

Logotherapy and Recovery from Religiously Abusive Environments

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Abstract

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During the author's past 30+ years of working with those affected by religious abuse, some have expressed interest in a spiritual dimension of recovery and some deny seeing any conceptual or practical relevance. Many of the author's clients have been influenced by a *Totalist Aberrant Christian Organization* (TACO),¹ but others have come from more diverse backgrounds. As we all affirm, sometimes people are not yet in a place of readiness to address the transcendent or spiritual dimension of life, but psychotherapeutic Logotherapy supports and the author affirms, eventually recovery requires it. A brief history and description of Logotherapy is provided. This paper then briefly suggests how concepts within Logotherapy can be helpful in understanding recovery from religiously abusive environments. This paper seeks to assist the reader in how one might conceptualize and then respectfully facilitate the process of movement from dismissal of all things religious to an increased exploration and deeper appreciation of the role and function of meaningful religious involvement.

Logotherapy described – One can arrive at a basic understanding Logotherapy primarily from a single written source (Frankl, 1984). This source is from the founder's own account of his prisoner of war camp experience and those of his fellow prisoners coupled with his summary of basic Logotherapy principles (Frankl, 1984, Part Two).

Understanding the place of suffering has generated a great deal of philosophical dialogue over the course of human history and done much to cause one to reject any notion of a caring personal God. Certainly, for me as a Christian, I have heard more objections to the truth claims of Christianity framed about this human and philosophical challenge than any other suggested difficulty. Frankl takes on this challenging task, sharing his and his comrade's story of pain and suffering. His autobiographical account is a dispassionate description, of what the common or average prisoner in the concentration camps experienced (pp.26-115).

On one level, his detachment seemed almost normative. We have known many, counselors, therapist, social workers, psychologist and psychiatrist. While most are quite able to be passionately emotive, the most helpful have the uncanny ability to set personal internal and

¹ TACO is an often used acronym in the field of cultic studies. TACO's are typically categorized as either communal (such as Waco or Jonestown) or non-communal (such as Westboro Baptist church).

external boundaries and control their emotional equilibrium. This frequently comes by deliberate practiced intention for the sake of clients, as well as the counselors own mental health. Frankl's medical and psychiatric training, likely helped him during his concentration camp tenure. I read an interview he gave at age 90 shortly before his death that certainly suggests that it had become a life-pattern for him (Scully, 1995). Frankl's personal and professional resilience is displayed in having, within a few short days of his camp release, drafted a creative play about his concentration camp experiences (Frankl, 1945).

Frankl's story, in his most well-known work, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1984) takes the form of outlining what he states as three basic phases the common prisoner in the concentration camps experienced (pp.26-115). In the first phase, at admission to the camp and sometimes shortly prior, he refers to the primary reaction the camp life brings as abject *shock* (p.26). He shares with the reader the rapid lowering of expectations and inhuman treatment. The huge realignment that he and others had to experience during this phase was nearly incomprehensible. My difficult experiences of Basic Training in the Army, or my having visited the worse slums of Calcutta, were but nominally similar. He provides witnessed illustrations of the *horror* (p.31) and highlights the expected defense mechanism of *cold curiosity* (p.35).

In phase two is described, *the boundless longing* for one's home and family and the *mortification* of a prisoner's sensibilities very shortly upon entry (p.39). The *blunting of the emotions* and apathy as a defense mechanism is described and illustrated (pp. 40-47). The general absence of sexual desires (p.52) and what he refers to as "cultural hibernation," with the exception of religion and politics, is explained (p.53). Along the way he identifies the supportive nature of having a past rich intellectual life as an indicator of the ability to rise above the damage to the inner-self (p.55-56). In general Frankl identifies the *importance of the intensification of*

the inner-life as a means to fortification against negative feelings and inclinations common among the prisoners (p.58-59). The helpful supports of *humor and limited forms of artistic endeavors* were given as means to coping with the otherwise uncopiable (p. 61-66). He highlights the role of *fate*, coupled with *free choice decisions* for self-understanding, finding meaning to the otherwise meaninglessness of the camp environs (pp.87-93).

Particularly noteworthy for me was his emphasis on *reframing*, “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it” (p.95). As mitigation to the internal experience of suffering, I agree. In opposition to Frankl, some have suggested that his views on suffering seemed insufficient in his denial of societal guilt (Pytell, 2003). This may be in part why some of Frankl’s critics have suggested that he insufficiently identifies the depth of evil within the Holocaust (Scully, 1995, p.8).

Frankl shares the third and final stage of the prisoner’s mental reactions. This is the psychological state following release. This phase includes the difficulty in appreciating beauty, having an internal experience of depersonalization, of wanting to incessantly talk, of bitterness and disillusionment (pp. 105-115). In a very helpful way, Frankl compares the emotional state of the liberated prisoners to “the *psychological counterpart to the bends*” (p.112). I found this a very compelling metaphor. He goes on to share a final metaphor, past experiences become, to him, nothing but a *nightmare*, with “*nothing he need fear any more – except his God*” (p.115).

There is much to affirm in Frankl’s “will to meaning,” but I question his limited existential response to suffering as primarily for *self-understanding* and becoming more *other-centered*. Frankl, locates meaning within the individual, yet speaks of the requirement “life” places upon us. He also personifies “fate” and its expectations upon us, while requiring our autonomous actions to a means of purpose (p.98). As a Christian and having studied philosophy,

I couldn't help but think of the concept of *semantic mysticism*, providing an implied meaning to terms or concepts without a sufficient ontological base (Schaeffer, 1968, p. 56-60). Reframing suffering as a life-teacher may be helpful in managing one's internal angst. But, I fail to be convinced of an impersonal conceptualization of its involvement to provide deep personal comfort both during and following suffering. At the same time, while thinking about my need to grow through hardship, I am reminded of an appropriate Winston Churchill quote, Frankl would have certainly affirmed, "***The price of greatness is responsibility***" (Churchill 1942). Existentially, greatness may indeed be achieved through understanding suffering for the benefit of a more comprehensive view of life, this I am convinced of and can gladly affirm.

Early in my doctoral studies, I had the privilege of speaking briefly with Salvador Minuchin at a conference here in Denver. I asked this early contributor to Family Systems theory, what role the *transcendent* played in his Structural Family System model. His brief reply was that the transcendent was "not my craft." Had I asked Frankl the same question, his response would have been very different. There are ***three basic processes*** to discovering a transcendent meaning identified by Viktor Frankl:

(1) By *creating a work or doing a deed*; (2) by *experiencing something or encountering someone*; and (3) by the *attitude* we take toward unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 1984, p. 133). (emphasis mine)

Examining the importance of the transcendent requires some thoughtful reflections of his view of meaning-centered psychotherapy. Each school of psychology has a focused purpose in its contributions to the field of counseling. Within Logotherapy the singularity of purpose is to confront and reorient the client toward finding their ***will to meaning***, thus facilitating improved current and future orientation. This will to meaning is not a secondary justification to one's attitudes and behaviors. It is the individually empowered, usually unconscious, and the *unique*

driving force of humankind (p.120-121). While this school grew out of psychoanalytic theory, it does not see itself as a replacement, but as an optional supplement. Previously hidden meanings, to life challenges, are explored in order that an expanded view of reality may empower ones otherwise existential distress (p.125). I cannot help wonder, if at various levels all therapies in varying degree, suggest this needed value.

Natural life-stressors provide the starting point or as Frankl suggests, *noo-dynamics* between the meaning to be fulfilled and the person experiencing the conflict. Contending with the human challenge of meaninglessness, having what is referred to as an *existential vacuum*, means resisting both conformism as well as totalitarianism (p.128). Frankl suggests that the meaning to life has a universal or ultimate quality that we should all strive for to the best of our ability, but will never understand until death. Meanwhile, we are individually responsible to discover meaning through mindfully confronting our finiteness, as well as the finality of what we take from life (p.132).

As I reflect on my incredible spouse, I am reminded of the *very winsomeness of relational love*, to which Frankl strongly affirms as a very necessary change agent (p.134). Similarly, I am reminded of a close friend's 30 year old loss of his dear wife through the painful ordeal of breast cancer (Means 2006). His unavoidable suffering brought clear changes within and, as a Christian a heightened view of Christ's suffering on his behalf. There occurred a depth of appreciation of life that has led to a lifelong work that has been the source of great comfort and support for many. His own suffering, experienced in his wife's suffering, has brought him personal depth otherwise perhaps never known.

In my first doctoral internship I was introduced to what Frankl refers to as *paradoxical intention*. It is a disarming counseling technique that asks the client to face their fear in an

exaggerated sort of way, building the capacity for self-detachment inherent in the use of self-effacing humor (p. 147). In this I am reminded of how I regularly relate to my 32 year stepson. He is developmentally disabled, totally blind, with minor Cerebral Palsy, Developmental Topographical Disorientation, symptoms consistent with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (formally, a General Anxiety Disorder) and has a host of other significant life challenges. He has found hope, tenacity and humor in working with his many challenges through my frequent conceptualizing of him as a “dragon slayer.” The dragons consist of the many and diverse physical, emotional and social challenges he must contend with. He and I often speak about dragon parts strewn all over his care facility, joking about the extra labor incurred by the staff. This is made all the more influential, as he loves the Lord of the Rings movies where dragons are significant and Hobbits, while small, are brave and ultimately the heroes.

Frankl sees humankind as being ultimately self-determining (p.154), optimistically endorsing the individual ability to change not only culture, but also ones attitude despite circumstances. Indeed, this sort of conceptualization of human freedom leads Frankl to suggest the notion of self-determination, as the *Psychiatric Credo* (p.156-157). In this, to his credit, Frankl supports a strong effort to *rehumanize psychiatry*. He also affirms the *depravity of humankind as well as its greatness*:

who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the *Shema Yisreal* on his lips (p.157).

In addition to the influence of Spinoza (p.179), Schopenhauer (p.67) and Nietzsche (p.103), I could not help wonder if the French 17th Century philosopher, Blaise Pascal may have also provided Frankl some conceptual fodder along the way:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, the glory and refuse of the universe (Pascal, 131/434).

Unlike Family Systems Theory, in its various formulations, the transcendent within Logotherapy is affirmed and has predominant value. It takes into account the spiritual dimension of humankind, seeking to directly work with the client, ***building on whatever religious background the individual may bring to the therapeutic endeavor***. While I differ with Frankl in his overly positive view of humankind's ability to control their attitudes toward hardship and in his conception of ultimate meaning, I still find huge value in Logotherapy ***affirming a more holistic and respectful anthropology*** that is consistent with the Christian worldview that I hold. The dragons that we all must face will certainly bring us fear, but we need not succumb if our spirituality has sufficient weight, our swords (tools) are sharpened, our minds and emotions focused and our comrades strong, supportive and proven in life's journey.

It is the ***attitude*** (Frankl), not the ***disease*** (of AA) that appears to be the defining philosophical issue. He, views such labeling as counter-productive to the healing process, refusing the concept of spiritual sickness, preferring instead the importance of the universal healthy part of the human condition, the ***Noetic Dimension*** (p.48).

For Logotherapy, ***the primary negative emotion is found in the feeling of meaninglessness***. Logotherapy appears to be broad in its conceptualization of spirituality (Holmes, 1970). Logotherapy is known as a ***"Spirit-Centered Psychotherapy"*** (Frankl, 1984, p. iv). ***For Frankl, this takes place in affirming the innate "Spiritual Dimension" that separates humankind from animal (Frankl, 1984, p.2).***

Logotherapy includes a dominant value on the spiritual, over that which might be labeled religious, while ***affirming a very broad and inclusive view of God ("Good Orderly Direction") or what might otherwise be framed as a polysemic concept of God.***

Frankl, connects his three ways of ***finding meaning: positive attitude towards***

unavoidable pain, grief or death...to explore and share our creative gifts as well...experience the love of another human being or things of the world. Working from this three-fold value system, I appreciate particularly the importance of seeing one's difficult experiences as an "asset in the future" (Frankl, 1984, p. 88-90). But, what are the means by which increased meaning is acquired by both?

Viktor refers to the means as a "Medicine Chest" that is found in the *Noetic Dimension* of humankind. Three tools within are: *an attitude shift, the place of humor and importance of self-dialogue* (p. 53). Implied in Logotherapy is the significant role of sharing personal story.

In addition to the place of spirituality, the importance of finding meaning, using similar Existential means, another important similarity is the common view of the freedom of the human will. This relates to their commonly held anthropological assumptions. I heard of this seeming value in Frankl's own play, produced shortly after his final release from a concentration camp, *God does not have a vocal role*. Frankl being a very intentional man, I still wonder why the necessity for a voiceless God. But, one must give him the benefit of the doubt. He had just very recently exited three years of concentration camp hell. I, too, may have wondered where the personal God, who speaks into history, had been. Another important theme coupled with personal growth and recovery is the importance of having a broad appeal to those considering the place and role spirituality. Logotherapy strongly affirm this value, but I could not help but wonder about this. A common exhortation given me by my incredible spouse is that *less can be more*, may be a value one could benefit from. Additionally, Logotherapy seems pragmatically postmodern in its treatment of religious topics and hold a utilitarian value of what "works" to be the epistemological standard in determining what is true.

Finally, there is much I gladly affirm in the commonly held values and principles of

Logotherapy. I see the *place of Spirituality*, the *role of community*, *life-meaning* and having a *clear set of practical recovery tools* as being essential not only for various forms of recovery, but specifically for those coming out of religiously abusive environments.

Summary and Application - I have attempted, in this paper, to identify and discuss the significance of some of the basic values held by Logotherapy in their correspondence to important principles supportive of those seeking recovery from spiritually abusive environments. I have sought to identify the greatest benefits and suggested a few shortcomings of Logotherapy.

In the course of my nearly 65 years of life, better than half of which has been devoted to the study of psychological theory and philosophy I have concluded that no one therapy or therapeutic conceptualization sufficiently contains what is needful for humankind. Logotherapy stresses the will to meaning as the answer to human ills and understands that we need a variety of voices speaking into our minds, our emotions and our souls. While I don't always agree with various aspects of Logotherapy, I can easily affirm its clear message of tolerance and support of other treatment perspectives.

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