

CRISIS OF MEANING

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“Try not to become a man of success but rather to become a man of value” - **Albert Einstein**



Many people suffer from an acute loss of meaning in their lives (Glas). They cannot see any purpose to their individual human existence, yet they know, without a shadow of doubt, that they do indeed exist, that they are conscious, sentient beings, alive in a tangible physical world. Nevertheless, the question “why?” continues to plague them, either consciously or as an indefinable nagging anxiety which has profound consequences for the way they live. This article explores the issue of meaning in science, philosophy and religion, with particular reference to old age and the challenges, for many people, which this period of life can bring.

Transitions

Most people will be familiar, with the concept, at least, of the mid-life crisis. Less well-known is the unfolding of human life in seven year periods, marked by transitions at ages 7, 14, 21, 28 etc. After age 63, however, the elder years are marked, not in 7 year periods but by an increasing inner freedom in which the individual gradually retreats from the affairs of the physical world to become more concerned with non-material realities (the spiritual or transcendental), as the next transition at the moment of death, draws nearer (O’Neil). This is a uniquely individual path, which can be spoken about in general terms, but only applies to specific individuals to a greater or lesser extent.

Many people are faced with “retirement” in their sixties which may be a time of existential crisis in their lives. This is particularly acute for those who have identified very strongly with their work so that when this is removed, along with all the motivation, collegueship and activity, a profound emptiness is felt. The feeling of superannuation and anxiety about the future leads to depression and apathy, and more or less serious mental or physical breakdown is the result. An awareness of physical bodily mortality, with an underlying fear of death, sets in. The sense of complete and utter loneliness, accompanied by a desperate questioning of the meaning of life sucks what little is left of joy or companionship out of relationships.

Fortunately, an understanding of this transitional period, together with a certain amount of preparation, knowing that it is never too late, can activate the will to meaning and help us to cope with, and even overcome, these life problems. Crisis then metamorphoses into opportunity.

Will to meaning

Logotherapy, developed by Viktor Frankl is the third Vienna school of psychotherapy after Freud’s “will to pleasure” and Adler’s “will to power”. Its aim is to help people to find meaning in their lives at times of crisis. According to logotherapy, there are three paths to meaning: 1) by finding work or activity with which one can creatively engage, body and soul; 2) by direct experience of goodness, beauty and love in culture, nature or people; 3) through the way in which we experience unavoidable suffering.

Logotherapy asserts that there is an inherent will to meaning. This can certainly be awakened in a therapeutic context, but ultimately individual action is required. Taking responsibility for our own lives is an essential part of the movement towards actualising human potential.

It is axiomatic that finding meaningful work or activity is an essential part of the path to actualising our human potential. As we grow older the danger is that we become fixated on one or other passion so that at the time when physical or mental capacity begins to decline, a deep despair sets in. Life becomes meaningless as inability to “follow our dream” curtails our options. Our response to changing circumstances, indeed our ability to embrace change becomes the key to further development.

As responsibilities for earning a living, bringing up children and generally “doing” in our complex society begin to fall away, so our relationships also change. Awareness of the essential loneliness of the human condition

mentioned earlier becomes more acute and new forms are required. Emerson said that the way to gain friends is to be one, while top of the Dalai lama's list is kindness. Thus a vast area of human experience, that of human relationships, involves an expanding experience of love to include selfless intention for the good of those around us, and ultimately the whole of humanity. Empathy is the key to this experience - putting oneself in the place of the other person.

As in human relationships, our relationship to the natural order of the world can deepen, too. The notion that we are "nothing but" higher animals seems to be gaining strength as Darwinism pervades the life sciences and the ecology movement. In fact, our direct individual experience of our own consciousness leads inevitably to the conclusion that we are quite different from even our closest "cousins" (Tallis). The grave danger that so reducing our status to that of animals, even very clever ones, will lead to inhuman behaviour is all too apparent. Contemplation of nature, and of ourselves, in all our glory, is an essential part of the way to meaning.

The third issue, which can seem horribly meaningless, is that of suffering (Luke), or more precisely, unavoidable suffering. Simply put, the question becomes one of how one meets the challenge of unavoidable suffering. The ego demands pleasant, happy feelings, including a longing for growth and freedom; if they are not present, neurotic depression may set in as false values come to the fore. To bear suffering bravely, with acceptance in all humility is a deed for the world; somewhere a burden is lightened by our effort. This is unprovable in any logical sense, and it in no way suggests that suffering is necessary for meaning. Rather it gives us an opportunity to overcome egotistical longing, leading to further spiritual growth.

In logotherapy, as in many other belief systems, the view that the world is an essentially meaningless, random interplay of complex physical forces (nihilism) is not a given truth. Our challenge is to cope with our seeming inability to logically comprehend this meaning, which raises the issue as to what evidence we use on which to base our beliefs.

Hard and soft evidence

Science is concerned with "hard" evidence, and makes progress by testing new theories against objective, measurable, repeatable and universally applicable data. This has been phenomenally successful in recent years at increasing our knowledge of the world and making that knowledge "useful" to us in technological advances undreamed of by people only one or two generations ago. Even "blue skies research" is seen as justified in that one day it may become useful, usually in a material, economic sense. This scientific world view, with its emphasis on rational thinking, comes into conflict with the subjective life of feeling, even to the extent of denying that individual human experience should be admitted at all.

Huge swathes of human experience are denied objective "reality" by this thinking. Indeed, a life including intrinsic value seems impossible without being labelled a crank or misfit, in our western society, at least. Thus it is that the older person becomes increasingly isolated, with physical needs more or less met, but with soul needs largely ignored in conventional "care" situations. A humanitarian impulse alone, without enabling personal growth, is not sufficient. Fear of the future, together with a sense of despair at increasing dependency on others, can lead to unhappiness and depression, and, in extreme cases, premature death. Fortunately, the conventional scientific paradigm is not universally accepted as the only way to the truth (Hick). Religion (or at least a feeling for the transcendental), art, the humanities and the subjective inner life of feeling are widely accepted as "real". The fact that science cannot "prove" that feelings exist (although neuroscience is beginning to make claims that neural activity in the brain can be correlated with specific feelings in an experimental subject) does not detract from the reality, to the individual, of those feelings. Rather than perpetuating a growing schism between science and "non-real" experiential evidence, holistic science practises an inclusive approach which also recognises and embraces a transcendental world view, including that relating to the "hard problem" of describing human consciousness (Chalmers) .

The twelve senses

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the twelve senses in detail, but since the decline of the senses in later years presents huge challenges it is appropriate to describe briefly some of the less well known ones, and the inner meanings associated with them. Working with an awareness of these meanings can lead to significant changes in behaviour and attitudes in old age. That the nervous system is popularly described in terms of inputs to a computer (the brain) for processing which then provides outputs for sensations or actions is a travesty of the truth. Infinitely more complex and subtle forces (for want of a better word) are at work in all living systems; this especially applies to human beings with their subjective experience of consciousness and free will.

The sense of touch links us to the world, closely and intimately. By touching things an inner experience is created which can enliven the soul with deep respect, even reverence, helping to overcome the disabilities of the body. Older people can cultivate the sense of touch by, for example, playing a musical instrument or by handwork.

The sense of life strongly influences our soul moods. Thus there can be a tendency for older people to be excessively dependent on their state of bodily health; even to lose human contact through minute interest in the course of every illness. Overcoming this requires occupation or concern for other people or the environment and to gain a degree of equanimity by becoming independent of the messages brought by the sense of life. (How to do this is a major task, but the first step is to recognise how our soul moods are being affected.)

The sense of movement is the kinaesthetic sense. This is closely linked to our ability to stand erect and to attain freedom of movement. As the body ages and hardens, this ability, from the outside, is seen to decline. Learning to look inward to soul-freedom, which cannot be stifled by the body's lack of mobility, involves joyful acceptance of the course of life and the unwavering pursuit of definite objectives as a sustained effort of will. The sense of balance gives us equilibrium. It is sobering to reflect that without it we could only crawl. An inner sense of calmness in relation to our surroundings enables us to understand our own being. In literature, where many archetypal journeys can be found, Shakespeare's King Lear loses his inner peace through his craving for the outer love of his daughters, not having the wisdom to see that this is the tragic result of his excessive egotism. Self-forgetfulness and unselfish love is required as we move through the elder years and "grow old gracefully". Studying King Lear, The Tempest and Greek literature can bring the old person to recognition of the necessity to keep egotism in check.

The sense of smell relates us to the world through the air we breathe, deeply into our bodies. To cultivate compassion, as the opposite of fear, is the main task in relation to a declining sense of smell. Keeping alive the beneficent forces which we breathe in throughout life in true humility and gratitude helps us to overcome the typical curmudgeon in us – peevish, ill-tempered and shunning all contact with fellow beings.

The sense of taste, by comparison, relates us to the world through the fluid element. Digestion and metabolism takes place in this element. A normal sense of taste knows the needs of the body and can be relied on if uncorrupted. Again, cultivating interest in others and dealing with them with kindness can help to overcome quarrelsome behaviour related to metabolic dysfunction.

The sense of sight is related to inner balance. Deteriorating eyesight in old age can lead to dissatisfaction with life – counting failures and what remains to be accomplished. Seeking to be truly grateful for our destiny and acknowledging that setbacks may have their origin in long past events restores soul-peace to the individual. The sense of warmth is essentially the sense of the warmth of the blood, perceived in the heart. The heart is the instrument of the feeling soul, where love, remorse and conscience impinge on the soul life. It is of great importance that older people are kept at a comfortable temperature, in body and soul. Developing the virtue of patience, so that we do not become overheated or cold when things do not go our way, is a great challenge in old age.

Through our sense of hearing we gain a great deal of information about the world, and about people. The soul responds with inner music, which unfortunately can easily be drowned out by external noise and negativity of the will, even to the extent of causing physical damage in certain organs of the body. The supreme task is to give full attention to everything we hear, to listen with understanding and to suppress immediate and loose responses. Listening to live music, and playing a musical instrument, is of great benefit in bringing peace to old people.

The sense of word is related to courage. The fear of death can be alleviated by the cultivation of the power of speech, much neglected in our time. Reading aloud, and every practical use of language can breathe life into the soul to "live victoriously".

The sense of thought allows us to grasp single thoughts as well as complex series of thoughts as a whole. Small children hardly have it, but around the third year connected short stories can be introduced, allowing the child to learn. In order to keep this faculty into old age, we have to create a space for ideas to penetrate into our inner being. Calm contemplation of the world reveals to us the thoughts that live in it. As we grow older, the desire to assert ourselves, becoming talkative and opinionated conceals a fear of losing our sense of self. To counter this tendency requires self – discipline, to interest ourselves in new ideas and to keep inner silence. The sense of the ego of other people is the sense of the "I" of the other person. It permits us to come close to the being of the other person, beyond outer appearances. If undeveloped, this sense makes it difficult for us to recognise the intrinsic worth of people with whom we have direct contact and who may have a decisive

influence on our lives. We may indulge in unjust criticism and become a burden in even our closest relationships.

When an elderly woman's husband died 25 years ago she was unable to replace her dependent relationship with any meaningful activity for herself or other people. Such was her grief, and the sympathy of her friends and family, that she became more and more obsessed with the decline of her physical body and her senses, including eyesight and hearing. The impression she gave was that she had never developed any artistic or spiritual beliefs of her own, living vicariously on her husband's many interests. Now 100 years old, she is terrified of dying and projects a tragic and belligerent spectacle to all who visit her. Real suffering may result from neglect of the needs of the soul, even if the body is well cared for. It should be emphasised again that the individual has to take responsibility for their own life, and, with the help of others, face all challenges as they arise.

A word about dementia is relevant in a discussion of the senses. Three quarters of a million people, rising to one million in ten years' time, have dementia in this country alone (The Alzheimers Society) It is a progressive dying of brain cells leading to a loss of brain function; usually memory loss is the first noticeable symptom. As yet, there is no cure and it is a distressing and much feared disease, often involving severe personality change. Losing our memory and the power of thinking is tantamount to losing our identity. Yet it is just this sense of egotistical "me" which is at the heart of so much human suffering (Tolle). The "cause" of dementia (and perhaps many other diseases of our time) may well lie outside the purely medical-scientific realm, and we should rather seek to understand the condition in terms of individual destiny and the social, environmental and philosophical time in which we live. What we "need" as human beings alive today is a deep respect for ourselves and nature, including the transcendental nature of reality.

It will be seen that many of the senses are alive even in people with advanced dementia, and soul-care is just as relevant as for people with physical disability. Enlightened soul-care as well as physical and social care should be available to all people suffering from dementia.

The message that this look at the senses brings is one of optimism. The radiation of a warm heart by the person who can forget himself will spread like a blessing and he will never suffer from loneliness. The task of the older person becomes clear – to train their senses so that what they bring may be developed in the soul to keep the spirit alive even though it is housed in a frail and worn-out body.

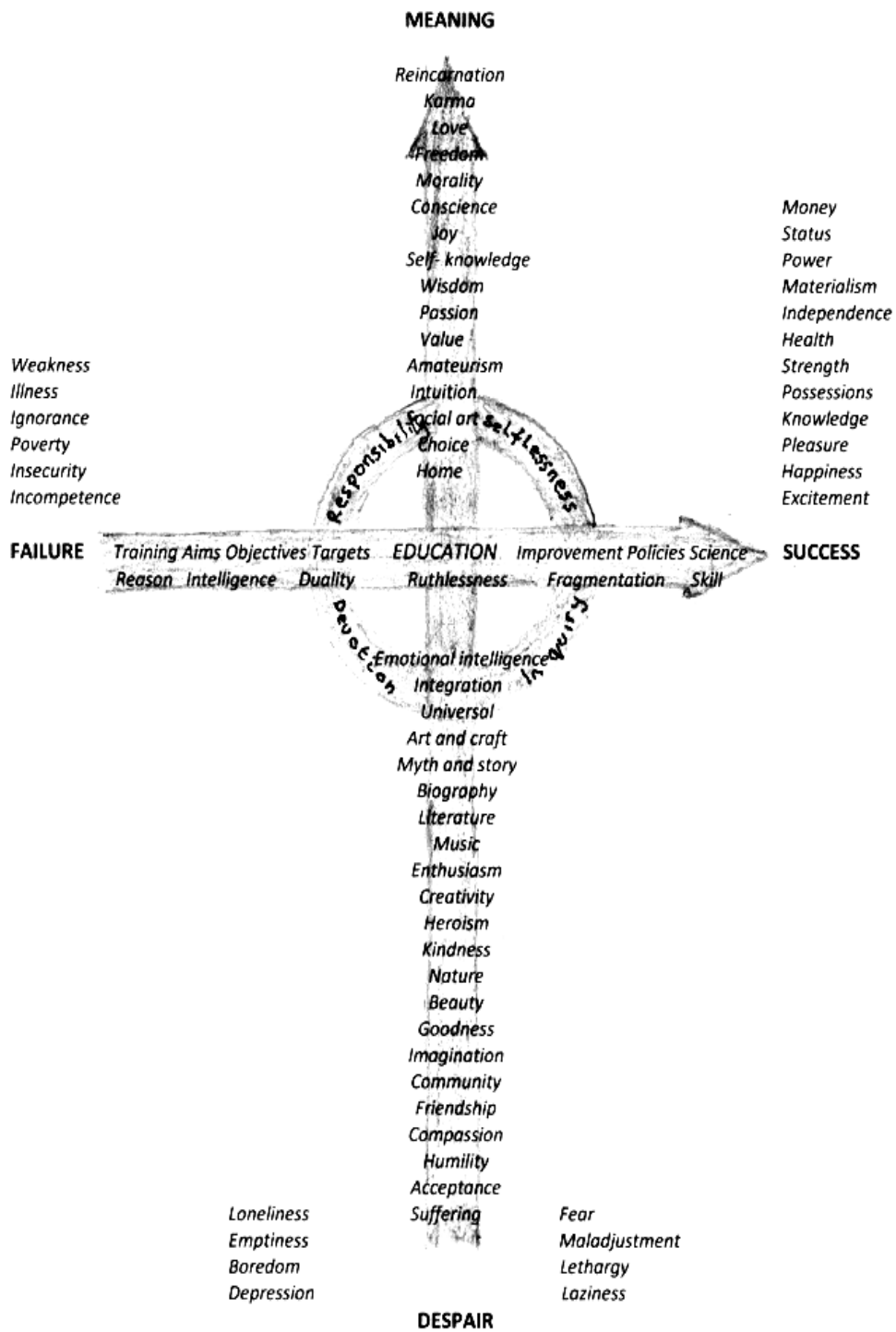
Conclusion

Although we would like the comfort and security which a sound-bite answer to the question "what is the meaning of life?" provides, it may be more relevant to restate the question in a more accessible form as "how can I live a meaningful life?"

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The Meaning Cross



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