

"Meaning in Suffering

FOREWORD

My first experience in searching for meaning occurred when I was three years old, long before logotherapy was developed. It happened early one morning in a brown shingled house on Pine Avenue in Berkeley, California, where I lived at the time. The day was Christmas and the air was full of excitement.

As a gift I received an heirloom doll which belonged to my mother as a child. It was about two feet tall, with a beautiful porcelain head and long hair, jointed arms and legs, an old fashioned embroidered dress, and black patent leather one-button shoes. I promptly named her Marilyn. She was a grown-up doll instead of a baby doll and I felt very grown up to be trusted with it.

My other gift was a doll-sized wicker basket filled with doll clothes pins so that when I washed her clothes I could also hang them up. These two gifts were very meaningful to me and seemed to represent love and trust.

However, the meaning changed somewhat when my brother, who was four years older, chased me around the room in some kind of game, slipped on the waxed floor, and fell against the low wooden chest on which Marilyn rested. Crash, she fell to the floor, her head broken! Crash went my heart, broken into as many pieces as my new doll.

Even at that age I knew there was absolutely no money available to buy a new head. That was the reality. No one was scolded for the accident; perhaps everyone was sad.

And so I pondered hour after hour, "What does it mean to have a doll with no head especially when it hurts so much?" I did not know the grown-up word "suffering" but I did understand "hurt" so I decided to love her regardless of her condition.

Since that time many years ago I have often made similar choices and looked for meaning in what might appear to be a meaningless situation. Like you, I have known joy in positive experiences of love, truth, and beauty. Like you, I have known pleasure in my own or in other people's accomplishments. And probably also like you, I have found meaning in the midst of pain, grief, and despair. So too, like a doll with a broken head, I have needed to be loved and that too has happened.

And so it goes. At any moment in a person's life the expected routine or anticipated success may seem important or may suddenly be without personal meaning. The challenging dragon may rear its head, flash its eyes, spit fire and roar, "I dare you to find meaning in this."

The person with courage accepts the dare, makes decisions, and acts on the basis of decisions. Acting with courage is not based on feeling confident. The courageous person may instead feel a bone-wrenching fear, yet in spite of it does not submit to the internal tyranny of overpowering negative feelings. Many people become so accustomed to negative thinking that choosing to change their attitudes is not easy. Yet it is possible in spite of limited knowledge, insufficient evidence, family background, physical or psychological disabilities or current problems. Change often requires courageous action and the willingness, as Frankl put it, "to face your fate without flinching." Sometimes this requires acting "as if," acting as if feeling strong and confident when in fact feeling weak and inadequate.

This is one of the basic tenets of logotherapy—that a person has feelings, the feelings do not need to "have" and control a person. It is one of the issues of Elisabeth Lukas' book, *Meaning in Suffering*, a book that demonstrates how a psychotherapist can help others take charge of their own lives with what Viktor Frankl has called "the defiant power of the human spirit." When this power is released, people can find meaning in any situation, even in situations of inevitable suffering.

To find meaning is to find validation. The care and humanness that Dr. Lukas demonstrates to her patients is a validating rarity in these days when many therapists limit themselves to the traditional 50 minute hour and sometimes seem unconcerned about the agony that can be experienced by the patients between sessions. In case study after case study the author of *Meaning in Suffering* reveals her psychological knowledge, her skillful and

creative use of logotherapy, and her concern for other people. She is not biased against being involved with them. Yet she carefully monitors her involvement so as not to contribute to the development of iatrogenic problems (damage caused by therapists saying or doing the wrong things or not saying and doing what needs to be done). Iatrogenic problems are possible when a therapist loses perspective, becomes overly involved, or perhaps reinforces the clients' negative reinforcing prophecies and invites further "sickness" instead of health.

The subject of iatrogenic problems is an important part of the book and, in my opinion, needs more study by those who intend to be, or who already are, mental health professionals. Also valuable are the suggestions about how to use logotherapy in specific ways with people who have neurotic-type personalities as well as with those suffering with some form of psychosis. For example, learning how to laugh at symptoms, even exaggerating them, is a logotherapeutic technique called "paradoxical intention." Laughter works because people do not fear what they find to be amusing.

In addition to paradoxical intention, the other major methods that Dr. Lukas focuses upon are dereflection and modulation of attitudes. When clients are encouraged to search for meaning in every area of life, their attitudes are changed in important ways. Especially interesting is the concept of a dereflection group. In this, group members are instructed to talk only about the positive aspects of their lives, positive things they observe, or negative problems they have overcome in positive ways. This positive view may be new to those who continually focus only on negatives or past history. Her almost allergic reaction to "working through" is well worth considering.

At the present time logotherapy, like other therapeutic modalities is often used to supplement other systems. For example, I frequently use logotherapy in conjunction with transactional analysis and gestalt therapy in my private practice. In transactional analysis terms, Elisabeth Lukas in *Meaning in Suffering* reflects her caring Parent as well as her empathic Child and knowledgeable Adult. This book will inevitably encourage and direct psychotherapists and counselors who recognize the need and potential people have to transcend themselves and move beyond egocentricity. The book is also useful in courses which compare various therapeutic theories and modalities

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because of its unusual clarity or as a reference for studying the values and ethics of a psychologist and counselor. Because she openly reveals her personhood, her value orientation, and her techniques, Elisabeth Lukas becomes a fine case study of someone who integrates who she is with what she does.

I experienced much of this book as being written by a someone I think of now as a "kindred soul" which to me means we have many similar values.

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CHAPTER ONE

COMFORT WHERE NO CURE IS POSSIBLE

For thousands of years people have done pretty well without the science of psychotherapy. Yet, something like psychotherapy has always existed—through persons who, with charisma, persuasiveness, and force of conviction, were able to bring comfort to those looking for help. Such help was usually based on a specific philosophy of life.

The afflicted were promised eternal wellbeing and justice in the hereafter, or their suffering was presented as a test on their way to happiness, or suggestive powers were used to exorcise the evil, or philosophic-ethical images were invoked to make blows of fate bearable. Psychotherapy was religion and vice versa.

This embeddedness in mysticism made it difficult for psychotherapy to find a scientific approach. Today, if we try to find rational explanations for irrational behavior, and offer rational help for irrational psychological problems, we stand on an extremely narrow ridge between two abysses: on the one side lies the danger of reverting to mysticism, and on the other side the danger of slipping into a mechanized manipulation of the human person.

Has psychology, on its long development through magic, exorcism, trickery, demagoguery, occultism, and fanaticism, finally attained the status of science? In recent decades great strides were made in that direction. Successes were conspicuous and resulted in a great variety of tools in a giant psychological workshop to serve humans but unfortunately the specifically human dimension—the spirit—was left out. “Psychotherapy without magic” has been replaced by “psychotherapy without spirit.” What was gained in the field of science was lost from

humanity. Psychotherapists may choose from a great number of methods but are forced to walk on that narrow ridge between old views and new perspectives, between speculative interpretations and human programming. It is a path illuminated by alarmingly few firm criteria.

This book is written for those who trust psychotherapy to find comfort. The trust of the patients is valuable but must not be blindly given, or they may be pushed into one of the abysses left or right. They may fall under the spell of speculative hypotheses from which they cannot free themselves, or they may be wrecked by a cold, impersonal conditioning process because they no longer can sense the meanings of their lives.

The book is also for psychotherapists who walk that narrow ridge, weighted down by responsibility for those who trust them. Few are the guideposts, many the contradictory theories, the confusion, the criticism. What school are they to believe, what concepts to make their own?

This book suggests a path for the lay reader as well as for the professional, a path through the maze of psychological schools to a psychotherapy which no longer is a myth and includes the human spirit, combines science and humanity, and thus justifies our trust, especially the trust of the *suffering person*. The value of a psychotherapy is tested by what it can do for those who suffer and need comfort. Where help no longer is possible, comfort must be given; where no comfort is possible, any psychotherapy is useless.

OLD VIEWS

Early psychotherapy was not concerned with comfort. Its central concern was to uncover human motivations, unmask hidden drives and unconscious emotions, and reveal secret intentions. From the very beginning, depth psychologists made it their business to search out, find, and explain negative aspects. They were looking for human weaknesses, libidinous dreams and symbols from which they could draw conclusions. Thus, psychotherapy began from a negative basis. Positive aspects were of little interest, of no use in practice, and suspected of masking something negative. Often the positive was denied, ideals and ethical values were interpreted as "mere

sublimation of primitive drives," love, faith, loyalty, or conscience were denied. Why worry about the noble, helpful, and good if in reality people are ruled by sexual desires and aggressions, every "noble motivation" only the mask of another, deeper and "ignoble motivation"? This was the era of cynicism, nihilism, atheism. Philosophers discovered the meaninglessness of human existence, artists were encouraged to create works of the "unesthetic." The human being as the age-long image of God was unmasked to show egocentricity and lust for gratification. Where, in this approach, was comfort possible for suffering people?

Even the non-suffering, the normal, the healthy were deprived of a solid base by confronting them with their "hidden aspects", the dark depths of their instinctual nature.

This picture of human nature left little room for free, rational decisions. The person was seen as a battlefield of three rather mystical forces: id, ego, and superego. Id symbolized the primitive drives, especially sex and aggression; the superego symbolized the "father image," or the totality of societal forces, as a controlling court. Between warring id and superego stood the ego, facing reality, making concessions to them.

What is questionable in this picture is our proclaimed powerlessness against our own weaknesses, our total dependence on the all-determining force of our drives.

If, for example, a patient mentions that once, while playing with her doll, she broke off its arm and this made her sad, the episode could be interpreted as follows: because of oedipal conflicts, she subconsciously hated her mother, wanted all her father's love and did not want to share it with her mother. She repressed her hate, the doll became a symbol for her mother, an acceptable outlet for her accumulated aggression. Her id urged her to express her hate, her superego prevented her from actually attacking her mother, so the symbolic act of "destroying the doll" remained the only way out. When she broke the arm of the doll she unconsciously wanted to break the neck of her mother. Such interpretations are dangerous and bring little comfort to the patient. Childhood pain about the broken doll, which may have lost its importance long ago, becomes now an infantile act of vengeance against the mother, which makes the daughter shudder even as an adult woman.

For a long time psychotherapists paid little attention to the

effects of their actions. They were certain that uncovering causes would make symptoms vanish. Psychoanalysis, of course, has developed and many practitioners are cautious about diagnoses, and do consider the feelings of patients. But the basic concept remains. Therapy still deals with uncovering and unmasking, and this means a devaluation of ideals. But values and ideals are precisely what provides support even in severe suffering. Early psychoanalysis not only did not give comfort to the suffering but robbed them of values which might have brought comfort.

In my student days I came across a vivid example of this reductionist thinking that suspects a "hidden" in everything and devaluates everything, down to the roots of human existence. It was an experiment to compare the strength of various drives in rats.

Rats were shown various objects from which they were separated by an electrically charged wire net. First, a sexually deprived rat faced a rat of the opposite sex. The rat immediately crossed the net to meet its partner. When put back to her original place she did not try it a second time. The sex partner did not tempt her to experience the electric shock a second time.

In a second experiment a starved rat was facing food. The rat crossed the wire a few times but gave up as soon as its worst hunger was stilled.

In a third experiment a rat mother faced one of her young, separated by the electric net. The rat kept running to her young, regardless how often she was put back, until she was dead. From these experiments it was concluded that the mother instinct was stronger than self-preservation, and this again stronger than the sex drive.

So far so good. But some depth psychologists drew conclusions according to their own concept of human nature. "Ah," they said, "what human parents do for their children also is done not out of selflessness and love, but to gratify their own strongest drive, the maternal instinct. All sacrifices of a mother are made because of the pleasure she gains by gratifying her strongest instinct." Mother love reduced to the simple gratification of a drive!

Viktor Frankl, one of the most prominent critics of reductionism, admits that unmasking has its legitimate place in psychotherapy, but adds:

"Unmasking, or debunking, however, should stop as soon as

one is confronted with what is authentic and genuine in man; e.g., man's desire for a life that is as meaningful as possible. If it does not stop then, the man who does the debunking merely betrays his own will to depreciate the spiritual aspirations of another."

This, then, is one abyss which threatens psychotherapists in their wanderings on the ridge; a relapse into devaluation stemming from the early days of psychoanalysis. Those who deal with suffering must not increase suffering, just to discover "truths," such as speculations about id, ego, and superego, and their internecine struggles. If we see people as determined by their drives, torn between gratification and non-gratification from childhood on, we cannot help or comfort. As Frankl says, we can only devalue and destroy until the genuinely human is eliminated and what remains as psychological concept is at best the outline of a rat.

Depth psychologists are not alone in misrepresenting human nature. Rats are the pet animals of behaviorists whose aim is to be strictly scientific, not accepting anything that is not clearly proved. After the period of unmasking and devaluating came the time of rationality. A rational society wants rational propositions: the time had come to bury mysticism in psychotherapy once and for all.

In behaviorism human beings are no longer battlegrounds for inner forces. Since nobody can look into the human psyche, it was declared "empty," like the famous "black box,"—no one knows what is in it. This was the time when "spirit" disappeared from psychology: for thousands of years spirit was considered something more than a visible and explorable organ; now, according to scientific principles, it was empty.

There was one ray of hope. The basis of what we can know about human nature was no longer purely negative; negative and positive aspects were equally considered, as "stimuli" for the black box. The original model was simple. The human being was a machine that digested data: on one side entered stimuli from the environment and perhaps also from one's own body; from the other side behavior reactions went out. What happened in between was at first not known. Today's behaviorists have worked out an incredibly complex system of criss-crossing currents between stimuli and reactions so the "black box" is no longer regarded as empty but as a giant

computer—which has not made it more human. The rat outline has been superseded by electronic wire mesh, where positive and negative reinforcers are linked with conditioned and unconditioned stimuli, which again can be unlinked so human behavior is totally manipulable. As a matter of fact, behavior thinking was born at a time when the first computer and robot models came into use: the parallels are obvious.

Can the psychological concepts of behaviorism give comfort to the sufferer? A computer can be repaired and reprogrammed but can it be comforted? This sounds ridiculous because computers need no comforting. But what about human beings seen as computers? Do they, too, need no comforting?

This is the dilemma of a psychology without spirit: To be consistent all behavior must be sufficiently measurable, even joy, hope, sorrow, and suffering. To evade this dilemma, human phenomena are declared problems beyond the field of competence for those schools of psychology. Behavior therapy has remained a treatment technology, in spite of many modern and positive attempts to broaden it on the human plane. Comforting the sufferer is not part of its task. It concentrates on what can be treated, and its "strategy" is always to intervene in existing stimulus-reaction links, turn off old currents, and turn on new ones.

An example are the antabuse therapies. Drinks of alcoholics are "spiced" with something that causes nausea. Every time they drink they get sick. If this is done for a long enough time, this technique is successful because—at least for a while—those treated avoid alcohol. The conditioning—alcohol equals feeling good—is gradually replaced by another—alcohol equals feeling bad. The software is changed, a new program is initiated. Unsolved remain such questions as why people started drinking, how they feel about themselves as alcoholics, and—most importantly—how can they live from here on as "cured" alcoholics.

Behavior therapy cannot offer strategies where it cannot bring about behavioral changes through manipulating stimuli. Their term "strategy" indicates the limitation. There are no such things as "strategic compassion" or "strategic comfort". Where patients face unavoidable suffering, they need neither unmasking nor manipulation. They need psychotherapists who can meet them as a "thou."