or psychology. This view is echoed in a recent article (McKernan, n. d.):

“While psychology and social work tend to focus on support of ego (our particular self) spiritual attention enriches the perspectives of social work by inviting us to see the soul (in transpersonal psychology “Self” is an alternative term) - a deeper, more connected dimension of human experience. This calls attention to the abiding mystery of our essential natures and innate reverence warranted for each human being. Just as important though, is the attention to a notion of foundational energies that shape our experience.”

The above quote from a social worker highlights two reasons for a spiritual/existential perspective of selfhood: (a) it allows us to explore the depths of the unconscious, such as the Shadow aspects of the Self; and (b) it allows us to explore the heights of the farthest reaches of consciousness: the mystical, transcendental source of “foundational energies” which in turn can shape our experience on earth.

In view of the above logic, one has nothing to lose but every to gain by holding a noble and sacred view of selfhood. Here is widely cited quote from Albert Camus: “I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live as if there isn't and to die to find out that there is.” Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) came to the same conclusion long before Camus. Pascal's main argument is that faith in God is a more rational and functional belief than faith only in natural science. Confronted with the orderliness of the vast universe, and the mystery of life and death, faith in God and in our spiritual resources is necessary for the motivation to create our preferred future and transcend all forces of evil. Pascal remarked that:

“Belief is a wise wager. Granted that faith cannot be proved, what harm will come to you if you gamble on its truth and it proves false? If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation, that He exists.”

## **What do You Need to Believe in Order to Live a Good Life?**

### **The Three Basic Tenets of Logotherapy**

- **Freedom of will.** Not only freedom from some negative condition but also freedom to something rewarding.
- **Will to meaning.** Striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force.

- **Meaning of life.** One can always discover meaning in life regardless of life's circumstances.

What you believe matters. The basic tenets of Logotherapy represents Frankl's core beliefs or assumptions. Here is my evidence-based explanation about why these three basic tenets of Logotherapy are essential not only for healing and surviving, but also for flourishing and becoming whole. Here is my explanation about why you need to believe in these three tenets. (Please [watch Frankl's 1972 video](#) about the three tenets and read Wong, 2012).

## **The Freedom of Will**

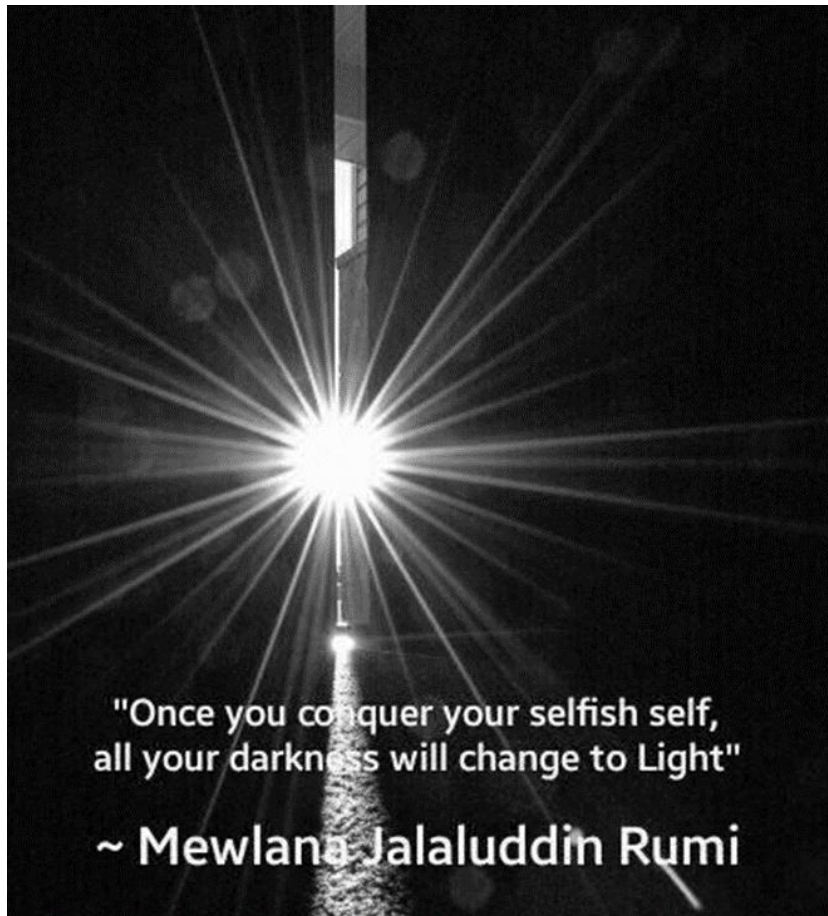
The philosophical debate of whether free will actually exist can go on forever (Burkeman, 2021; Kastrup, 2020), but functionally, for people to choose their own path or decide on their own reaction to stress or trauma, we have to recognize that people are endowed with the innate capacity for volition and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

William James, the father of psychology famously said that "The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another." He asserted that the ability to choose one attitude over another is the greatest discovery in psychology. Long before psychology even existed, John Milton (1667) in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, also said that "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

However, freedom of will is a two-edged sword. It points out both the ethical responsibility and the wisdom of discernment to do what is right and righteous, but it can also create one's own hell by rebelling against God by doing whatever one wants. Milton's quote can be best understood as Satan's illusion of creating his own heaven while in hell (Mitchell, 2023), but it also contains the psychological truth that we have conscience as our guide to do what is right in order to avoid the unbearable burden of shame, guilt, and fear.

In short, without the capacity for freedom of will, people would not be able to choose how to respond to a given situation as moral and instrumental agents. There is no escape from making choices in everyday life; there is also no escape from the consequences of their decisions and actions.

I have also argued that the reorientation from the horizontal dimension of self-enhancement to the vertical dimension of self-transcendence is necessary to correct the widespread belief that individuals are free to do whatever they want to achieve personal success and happiness (Wong et al., 2021).



More importantly, I have made a compelling case that the greatest way to be happy and flourish is to have a sense of responsibility or moral obligation to choose the right attitude or the right way to respond (Wong, 2019), because we always have the freedom to choose our attitude in any circumstances. As Frankl noted:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” (Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 75)

### **The Will to Meaning**

We have already considered in some detail why the will to meaning is a primary motivation of human beings, rather than from other drives and needs. The will to meaning is essential for survival and health in trying times because the will to live depends on finding reasons for living according the biology of evolution (Wong, 2022). Clinically and experientially, Frankl (1988) had found that a strong will to meaning enables people to endure unimaginable traumas and move forward.

The will to meaning also comes from our innate spiritual yearning for meaning and spirituality (Wong & Laird, in press). According to Frankl (1946/1984), the search for meaning primarily comes one's “existential vacuum,” which results when one's spiritual need for meaning is frustrated or blocked by both external forces and internal hindrances. We are currently living in

a materialistic and consumerist culture which offer many distractions far more attractive than the ups and downs of the search for meaning. According to the human tendency of choosing the path of the least resistance, the broad way of becoming rich and famous and living a comfortable, happy life attracts a large crowd, while the prophet of hope and meaning transformation attracts only a few followers (Wong, 2007).

The loss of traditional values, the dehumanization of individuals, and the endless conflicts along the lines of race, sexual orientation, culture, and ideology further contribute to the widespread “existential vacuum” or feelings of inner emptiness (Wong, 2002). It is sad but true that people often need pain or suffering to awaken them to the urgent need for meaning in order to survive and transcend their existential crises. The lesson from Frankl is that it would be far better for us to have the existential courage and wisdom to choose the more stressful but exciting adventure of going rock climbing up a mountain to search for meaning. Some tension or stress is actually good for us.

In sum, mental health is best achieved not by a living a care-free, stress-free comfortable life, but by a living a life of constant struggle for a worthy life goal and becoming a better person. It is this kind of tension and striving that makes us feel fully alive and growing continually even in old age. As Frankl notes,

“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.” (Frankl, 1946/1984, p. 110)

## **The Meaning of Life**

“What is the meaning of life?” This remains one of the most commonly asked questions. Philosophers and psychologists have wrestled with this perplexing question for a long time. At present, there is some consensus in the psychology community about meaning in life. According to George and Park (2016) and Martela and Steger (2016), meaning in life involves three main components: (a) Significance or mattering, (b) Purpose or direction in life, and (c) Coherence or comprehensiveness.

Wong’ (2012a) PURE model of meaning differs from the above tripartite model by adding a responsibility component, which is also emphasized by four bestselling authors on how to live a meaningful and productive life: Viktor E. Frankl (1946/1984), Scott Peck (1978), Steve Covey (1989), and Jordan Peterson (2018).

Thus, responsibility also needs to be considered as a main component. Earlier in this paper, I have already explained that a meaningful life is always initiated by a conscious choice to assume the responsibility for a positive change in one’s life.

It may be more helpful to understand the process of meaning seeking than the outcome of finding meaning. Ancient sages, from Lao Tsu to Buddha, all emphasized that happiness is not a destination but the path or process. We can apply the same insight to meaning in life, which is not a destination, but a path or process of seeking it.

Different people choose different paths from childhood to death. Which path is meaningful varies from person to person, or is unique to each person, and everyone has to discover its meaning for themselves. Thus, it is difficult to discover principles of meaning seeking in life that are

universally acceptable to all people from different cultures. Frankl's (1946/1984) unique solution to this ancient puzzle is twofold: Firstly, we need to reframe the question:

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.”

Secondly, Frankl (1946/1984) emphasized that “The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche” (p. 133). It is both a personal and social responsibility to discover one's unique set of gifts and society's demands for one's unique contributions.

Thus, the first principle of finding meaning in life is through active engagement with life and reflection on one's life experience rather than arbitrarily creating meaning in life according to one's whim or imagination without any reference to personal moral obligations and universal values/ethics.

The second principle is that one cannot understand the meaning of life apart from the meaning of suffering because suffering is an inevitable aspect of human existence. To discover meaning in suffering is essential to meaningful living. Frankl's own life epitomized Nietzsche's dictum that “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” Wong (2012a) summarized this principle in the following quote:

“When individuals are stripped of everything that makes life worth living or when they are in the throes of battling with pain and despair, meaning makes suffering more bearable and provides reasons for living:

‘It is precisely when facing such fate, when being confronted with a hopeless situation, that man is given a last opportunity to fulfill a meaning—to realize even the highest value, to fulfill even the deepest meaning—the meaning of suffering. (Frankl, 1967/1985b, p. 15)’”

The third general principle is that there are at least three levels of meaning: (a) situational meaning in each moment, (b) meaning of one's life as a whole, and (c) the Ultimate meaning of human existence (Wong, 2014).

We can never fully understand Ultimate meaning because of inherent human limitations in intellect and experience. We can only approximate Ultimate meaning through continued pursuit, incremental understanding, and faith in God's revelations through nature, spiritual giants, and scriptures. Meaning of life as a whole can only be grasped through life review and assessing every aspect of one's life – both failures and success, sorrows and joys during middle age or old age.

Momentary meaning in each situation is most important for living a meaningful life and for providing effective psychotherapy. It is most important, because it is contextualized and focused on each unique individual. This is how we can identify the etiology of mental illness and the most effect approach towards healing.

More importantly, we can discover the meaningful moments (MM) as monuments which can serve as resources of strength or joy. According to Wong (2011), a MM is by definition marked by something with special meaning and personal significance, which can stir up strong emotions and vivid memories:

“Typically, an MM has at least two of the four characteristics:

1. It is deeply felt – It touches your emotions in a deep and lasting way. More than a fleeting feeling, it reaches your inner most being.
2. It is deeply processed – It involves deeper layers of meaning beyond the factual and superficial.
3. It is enlightening – It provides a solution to some puzzling problems or leads to some new discovery.
4. It is transforming – It enriches your life, changes your life’s direction or restores a sense of purpose and passion to your life.

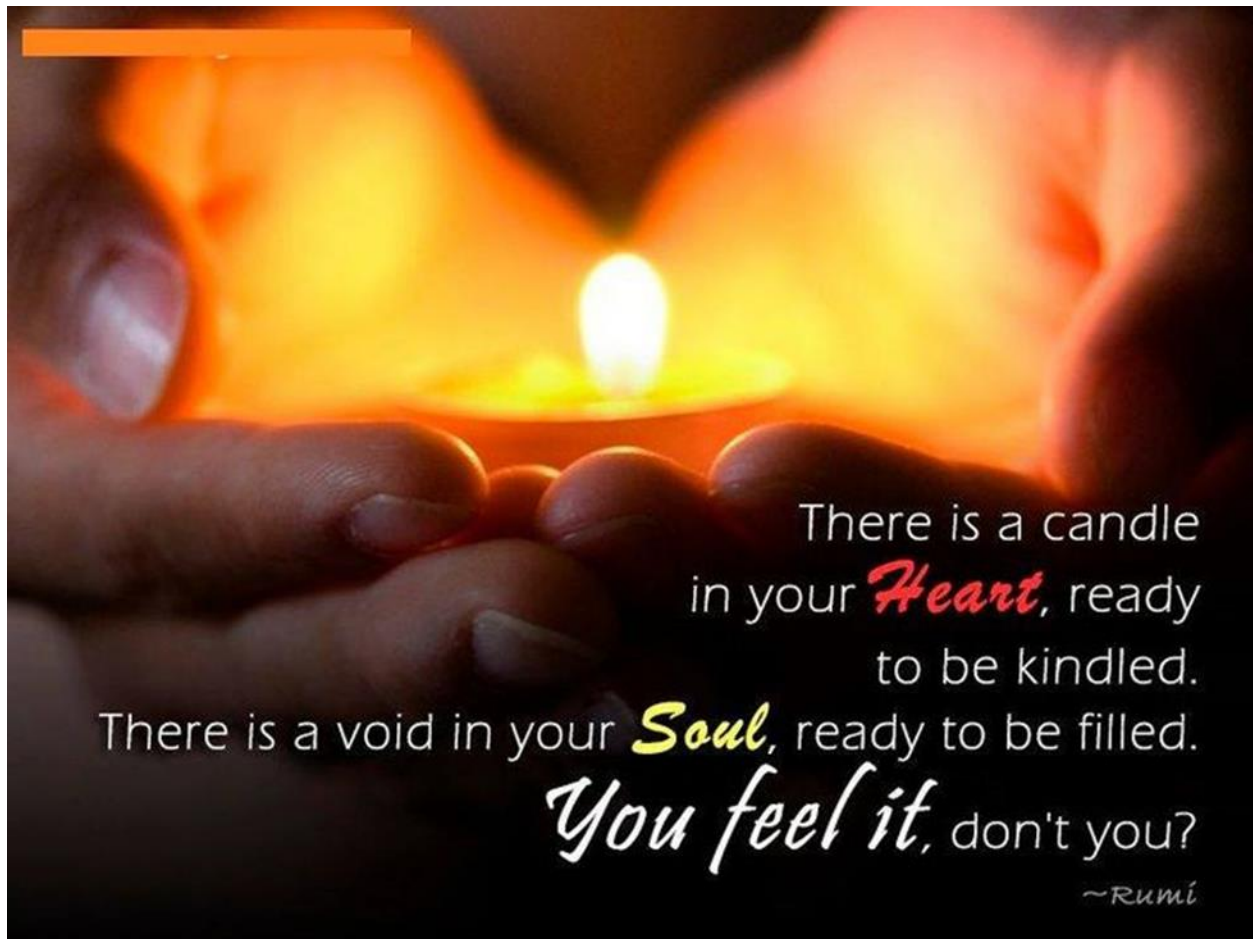
MMs abound in everyone’s journey of life. An MM can be dramatic or ordinary, scary or funny. It can be a life-changing moment, such as spiritual conversion, getting married, or the birth of the first child in a family. An important MM may last a lifetime and drastically alter one’s career and destiny.”

If we view life with a meaning mindset (Wong, 2012b), we are more likely to discover MMs from the past and the present. There are hidden gems in ordinary circumstances which can be discovered by people with appreciative eyes, an inquisitive mind, and the wisdom of the soul.

### **The Applications of the 3 Basic Tenets**

We need to believe in the 3 tenets of logotherapy, because they have important implications for our lives, especially for mental health professionals. Subsequent Chapters will introduce many important tools to help us navigate troubled waters and complex situations. In this chapter, I want to highlight three points about the 3 common triggers of meaning search:

#### **A Void in the Soul**

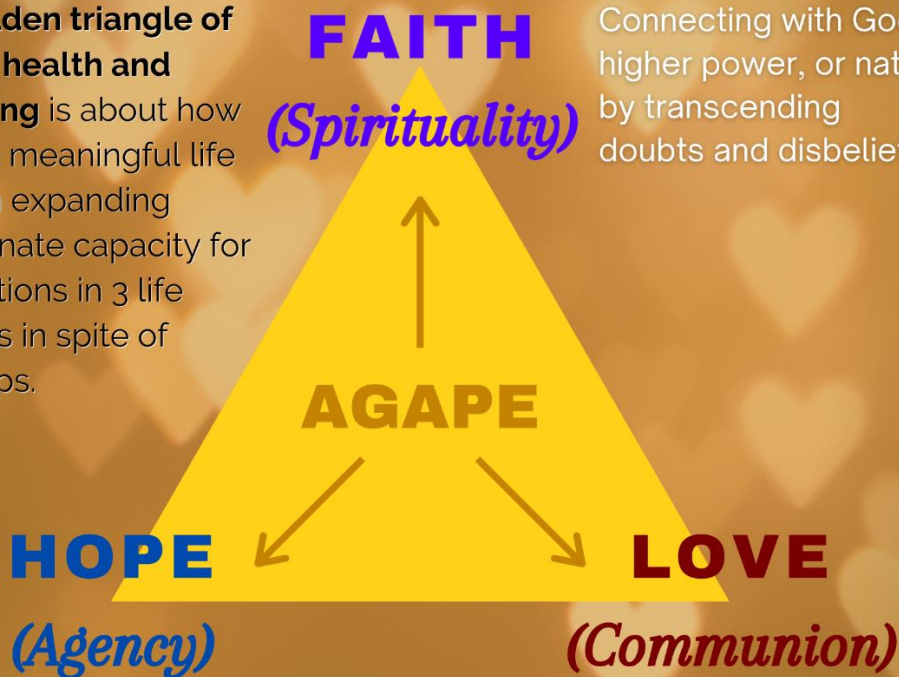


This is the same as Frankl's "existential vacuum." It is a nagging sense of inner emptiness or boredom especially when times are good and life is comfortable. The underlying process is habituation – we tend to respond less and less to anything that is repeated over and over again, whether it is positive or negative. Nothing in this world can fill this void and quench the hunger of our soul. Frankl points out that this void can only be filled by some transcendental values such as faith, hope, and love (Wong, 2023), which often involves encounters with something sacred, divine, or awe-inspiring. The following graph illustrates these spiritual values within the self-transcendence paradigm.



# 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.



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

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

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

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

## A Thorn in the Flesh

This refers to chronic pain that does not go away in spite of medication or surgery. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report (Rikard et al., 2023):

“During 2021, an estimated 20.9% of U.S. adults (51.6 million persons) experienced chronic pain, and 6.9% (17.1 million persons) experienced high-impact chronic pain (i.e., chronic pain that results in substantial restriction to daily activities) with a higher prevalence among non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native adults, adults identifying as bisexual, and adults who were divorced or separated.”

Worse still, chronic physical pain may have a high negative impact on one's daily functioning, mental health, and even family members, if pain is not properly treated or managed:

“Pain may cause you to become preoccupied with the pain, depressed, and irritable. Depression and irritability often leads to insomnia and weariness, leading to more irritability, depression, and pain. This state is called his state is called “the "terrible triad" of suffering, sleeplessness, and sadness.” (John Hopkins Medicine, n.d.)

I happen to suffer from chronic pain. When writing this chapter, I am suffering from all kinds of pains and aches including neck pain, lower back pain, pain in bending my stiff fingers, and boils on my butt. I have to set on a “donut seat,” or a toilet seat placed on my office chair, to reduce pain. Yet I have been able to remain productive through practicing Frankl’s meaning triangle of responsibility, will to meaning, and faith in meaningful life, and my Iron Triad of Courage, Acceptance, and Meaning transformation.

If an 86-year-old man can endure all these pains, I am sure that you can do it too with some discipline in practicing the existential competencies of endurance and transformation.



## Existential Concerns

“Four major existential concerns – death, meaning in life, isolation, and freedom – play a crucial role in the inner life of every human being.” – Irvin D. Yalom

You may call it “existential crises,” “ultimate concerns,” “threats to human existence,” or any problem that has no scientific answer or solution. Therefore, all our confidence in education, science, intellect, or financial power cannot solve some problems that have been haunting humanity from antiquity. With all this progress, we still cannot stop human beings from being cruel and abusive towards others. We still cannot prevent human beings from engaging in substance abuse that may destroy their own lives and people around them. People continue to do crazy and terrible things to themselves and to others.

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“Insanity – a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world.” – R. D. Laing

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Watching the recent Israel-Hamas war or Russian-Ukraine war, I could not help but feel sick in my stomach. I shake my head, wondering when they will stop killing innocent children, woman, and old folks. What give them the right to destroy whole cities with bombs, missiles and rockets? Why can't the UN stop any war or aggression?

We can go on and on about the absurdity of man-made disasters and existential crises, from nuclear weapons and climate change to the nightmare of Artificial Intelligence in the hands of evil people. Somehow, we knowingly and willingly drive our car off the cliff, as if driven by a powerful death wish.

The human quest for meaning may be the only way for us to pause and reflect on how to reduce all the bad things in this beautiful world. We need someone to kindle a light to awaken and enlighten us so we can restore some sanity in an insane world.

The take home message of this chapter is that we need to believe in the value of life and treat people with dignity and compassion. Each of us need to assume ethical responsibility to develop our full potential and care for our brothers and sisters. Finally, let us not forget that eventually we are all accountable to the Supra-meaning or a Higher Power.

May you see the light in darkness and may you be the light each day.

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