

Healing the Dark Night of the Soul

Overcoming Depression
Through
Re-investing Life with Meaning

A Jewish approach - by Bill Heilbronn

**“Master of the Universe!
I do not beg you to reveal to me the
secret of your ways
That would be too much for me - I
could not bear it.
But show me one thing, show it to me
ever more clearly and more deeply.
Show me what this, which is
happening to me here and now,
means to me. What it demands of
me. What it is that you, Lord of the
World, are telling me by way of it.
Oh! it is not why I suffer that I wish
to know, but only whether I suffer
for your sake”.**

Levi Yitchak of Berditchev
17th century Chassidic Rabbi:

Introduction

Depression is an experience that affects many of us. It may be the result of a spiritual or physical trauma. It may stem from persecution, war time atrocities or bullying, also crippling accidents or illnesses. In all these cases it may lead to the “Dark night of the Soul” where, in the extreme case, all feeling for any meaning to one’s life is lost and the will to live is threatened. There are many approaches to healing, including pharmaceuticals, complementary therapies, electro convulsive treatment and meditative techniques, all of which may be initially helpful. Ultimately, however, a much more fundamental spiritual approach is necessary in order to get to restore the will to live. In the first instance this booklet takes two cases that might be regarded as extreme, but, nevertheless, demonstrate what may be appropriate in more typical cases.

The Problem of Suffering

There are times when, in the event of unbearable personal suffering, we cry out: “Why this? Where is God in all this?”. The atheist asks: “If there were an omnipotent God, how could He permit such tragedies to happen?”

The stumbling answers of some theologians and philosophers not only fail to satisfy, but too often are almost obscene in their implications, especially when they invoke speculative theories, totally lacking in compassion, to suggest that the victims had invariably brought their suffering upon themselves.

The Jewish approach to the problem of suffering and its healing is derived from various spiritual principles:

Firstly in the Bible, through the commandment:

**“I set before you this day, good and evil, blessing and curse.
Choose therefore the good that you may live”**

This is a reminder that Judaism totally rejects the idea of “original sin” and “Pre-destination”. It acknowledges that humans are in perpetual tension between their innate “inclination to good” and their “inclination to evil”, the “Yetzer ha tov” and the “Yetzer ha rah”. The tragedy is that when people choose to let the “inclination to evil” dominate, it is the innocent that suffer.

If there were to be no suffering, no evil in the world, then God would have made us mere robots. It is part of our humanity that we are all creatures with free will and the moral responsibility to make intelligent choices, both in our refusal to go the evil way of humiliating or destroying people, and in the way we choose to respond to being bullied or injured, and other traumatic situations.

Secondly in the Talmud, which tells us that:

**“He who saves a single soul, saves the World
and he who destroys a single soul, destroys a
World”**

This tells us how we are all responsible for each other, particularly for comforting and healing those that have been traumatised by life’s misfortunes.

One might consider it as an earlier expression of John Donne's "No Man is an island"

Thirdly in the mystical doctrine of the Kabbalah which talks of:

"Tikkun Olam" – Repair of the World

This reinforces the need for healing and reconciliation. It also teaches the Messianic responsibility of the individual and the community to take responsibility for the mess that we are in, and put things right..

So we have the progression from personal responsibility, to communal responsibility, to global responsibility in the alleviation of suffering.

Each of these spiritual principles make it clear that Suffering is not a punishment to be endured but a challenge to be answered for the sake of ourselves and for others.

The theological Job's comforter would defend God by rationalising suffering and demanding a passive acceptance of it as God's will, with 'pie in the sky for compensation'. But in reality, whilst it is difficult to come to terms with suffering, it can neither be passively accepted, nor can it be rationalised, nor can God be blamed or defended. What we have to do with our personal suffering is to invest it with meaning, and recognise it as a call for creative action as a response to the situation in which we find ourselves, whilst acknowledging that the ultimate meaning of God lies beyond our comprehension.

In the face of suffering, Judaism demands, not passivity but a dedicated aggressiveness. We are permitted to question God, to challenge God, to demand an accounting from God. And this, rather than diminishing God is truly to take God seriously.

Elie Wiesel, who wrote a diary of his experiences in the Nazi Death Camps tells how one of his teachers taught him:

"The Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defence of his creation".

and Wiesel himself reminds us of our responsibilities and that:

"It is given to Man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion

The Origin of the Paralympics

These philosophies of meaningfulness were put to powerful effect in the work of Dr Ludwig Guttman, a neuro-surgeon, who was a devout Jewish refugee from the Nazis. He was posted to Stoke Mandeville hospital in 1944. There he completely revolutionised the treatment of soldiers paralysed with spinal injuries, with no hope for the future, who previously were just doped with pain killers and left to die in as comfortable a manner as possible. The death rate was 80 per cent.

On his first day he walked into the ward, and to the consternation of the nurses, threw open the curtains to let light into the room and ripped off the plasters that were immobilising them. He forced them out of their beds into wheel chairs, when all they wanted was to be left to die in peace, he encouraged them into doing muscle strengthening exercises, challenged them into participating in competitive games and saved their lives by giving them a meaning to their lives and a reason and will to live. The death rate was reduced from 80 per cent to only 20 per cent as men, who only wanted to be left to die in peace, were forced to find a meaning for their existence and thus a will to live rather than to die.

His method has been adopted world-wide and his memorial lives on in the Paralympics and other games which he pioneered, and for which he was knighted.

The Death Camps

In the years of the 'Holocaust' (1939 — 1945), Hell was no metaphysical concept — it was a concrete geographical reality spelt Auschwitz — Belsen — Treblinka — Dachau — the death camps of Nazi Germany.

During the 2nd World War Dr. Viktor Frankl was a slave labourer in one of the Nazi Concentration Camps, in constant danger of death in the gas chamber or from one of the epidemics of typhoid fever. By day he had to perform the heaviest of manual labour: digging, carting and moving dead bodies. But by night he developed the therapy that he had already started upon before the war, not only through choice, but also through sheer stark necessity.

For those who learnt their therapeutic techniques in Hell, whether it was the concentration camps of the Nazis, the Communists or one of the totalitarian regimes of more recent times, their education was thrust upon them by those who perpetrated these atrocities.

The Nazis had a deliberate policy of attempting to destroy a Man's identity and will to live by stripping him, not only of his possessions and clothing, not only of his hair and dignity, but also of his name. In return he was given the cast-off clothing of a man already a victim of the gas chamber and a number was tattooed on his arm.

All Meaning Gone

The moment of truth for the shattered 'number' who once upon a time, in a different life, in a different world, had been Dr. Viktor Frankl, was when the one remaining possession that he valued above all others, the manuscript that recorded all his life's work was stripped from him along with his clothes, and he was given the rags of another.

For a moment he felt that all meaning had been ripped from his life, that there was nothing left for him to do, and then thrusting his hands into the pockets of his new rags he found a piece of crumpled paper. Carefully and

curiously unfolding it, he found that it was a page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book bearing the words of the fundamental Jewish prayer (or declaration of faith) known as the 'Shema' with its challenge – “Hear O! Israel, YHVY your God is One” (which means “Harken to this O! you who wrestle with God and Man and in that wrestling find both God and yourselves, That who was, is and always will be is our God and is a Transcendental Unity”) followed by its invitation to a creative relationship with Divinity – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might”.

If the Prisoner was not to lose his humanity and his spirit, the attack had to be resisted by Creative Meditation on the fundamental nature of one's identity and the analysis of those freedoms that still remained to be exploited in one's predicament.

Dr. Frankl had previously experienced the truth of Carl Jung's idea of 'Synchronicity', the theory that coincidences are not arbitrary but are meaningful. However they only become personally meaningful when the person to whom the coincidence occurs has the courage, the intuition and the ability to invest it with a personal meaning.

Faced with this prayer, Dr. Frankl might well have asked 'In what sort of God could one believe in a World full of suffering?' But Logotherapy inverts the question and poses another — 'How can we afford to deny the existence of God in a World full of suffering?' The very essence of Logotherapy is the belief that there is ultimately 'Meaning' behind suffering, that God is manifest in the Universe as 'Logos' or 'Ultimate Meaning'.

If there were no meaning, if this World was a mere matter of chance — a giant joke, then suffering would be unbearable. Only by accepting a doctrine of meaning can suffering and acute depression be overcome.

Through meditating upon the particular incident of the prayer, Dr. Frankl realised that the destruction of his manuscript did not negate the meaning of his life, for the prayer found in his rags could only be interpreted as a command to realise his work in action, not only to maintain his own dignity and integrity as a human being, but also that of his fellow prisoners.

In his narrative of his concentration camp experiences and the case histories of the people that he helped after the War Dr. Frankl reminds us again and again that the one freedom that can never be taken away from us is our freedom to choose our attitudes in the face of our circumstances. In the death camps he found that:

'One who has a WHY to live for can bear with almost any HOW'.

'As long as One could find some personal meaning in life —

As long as One could find a reason for continuing to fight on against apathy and despair — whether it be for some one or something beyond themselves —

For just so long could One retain an amazing power of endurance'.

Loss of a Sense of Meaning

The spiritual neurosis from which we all may suffer to a greater or lesser extent is a lack of sense of meaning. This is largely the product of the times, of the breakdown of community bonds through the mobility of the Industrial Era, the increasing regimentation of our activities, the weakening and depersonalising of human relationships through bureaucracy, the impoverishment of our means of leisure through the increasing mechanisation of entertainment and the loss of a sense of personal destiny. In many people this has become a source of spiritual neurosis which appears in feelings of apathy, frustration and depression.

At the highest level it expresses itself as a feeling of separation from the Spiritual sources of our being. At more mundane levels it appears in feeling of depression, frustration, apathy, and in extreme cases the total dependence or addiction to some form of crutch such as drugs.

Faced with this problem, some of the younger disciples of Freud began the development of a new method that was far more spiritual in its approach. To distinguish it from the 'Psycho-Analysis' of Sigmund Freud they called it 'Existential Analysis'. They never failed to acknowledge their debt to Freud, nor did they deny that there are many problems of spiritual and psychic tension best treated by 'Depth' psychology. Nevertheless they demonstrated that there were an increasing number of problems that demanded what might be termed a 'Height' psychology.

Its essence lies in its endeavour to reveal and develop all those latent spiritual strengths within our Selves that will enable us to transcend our personal suffering and to find healing from the highest and most spiritual elements of One's Self. It gives practical effect to the idea that a therapy can deliberately search out all those aspirations, potentialities and relationships to greater causes that give meaning to life.

To understand Logotherapy, one must first understand its exponent and the circumstances under which it developed, for these illustrate better than any other example the nature of its potential.

Viktor Frankl began his career as a student of Sigmund Freud who encouraged him in his early writings. While acknowledging his debt to Freud's teaching and the fact that there were many problems best treated by classical Freudian depth psychology he found himself increasingly drawn towards those who were developing 'Existential Analysis'.

Before the War he had already started developing the techniques of Logotherapy and was holding official hospital posts in Vienna. After the war, Dr. Viktor Frankl became Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna medical school, Head of the Neurological department of the Poliklinik hospital of Vienna and President of the Austrian Medical Society of Psychotherapy — a man who received the respect of professional psychotherapists all over the world. It was a respect that was earned the hard way.

One of the objectives of both Religion and Philosophy is the fulfilment of the command:- 'Man — Know Thy Self'. To the Logotherapist, the answer to the question 'Who am I?' is found in posing and meditating upon two more questions: 'Where do I stand?' and 'What is expected of me?'. This demands three closely related sets of values:

When we are completely free, we have a potential for 'Creativity' in which we can choose our activities in the outer World and the manner in which we can transcend our Ego in service to others. When our freedom is partially restricted through physical infirmity or external pressures, we still retain a capacity for 'Experience', the ability to observe the things that are happening to us and around us, and to find meaning in life or to invest it with meaning through relationship with others.

Even when all freedom of action and experience is completely denied us and the agony of our suffering is at its most intense and humiliating, we still retain our ability to choose our 'Attitudes' in the face of our circumstances — one can still observe oneself — and this represents the ultimate freedom that no one can ever deny us, unless they completely rob us of our will through mind changing drugs. It is this ability which, in the last resort, establishes the Human as a potentially religious and self transcending Being.

The Problem of Dehumanisation

We talk about Psychoses and Spiritual Neuroses because they are an extreme manifestation of what affects us all in this stress-laden society and age.

We talk about the Concentration Camps and the atrocities of recent times because they are extreme manifestations of the dehumanisation process which is always endangering the World, and which George Orwell and other writers have so ably portrayed. But the fact that Man can retain his humanity, his capacity for compassion, courage and hope in the horrors of the Concentration Camp is an encouragement to all those who believe in the Spiritual Quality and Potential of Mankind and the ability to transcend one's circumstances.

Dr. Frankl is by no means unique in the way that he maintained his own dignity and that of his fellow prisoners under extreme temptation to despair. He is unique in that he had the background and the vision to use his experience to create a powerful system of psychiatry that will one day be as widely known as that of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung and that is in many ways far more appropriate to our times and needs.

In the terrible attempts to dehumanise Man in the Nazi death camps, Dr. Frankl saw for himself the ultimate result of that pagan and materialistic philosophy that reduces Man to a mere pawn of conditioning circumstances. This led him to make his great contribution to humanise psychiatry through Logotherapy.

Again and again he reminds us that the one freedom that can never be taken away from Mankind is our freedom to choose our attitudes in the face of our circumstances.

Dimensions of Fulfilment

**"If you can meet with triumph and disaster -
and treat those two imposters just the same".**

Thus wrote Rudyard Kipling in his much quoted poem "If".

Dr. Frankl, in the existential philosophy that underlies Logotherapy, carries this line of argument a stage further.

At the materialistic level, we tend to judge our lives in terms of Triumph and Disaster - Success and Failure. Let this Material dimension be represented by the horizontal member of a cross in which Failure is to the left and Success to the right. How many people are there, who are, in material terms, highly successful and yet their lives are empty to the point that they require psychiatric treatment and may even contemplate or turn to suicide. This can be illustrated by having the vertical member of the cross represent the Spiritual dimension. In this dimension, we see at the bottom - despair and at the top - fulfilment, which is not the same thing as achievement.

One can meet people who in material terms have failed and yet have fulfilled their destiny, and who in a strange way have influenced their immediate circle of kin and friends by bringing a quality of humanity, compassion and encouragement to them.

It is of course possible to be both materially successful and also to have fulfilled one's destiny spiritually, and happy is the person who is in that case. It is tragically possible to fail materially and to be sunk in apathy. But most tragic of all, it is possible to have fulfilled one's purpose and yet to despair because one cannot see one's own spiritual potential. And this is where the insights of Logotherapy can be of the greatest help.

Investing Life with Meaning

Logotherapy demands of one that we stop looking backwards and downwards into our hidden subconscious motivations and that we should look forwards and upwards into life to do all of, and more than, that which is demanded of us. More particularly, however, although 'Absolute Meaning' is something upon which we can speculate by Philosophy but can never truly know except by mystical experience, Logotherapy is concerned with the 'Unique Meaning' for the concrete situation facing this person at this moment in time. It suggests that although 'meaning' in the human dimension is not the same as 'meaning' in the Divine dimension, nevertheless part of the concept of Man

created in the Divine Image suggests that one of his faculties, if not indeed the most humanly important, is his capacity to invest life with meaning.

Our task through both creative action and creative meditation is to bring 'Logos' (meaning) into life. The therapeutic technique of Logotherapy is essentially to show each person how they can achieve this for their own circumstances.

In the battle to harmonise the conflicting elements of the personality one often needs human counsel and guidance from one who is more experienced and integrated. This may be sought from a person or from their writings. But both the genuine Guru and the true Logotherapist is a guide who acts as a catalyst to stimulate, and yet no more than stimulate, the unfolding and flowering of the person from within.

Dr. Frankl describes his experiences with patients who were on the verge of suicide and who had to be helped to find a reason for living: — patients who were crippled with phobias and who had to be helped to use their sense of humour to conquer their fears: — patients who were depressed and apathetic, and who had to be helped to find a new meaning in life itself. In these case histories everyone can find their own problems set out and analysed.

Of course, major neuroses and psychoses are a subject for the professional qualified Logotherapist, who may use pharmaco-therapy or analytical psychology where indicated in addition to logotherapeutic counselling. The most important feature of clinical Logotherapy is the personal dialogue between therapist and patient. These aspects of the work of the Logotherapist are beyond the scope of this article. But Logotherapy is a philosophy and a technique that in many cases people can apply to their own problems for themselves by using reflective meditation to observe the incidents that befall them in as detached a manner as possible, and to penetrate into their significance to invest them with meaning.

We can use for our inspiration the message of the Hindu Bhagavad Gita and similar parables from other Eastern and Western scriptures. We can study Viktor Frankl's own books on the subject, for his writings are geared to the needs of the 'Man in the street' who can apply them to his own needs. For all those engaged in the day to day battle of life, and who need to help themselves or their colleagues, the philosophy that underlies his spiritual healing techniques is of the utmost urgency and importance.

The words from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's prayer (page 2) summarise it all:

**Show me one thing, show it to me ever more
clearly and more deeply.
Show me what this, which is happening to me
here and now, means to me. What it demands
of me. What it is that you, Lord of the World,
are telling me by way of it.**

Suggestions for further reading

Man's Search for Meaning - an Introduction to Logotherapy.
by Viktor E. Frankl.
Published by Rider Books
ISBN 1-84413-239-0

Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning
by Viktor E. Frankl.
Published by Perseus Publishing
ISBN 0-7382-0354-8
(This was originally published under the title "The Unconscious God")

The Doctor and the Soul. From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy
By Viktor E. Frankl
Published by Souvenir Press
ISBN 0-285-63701-0

The Will to Meaning
By Viktor E. Frankl
Published by Meridian

This booklet was prepared to provide background
reading for a presentation at the
Warwick District Faith Forum Conference
on Health and Wellbeing

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Depression may be caused by trauma, and whether that be physical or spiritual, it may lead to the “Dark night of the Soul” where, in the extreme case, all feeling for any meaning to one’s life is lost and the will to live is threatened.

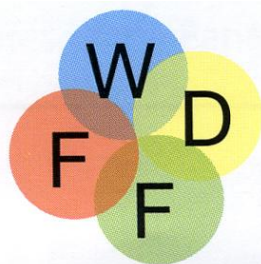
In the workshop, for which this paper is a background study, two events from the time of the 1939-45 World War were used to illustrate very successful approaches to restore the Will to Live.

Firstly the therapeutic treatment applied at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, pioneered in 1944 by Dr Ludwig Gutman to soldiers with horrific amputations and spinal injuries who had given up and were just waiting to die.

Secondly the system of Logotherapy developed by Dr Viktor Frankl in the Nazi Death Camps to give his fellow inmates a sense that there was a meaning to life and a determination to survive. After the War, he developed the philosophy and technique to help all those with spiritual depression and loss of faith.

The philosophy, on which Dr Frankl’s healing methods were based, might be summarised in his teaching:

**He who has a WHY to live for can bear with almost any HOW.
As long as Men and Women could find some personal meaning in life
and as long as they could find a reason for continuing to fight on
against apathy and despair –
whether it be for someone or something beyond themselves,
for just so long could they retain an amazing power of endurance**



Warwick District
Faiths Forum

www.warwickdistrictfaithsforum.org