

Adventures with Viktor Frankl and Advances in Logotherapy (AEPP01)

Chapter 5: Domains of Meaning in Life

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Chapter 4 Recap

The last chapter focused on the How of meaning. It explained that a spiritual perspective of searching for meaning involves three core values: (1) the creative value of contributing to the world, (2) the experiential value of an appreciative attitude towards life, and (3) the attitudinal value of exercising the responsibility and courage to stand up for one's beliefs and values.

The present chapter focuses on how to become one's best self by (1) integrating different domains of meaning and (2) navigating a dialectical balance between the bright and dark sides within each domain through understanding and employing the transformative power of meaning.

“The greatest task
for any person is
to find meaning
in his or her life.”



(Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning)

Abstract

This chapter focuses on **how to apply logotherapy principles and techniques to meet health needs** and heal individuals who are struggling with existential crises beyond the medical model. I first demonstrate how the basic principles of self-determination, self-distancing, and self-transcendence are the building blocks for mental health. Then I introduce the major logotherapy techniques – such as Socratic Dialogue, Paradoxical Intention, De-reflection, as well as Appealing and Attitude Modification – to treat various kinds of mental disorders. I conclude that a faith-based, purpose-driven, and meaning-centered approach can contribute to healing and positive transformation for both individuals and society.

Introduction

There is a growing recognition that meaning in life entails more than meaning of work and meaning of relationship (e.g., Iso-Ahola & Baumeister, 2023; Wong, 1998a).

In simplest terms, to live a balanced meaningful life means that one does not put all the eggs in one basket, whether it is work or relationship. A deeper understanding of balance means that there are at least 7 main domains of meaning which are important for our wellbeing.

To live a balanced and well-adjusted life also does not mean that we invest our time and effort evenly in all 7 domains. It does mean that, depending on our stage of development or current circumstances, one needs to be agile and flexible to redirect our energy and resources to different areas as needed, but always keeping in mind that they are all available to make our life better.

7 Main Domains of Meaning in Life



◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

You may wonder: “Why can’t we just focus on work and relationships, which take up most of our time and energy in adult life?”

The short answer is that there are times in our life when we are no longer able to work and no longer able to visit family friends, such as times of hospitalization or mandatory isolation during the pandemic.

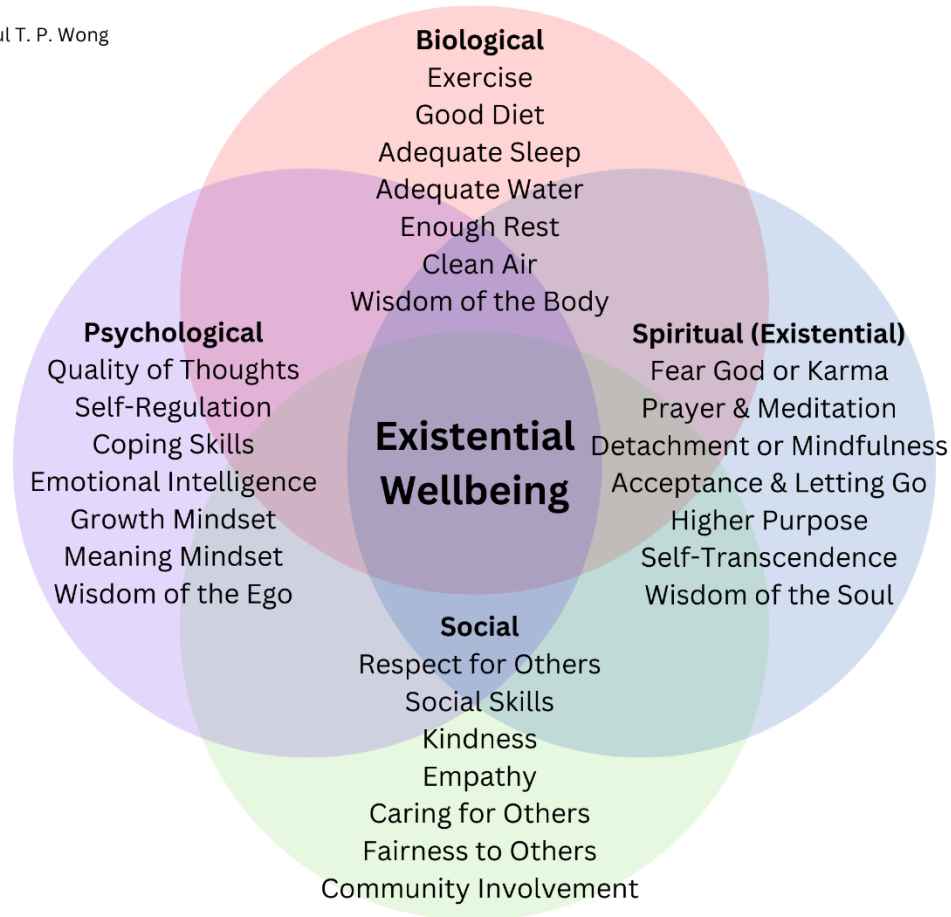
The long answer is that we are bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings. Our meaning in life and our overall wellbeing are related to all four dimensions of the self.

In addition, in our materialistic and consumeristic culture, the spiritual needs of the soul tend to be neglected to our detriment. Recall that, in Chapter 3, we learned that the spiritual dimension is both the foundation and fountain of meaning and purpose.

The below figure shows that existential wellbeing from the spiritual dimension is the core that affects all other dimensions of personhood.

Total Wellness Challenge Involving Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Dimensions

◆ Paul T. P. Wong



In my six-decade search for the Holy Grail of true happiness, I have gone through the deepest darkest valleys and scaled the highest rockiest mountains. I have researched in every arena of human struggles, from coping with frustration, stress, and cancer, to coping with aging and fear

of death and dying. At long last, I have found the missing piece of wellbeing research: existential wellbeing.

Existential wellbeing, also known as meaning-centered wellbeing, results from integrating not only all dimension bur also the Yin-Yang aspects within each dimension. To achieve wellbeing within each dimension, all opposites, such as good vs. evil, happiness vs, sadness, or health vs. sickness, can be integrated into an invisible unity through the dialectical interactions.

Meaning is needed to integrate the Yin and Yang because of the bi-directional nature of searching for meaning: a) the search for what is positive, hopeful and satisfying our soul's hunger for meaning, and (b) the search for what enables us to overcome and transform suffering through meaning.

The resulting existential wellbeing not only includes well integrated dimensions, but also balanced relationships between dimensions. When one is in harmony with one's self, one will be able to live in harmony with others, with Heaven and Earth, resulting in the mature happiness of balance, harmony and equanimity in all seasons of life.

If you say, "show me a happy and healthy person," I will show you a person who not only lives a balanced life, but also maintains an abiding inner peace though successfully resolving or transcending all kinds of conflicts.

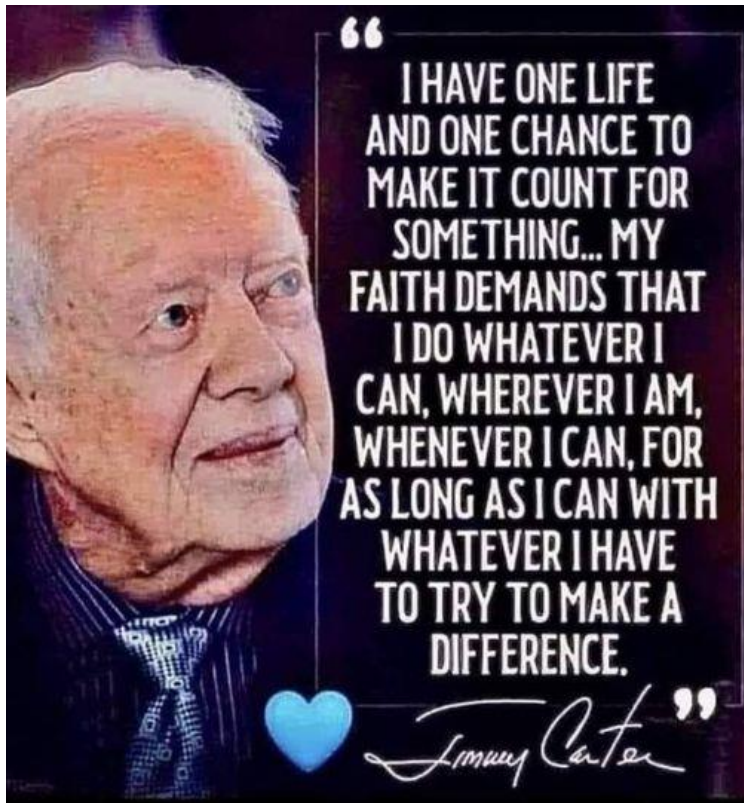
Different Domains of Meaning in Life

Meaning of Work

I will first briefly discuss when these domains are important for our sense of meaning and wellbeing. In previous chapters, I have already delved into the importance of meaning of work and meaning of relationship. I only want to add that volunteer service should also be considered as unpaid work.

During my recent trip to Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, my most positive experience in the Pittsburgh airport was from the volunteers who help push the wheelchairs for the disabled seniors through the customs and others gates. These volunteers include both early retired middle-aged individuals and unemployed younger people. Their cheerful, courteous demeanor and their willingness to go the extra mile brightened my day as an aged and weary traveller. Their only income depends on tips for satisfied customers, but their real sense of fulfillment comes from the intrinsic meaning, value of volunteer services and other social and mental health benefits (Nichol et al., 2023; Schnell & Hoof, 2012).

Some volunteer work is especially important for seniors because they have more free time and they can benefit from being socially and productively engaged. There are many opportunities for meaningful volunteer services for seniors (Lagemann, 2023). Jimmy Carter epitomizes the spirit of volunteering during old age, as seen in the following quote.



Meaning of Relationship

We have also discussed extensively on the importance of relationships and the need for belonging and connections. The only thing I will add here is that other people are both our heaven and hell. Especially in close relationships, conflicts are inevitable. One solution is the wisdom of maintain a comfortable balance in any relationship between too much self-disclosure and hiding too many secrets from each other, or between a too intense or too indifferent relationship.

There is a Chinese proverb, “君子之交淡淡若水,” which means that the relationship between two gentlemen is like water – calm, sincere stable and respectful towards each other.

Even in marriage, a calm and caring companionship is more likely to endure much longer than a passionate but turbulent relationship marked by hot and cold periods, which can end abruptly when one partner is sick and tired of the dramas.

One more word of caution: Beware of fake friends. They befriend you with an ulterior motive. Once they have gotten what they need from you, they either abandon you or betray you if it further advances their agenda. Worse still, some fake friends get close to you in order to ruin you. In my long life, those who have caused me the greatest pain and deepest wounds are from my so-called “friends.”

Community Involvement

Together, we are stronger and life is better. There is a mountain of empirical evidence supporting the connection between wellbeing and sense of belonging, community involvement, and meaningful participation in daily life occupations (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Participation in the community can involve civil duties, or helping out with a variety of charities such as a

foodbank, Walk for Water, Walk to Conquer Cancer etc. Some may prefer to get involved in faith communities.

Personally, I have initiated several community involvement projects, such as *Neighbours Together* in Coquitlam BC, the Toronto *Meaningful Living Meetup*, and church planting. Throughout all these endeavours, I have discovered just how difficult it is to develop a deep sense of community when people do not really care for each other and develop lifelong friendships. I have achieved this objective only in the Peterborough Chinese Christian Fellowship, but this was the result of more than 20 years of investment of my time and effort plus a lot of personal sacrifice.

The painful lesson I have learned is that community involvement is at best a bittersweet thing. If people only want fun and happiness, they will not experience the deep joy of community involvement. If they want to find meaning from getting involved, they would need courage and dedication to become a useful member of the group. That is what I have learn from Adler and Frankl.

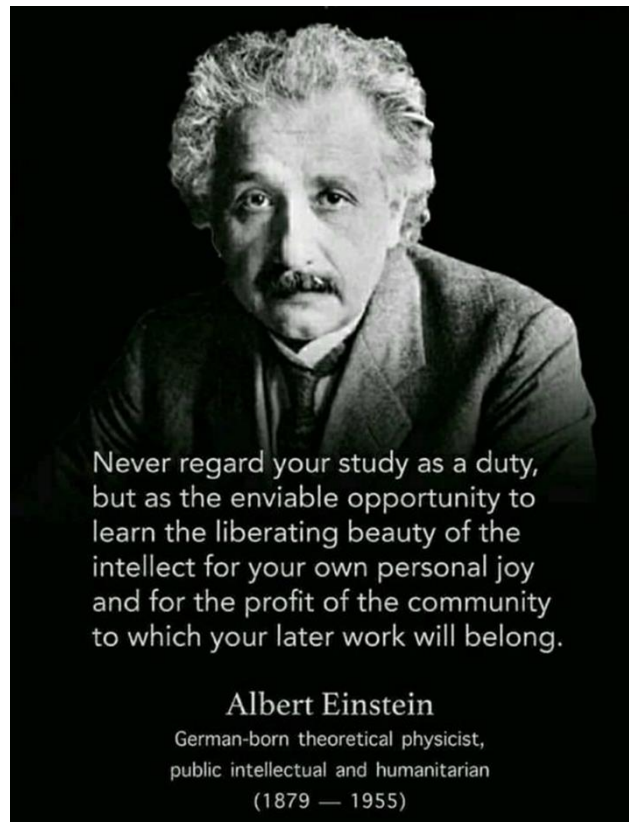
Adler elevates social interest as the key to solving problems of life and finding meaning through relationships and making significant contributions to others (Adler, 2009). Adler was concerned about the interconnectedness of the brotherly love and the commonwealth; the man-earth relationships (Yang et al., 2010). According my understanding (Wong, 2017), in contrast to Adler, Frankl considered that meaning in life stems from a spiritual rather than relational source, but Frankl's concept of self-transcendence also includes the horizontal dimension of loving and serving others and contributing to society in spite of personal sacrifice.

Meaning of Education and Lifelong Learning

We all know the importance of education, not only for gainful employment but for general wellbeing. Accord to Harvard's longitudinal study of happiness (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023), college or university education is a variable for a happiness at old age, regardless of whether one gets the degree from an ordinary university or from the Ivy League.

Just last week, I attended the Pui Ching Middle School Alumni Reunion for the class of 1955 (Wikipedia, 2023). Most of the alumni in my class are aged between 85 and 90 years old. Most of them are still engaged in some kind of lifelong learning, whether it is learning a new language or some artform such as painting or singing. Clearly, lifelong learning has contributed to their mental alertness, happiness, and general health.

For myself, I have never stopped learning after receiving my PhD. I am still learning new things each day to be a better psychologist and a better human being.



Play and Leisure Activities

Play is a spontaneous activity for children and the most important aspect of their lives. Play provides an opportunity for many important functions, from eye-hand coordination, social skills, and learning how to accept failures. That is why play therapy is a widely used intervention for children.

For adults, play is subsumed under leisure activities. According to Seppo E. Iso-Ahola and Roy F. Baumeister (2023), leisure is also a source of meaning:

“The essence of leisure lies less in the specific activity than in the subjective perception of freedom, choice, and intrinsic motivation. People desire their lives to be meaningful, and leisure activities offer varying degrees of satisfying the basic needs for meaning (here covered as purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth).”

They argued that with the great resignation and a 4-day workweek, leisure became increasingly important as a source of meaning. A case can also be made for the aging of the Baby-Boomer generation and increasing number of older adults with some disability.

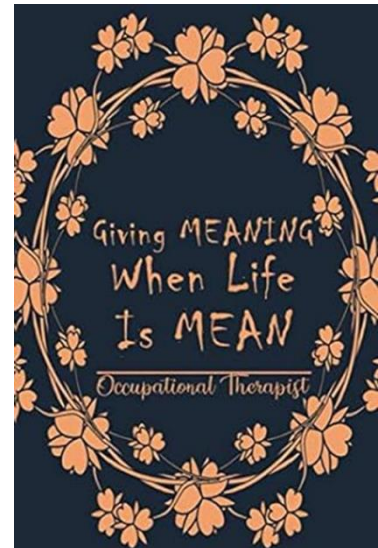
Jerry Long was widely quoted for saying “The accident broke my neck, but it did not break me” after Logotherapy (see Alexoandrews, 2008). Since then, many paraplegics have found hope and meaning for the uphill battle of rehabilitation.

The recent publication by Bendic Journals (2019) confirms my hypothesis that giving meaning to the disabled in an important tool for occupation therapies.

This brings back my memory of being a keynote speaker at the Hong Kong Occupation Therapy Association (Wong, 2005). After my lecture on how Logotherapy or meaning therapy can help patients who need occupation therapy, they told me that they would make encouraging patients to do what is most meaningful to them a priority in occupational therapy.

More recent research (World Health Organization 2010) demonstrates that participation in recreation, leisure, and sports activities may be beneficial for people with disabilities to engage in community life beyond their immediate families.

In sum, logotherapy and meaning therapy can be very useful to endow the life of the disabled with meaning and hope.



Here is a useful Table from Human Kinetics (2023) clarifying the definition of several related terms to facilitate future research.

Table 1.1 Definitions of Leisure, Play, and Recreation

Concept	Definition
Leisure as time	Leisure is time free from obligations, work (paid and unpaid), and tasks required for existing (sleeping, eating).
Leisure as activity	Leisure is a set of activities that people engage in during their free time—activities that are not work oriented or that do not involve life maintenance tasks such as housecleaning or sleeping.
Leisure as state of mind	Leisure depends on a participant's perception. Perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and positive affect are critical to the determination of an experience as leisure or not leisure.
Play	Play is imaginative, intrinsically motivated, nonserious, freely chosen, and actively engaging. Play is typified by spontaneity, joyfulness, and inhibition and is done not as a means to an end but for its inherent pleasure.
Recreation	Recreation is an activity that people engage in during their free time, that people enjoy, and that people recognize as having socially redeeming values. The activity performed is less important than the reason for performing the activity, which is the outcome.

Meaning of Spirituality/Religion

We have already discussed at length in the previous chapter on the essential role of spirituality and religion as major sources of meaning (for additional source, please read Wong, 1998b).

Belief or faith in divine help and protection is a big part of spiritual power. Psalm 23 is a classic case of the kind of comfort and meaning one can experience through believing in God. It can be considered the symphony of gratitude and appreciation, which is one of the three paths to find meaning. There are four movements in this symphony with gratitude as the leitmotif:

- 1) Grateful that God is my shepherd (v.1): Faith in a loving & almighty God
- 2) Grateful that He provides all my needs (v.2-3): Inexhaustible resource
- 3) Grateful that He protects me from all evils (v.4): Security & comfort
- 4) Grateful that my life is full of blessings (v.5-6): Sustainable flourishing

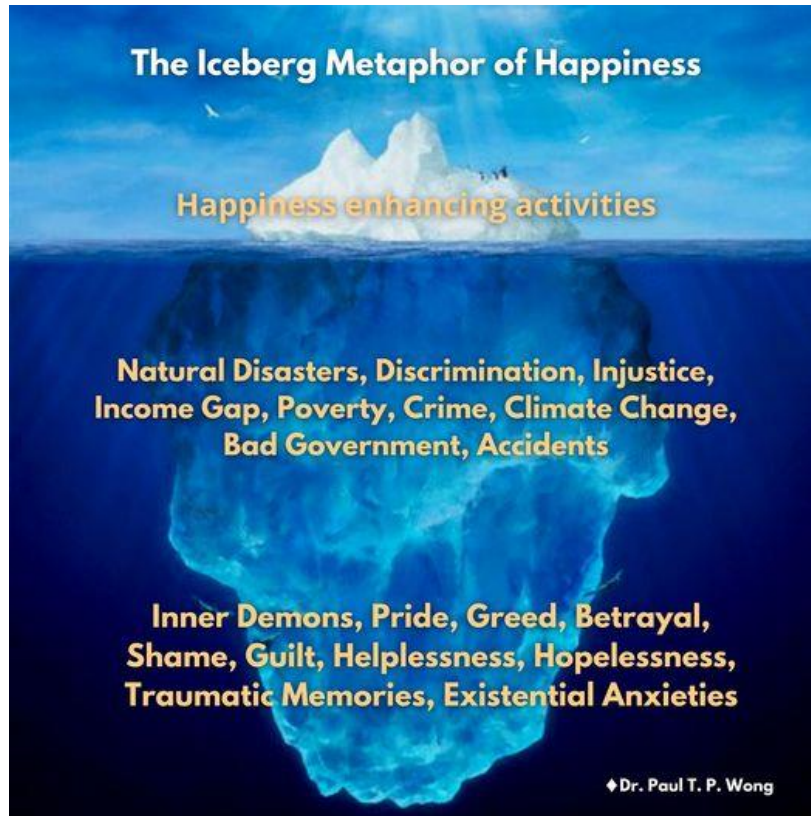
Psalm 23

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
- 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me,
- your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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Meaning of Suffering

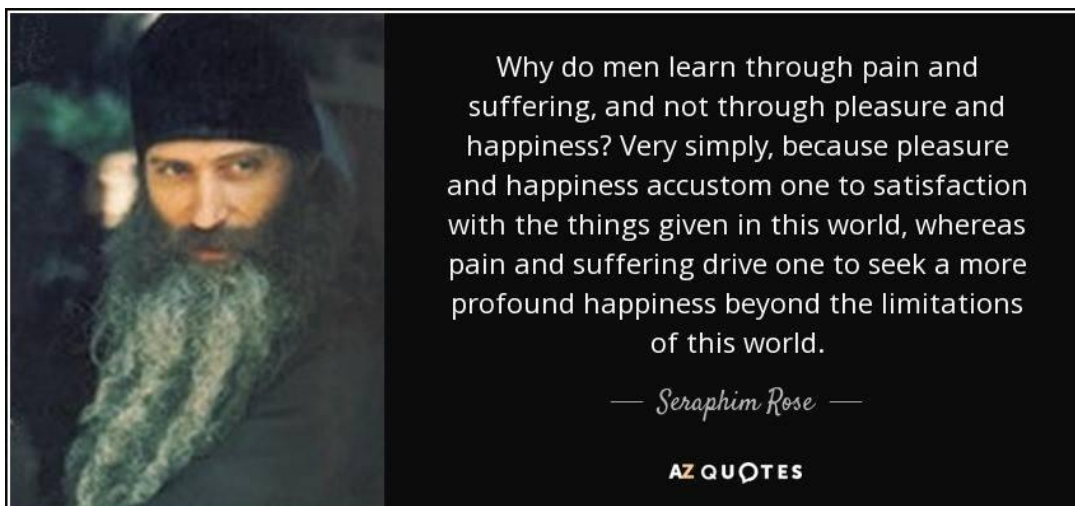
Suffering is a recurrent theme in this course because both Frankl and I have learned that this is the cornerstone for happiness and wellbeing. We have flipped positive psychology on its head because we know the impossibility of finding happiness with this missing link. Just take a look at the following figure.



Is it Possible to Escape from All Suffering?

Without learning how to endure, overcome, and transcend all the hardships, trials, and tribulations, all our happiness enhancing activities will not result in sustainable happiness or flourishing. That is why we need a paradigm shift to existential positive psychology (Wong, et al., 2022).

The following quote points out the additional benefit of pain and suffering, which compels us to discover the vast and invisible domain of happiness, hope, and joy beyond the physical reality.



Conclusion



At the end of this chapter, we need to ask ourselves the crucial question: 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.

I can go on and on, but I have to wait until the next chapter to share with you more about the real power of meaning.

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