The Unheard Cry for Meaning*

A literal translation of the term "logotherapy" is "therapy through meaning." Of course, it could also be translated as "healing through meaning," although this would bring in a religious overtone that is not necessarily present in logotherapy. In any case, logotherapy is a meaning-centered (psycho-) therapy.

The notion of a therapy through meaning is the very reverse of the traditional conceptualization of psychotherapy, which could rather be formulated as meaning through therapy. Indeed, if traditional psychotherapy squarely faces the issue of meaning and purpose at all—that is, if it takes meaning and purpose at face value rather than reducing them to mere fake values, as by deducing them from "defense mechanisms" or "reaction formations"†—it does so in the vein of a

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* Based on a lecture titled "Therapy Through Meaning," delivered at the University of California at Berkeley, February 13, 1977.

† To repeat an improvisation I made in the question-and-answer period following a lecture of mine, I said that, as to myself, I am not prepared to live for the sake of my reaction formations, nor to die for the sake of my defense mechanisms.
recommendation that you just have your Oedipal situation settled, just get rid of your castration fears, and you will be happy, you will actualize your self and your own potentialities, and you will become what you were meant to be. In other words, meaning will come to you by itself. Doesn’t it sound somewhat like, Seek ye first the kingdom of Freud and Skinner, and all these things will be added unto you?

But it did not work out that way. Rather, it turned out that, if a neurosis could be removed, more often than not when it was removed a vacuum was left. The patient was beautifully adjusted and functioning, but meaning was missing. The patient had not been taken as a human being, that is to say, a being in steady search of meaning; and this search for meaning, which is so distinctive of man, had not been taken seriously at its face value, but was seen as a mere rationalization of underlying unconscious psychodynamics. It had been overlooked or forgotten that if a person has found the meaning sought for, he is prepared to suffer, to offer sacrifices, even, if need be, to give his life for the sake of it. Contrariwise, if there is no meaning he is inclined to take his life, and he is prepared to do so even if all his needs, to all appearances, have been satisfied.

All this was brought home to me by the following report, which I received from a former student of mine: At an American university, 60 students who had attempted suicide were screened afterward, and 85 percent said the reason had been that “life seemed meaningless.” Most important, however, 93 percent of these students suffering from the apparent meaninglessness of life “were actively engaged socially, were performing well academically, and were on good terms with their family groups.” What we have here, I would say, is an unheard cry for meaning, and it certainly is not limited to only one university. Consider the staggering suicide rates among American college students, second only to traffic accidents as the most frequent cause of death. Suicide attempts might be fifteen times more frequent.

This happens in the midst of affluent societies and in the midst of welfare states! For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.*

On the other hand, we see people being happy under adverse, even dire, conditions. Let me quote from a letter I received from Cleve W., who wrote it when he was Number 049246 in an American state prison: “Here in prison . . . there are more and more blissful opportunities to serve and grow. I’m really happier now than I’ve ever been.” Notice: happier than ever—in prison!

* There is a parallel to this state of affairs on the ontogenetic, rather than the phylogenetic, level. As a former teaching assistant of mine at Harvard University could show, among graduates of that university who went on to lead quite successful, ostensibly happy lives, a huge percentage complained of a deep sense of futility, asking themselves what all their success had been for. Does this not suggest that what today is so often referred to as “midlife crisis” is basically a crisis of meaning?
Or let me take up a letter that I recently received from a Danish family doctor: “For half a year my very dear father was seriously ill with cancer. The last three months of his life he lived in my house—looked after by my beloved wife and myself. What I really want to tell you is that those three months were the most blessed time in the lives of my wife and me. Being a doctor and a nurse, of course, we had the resources to cope with everything, but I shall never in my life forget all the evenings when I read him sentences from your book. He knew for three months that his illness was fatal ... but he never gave a complaint. Until his last evening I kept telling him how happy we were that we could experience this close contact for those last weeks, and how poor we would have been if he had just died from a heart attack lasting a few seconds. Now I have not only read about these things, I have experienced them, so I can only hope that I shall be able to meet fate the same way my father did.” Again, someone is happy in the face of tragedy and in spite of suffering—but in view of meaning! Truly, there is a healing force in meaning.

Returning to the subject of therapy through meaning, does this imply that neurosis is caused in each and every case by a lack of meaning? No; the only thing I wanted to convey is the fact that if there is a lack of meaning, filling up the vacuum will result in a therapeutic effect, even if the neurosis was not caused by the vacuum! In this sense the great physician Paracelsus was right when he said that diseases originate in the realm of nature, but healing comes from the realm of the spirit. To put it in more technical terms, in the terminology of logotherapy, a neurosis is not necessar-
importance, even though the bulk of symptomatology is psychogenic.

Last but not least, we must note the fact that there are also sociogenic neuroses. This designation is particularly applicable to the mass neurosis of today, namely, the feeling of meaninglessness. Patients no longer complain of inferiority feelings or sexual frustration as they did in the age of Adler and Freud. Today they come to see us psychiatrists because of feelings of futility. The problem that brings them crowding into our clinics and offices now is existential frustration, their “existential vacuum”—a term I coined as long ago as 1955. I described the condition itself in publications that date back to 1946. Thus we logotherapists may say that we were aware of what was in store for the masses long before it became a widespread, worldwide phenomenon.

Albert Camus once contended “There is but one truly serious problem, and that is . . . judging whether life is or is not worth living . . . .”* I was reminded of this recently when I was given a report in which I see a confirmation of what I said before, namely, that the existential question of a meaning to life and the existential quest for a meaning to life are haunting people today more than their sexual problems. A high-school teacher invited his students to present him with any questions they might wish, and they were allowed to do so anonymously. The questions ranged from drug addiction and sex down to life on other planets, but the most frequent subject—one wouldn’t believe it!—was suicide.


But why should society be blamed for this state of affairs? Are we really justified in diagnosing a sociogenic neurosis? Consider today’s society: it gratifies and satisfies virtually every need—except for one, the need for meaning! One may say that some needs are even created by today’s society; yet the need for meaning remains unfulfilled—in the midst of and in spite of all our affluence.

The affluence of our society is reflected not only in material goods but also in leisure time. In this connection we should give a hearing to Jerry Mandel, who writes: “Technology has deprived us of the need to use our survival skills. Thus, we have developed a system of welfare which guarantees that one can survive without making any effort on one’s own behalf. When as few as 15 percent of the country’s labor force could in fact supply the needs of the entire population through the use of technology, then we have to face two problems: which 15 percent will work, and how will the others deal with the fact that they are dispensable, and the consequent loss of meaning? Perhaps logotherapy may have more to say to twenty-first century America than it has already said to twentieth-century America.”*

Today, to be sure, we also have to cope with unintentional leisure in the form of unemployment. Unemployment may cause a specific neurosis—“unemployment neurosis,” as I called it when I first described it in 1933. But again, upon closer investigation it turned out that the real cause was the confusion of one’s being unemployed with his being useless and, hence,

* Unpublished paper.
his life's being meaningless. Financial compensation, or for that matter social security, is not enough. Man does not live by welfare alone.

Take the typical welfare state of Austria, which is blessed with social security and is not plagued by unemployment. And yet in an interview our Chancellor Bruno Kreisky expressed his concern about the psychological conditions of the citizens, saying that what is most important and urgent today is to counteract the feeling that life is meaningless.

The feeling of meaninglessness, the existential vacuum, is increasing and spreading to the extent that, in truth, it may be called a mass neurosis. There is ample evidence in the form of publications in professional journals to indicate that it is not confined to capitalist states but can also be observed in Communist countries. It makes itself noticeable even in the Third World.*

This brings up the question of its etiology and symptoms. As to the former, let me offer you this brief explanation: Unlike other animals, man is not told by drives and instincts what he must do, and unlike man in former times, he is no longer told by traditions and traditional values what he should do. Now, lacking these directives, he sometimes does not know what he wants to do. The result? Either he does what other people do—which is conformism—or he does what other people want him to do—which is totalitarianism.

James C. Crumbaugh, Leonard T. Maholick, Elisabeth S. Lukas and Bernard Dansart have developed various logotherapeutic tests (PIL, SONG and Logo tests) to ascertain the degree of existential frustration in a given population, and thus it is also possible empirically to verify and validate my hypothesis on the origin of the existential vacuum. With reference to the role ascribed to the decay of traditions, I see some corroboration in Diana D. Young's dissertation at the University of California. As she could evidence by tests and statistical research, young people are suffering from the existential vacuum more than older generations. Since it is also the young in whom the wane of traditions is most pronounced, this finding suggests that the crumbling of traditions is a major factor accounting for the existential vacuum. It is also in accordance with a statement made by Karol Marshal of the East Side Mental Health Center in Bellevue, Washington, who "characterized the feeling among those in the pre-30 age group who come in for help as a sense of purposelessness."**

Speaking of the young generation brings to mind a lecture I was invited to give at a major American university, and its student sponsors' insistence that the lecture be titled "Is the New Generation Mad?" It is time, indeed, to ask whether people suffering from the feeling of meaninglessness are in fact neurotic, and if so, in which sense. In short, the question reads: Is people do—which is conformism—or he does what other people want him to do—which is totalitarianism.

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what we have called the mass neurosis of today really a neurosis?

Let me postpone answering and first briefly review the symptomatology of the existential vacuum, what I would like to call the mass neurotic triad, comprising depression, aggression and addiction.

Depression and its sequel, suicide, we have discussed. As to aggression, I refer the reader to the chapters on sports and on humanistic psychology. So we have here to elaborate only on the third aspect of the triad, in order to show that, alongside depression and aggression, addiction too is at least partially to be traced back to the feeling of meaninglessness.

Since I advanced this hypothesis numerous authors have supported it. Betty Lou Padelford devoted a dissertation to “The Influence of Ethnic Background, Sex, and Father Image upon the Relationship Between Drug Involvement and Purpose in Life” (United States International University, San Diego, January 1973). The data generated by her study of 416 students “failed to identify significant differences between the extent of drug involvement reported by students having a weak father image as opposed to students having a strong father image.” However, a significant relationship between drug involvement and purpose in life was found beyond reasonable doubt \( r = -0.23; p < .001 \). The mean drug-involvement index for students with low purpose in life (8.90) was found to differ significantly from the mean drug-involvement index for students with high purpose in life (4.25).

Dr. Padelford also reviews the literature in the field which, like her own research, is favorable to my existential vacuum hypothesis. Nowlis addressed the question of why students were attracted to drugs and found that one reason often given was “the desire to find meaning in life.” A survey of 455 students in the San Diego area, conducted by Judd et al. for the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, found that users of both marijuana and hallucinogens indicated they were bothered by and had suffered over the lack of meaning of life more than had nonusers. Another study, conducted by Mirin et al. found that heavy drug use was correlated with a search for meaningful experience and diminished goal-directed activity. Linn surveyed 700 undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, in 1968 and reported that marijuana users, compared with nonusers, were more concerned about the meaning of life. Krippner et al. theorize that drug use may be a form of self-administered psychotherapy for people with existential problems, citing a 100-percent-positive response to “Have things seemed meaningless to you?” Shean and Fechtmann found that students who had smoked marijuana regularly over a six-month period scored significantly lower \( p < .001 \) on Crumbaugh’s Purpose-in-Life (PIL) Test than did the nonusers.

Parallel findings have been published with regard to the addiction to alcohol. Annemarie von Forstmeyer has shown in a dissertation that 18 out of 20 alcoholics looked upon their existence as meaningless and without purpose (United States International University, 1970). Accordingly, logotherapeutically oriented techniques have proved superior to other forms of therapy. When James C. Crumbaugh measured existential vacuum to compare the outcome of group logotherapy with results achieved by an alcoholic treatment unit
and a marathon therapy program, “only logotherapy showed a statistically significant improvement.”*

That logotherapy equally lends itself to the treatment of drug addiction has been shown by Alvin R. Fraiser at the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Center at Norco, California. Since 1966 he has used logotherapy in working with narcotic addicts and as a result, he says, “I have become the only counselor in the history of the institution to have three consecutive years of the highest success rate (success meaning that the addict is not returned to the institution within one year after release). My approach to dealing with the addict has resulted in a three-year 40 percent success rate as compared to an institutional average of about 11 percent (using the established approach).”

It goes without saying that, in addition to the three covert symptoms of the existential vacuum subsumed in the mass neurotic triad, also other symptoms occur, be it on a covert or an overt level. To come back to the question of whether or not the feeling of meaninglessness itself constitutes mental illness, Sigmund Freud, it is true, once wrote in a letter to Princess Bonaparte: “The moment one inquires about the sense or value of life, one is sick.” But I think that, rather than exhibiting mental illness, someone worrying about the meaning of life is proving his humanness. One need not be a neurotic to be concerned with the quest for a meaning to life, but one does need to be a truly human being. After all, as I have pointed out, the search for meaning is a distinctive characteristic of being human. No other animal has ever cared whether or not there is a meaning to life, not even Konrad Lorenz’ grey geese. But man does.

**The Will to Meaning**

Man is always reaching out for meaning, always setting out on his search for meaning; in other words, what I call the “will to meaning”** is even to be regarded as “man’s primary concern,” to quote from Abraham Maslow’s comments on a paper of mine.†

It is precisely this will to meaning that remains unfulfilled by today’s society—and disregarded by today’s psychology. Current motivation theories see man as a being who is either reacting to stimuli or abreacting his impulses. They do not consider that actually, rather than reacting or abreacting, man is responding—responding to questions that life is asking him, and in that way fulfilling the meanings that life is offering.

One might argue that this is faith, not fact. Indeed, since I coined, in 1938, the term “height psychology” in order to supplement (rather than supplant) what is called “depth psychology” (that is, psychodynamically oriented psychology) I have again and again been accused of overestimating man, putting him on too high a pedestal. Let me here repeat an illustration that

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has often shown to be didactically helpful. In aviation there is a business called “crabbing.” Say there is a crosswind from the north and the airport where I wish to land lies due east. If I fly east I will miss my destination because my plane will have drifted to the southeast. In order to reach my destination I must compensate for this drift by crabbing, in this case by heading my plane in a direction to the north of where I want to land. It is similar with man: he too ends at a point lower than he might have unless he is seen on a higher level that includes his higher aspirations.

If we are to bring out the human potential at its best, we must first believe in its existence and presence. Otherwise man will “drift,” he will deteriorate, for there is a human potential at its worst as well. We must not let our belief in the potential humanness of man blind us to the fact that humane humans are and probably always will be a minority. Yet it is this very fact that challenges each of us to join the minority: things are bad, but unless we do our best to improve them, everything will become worse.

Thus, rather than dismissing the concept of a will to meaning as wishful thinking, one could more justifiably conceive of it as a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is something to Anatole Broyard’s comment, “If ‘shrink’ is the slang term for the Freudian analyst, then the logotherapist ought to be called ‘stretch.’”* In fact, logotherapy expands not only the concept of man, by including his higher aspirations, but also the visual field of the patient as to potentialities to feed and nurture his will to meaning. By the same token, logotherapy immunizes the patient against the dehumanizing, mechanistic concept of man on which many a “shrink” is sold—in a word, it makes the patient “shrink-resistant.”

The argument that one should not think too highly of man presupposes that it is dangerous to overrate him. But it is much more dangerous to underrate him, as has been pointed out by Goethe. Man, particularly the younger generation, may be corrupted by being underrated. Conversely, if I am cognizant of the higher aspirations of man—such as his will to meaning—I am also able to muster and mobilize them.

The will to meaning is not only a matter of faith but also a fact. Since I introduced the concept in 1949, it has been empirically corroborated and validated by several authors, using tests and statistics. The Purpose-in-Life (PIL) Test* devised by James C. Crumbaugh and Leonard T. Maholik, and Elisabeth S. Lukas’s Logo-Test have been administered to thousands of subjects, and the computerized data leave no doubt that the will to meaning is real.

Similarly, research conducted by S. Kratochvil and I. Planova of the Department of Psychology of the University of Brno, Czechoslovakia produced evidence that “the will to meaning is really a specific need not reducible to other needs, and is in greater or smaller degree present in all human beings.” The authors continue: “The relevance of the frustration of this need was documented also by case material, concerning neurotic and depressive patients. In some cases the frustration of the will to meaning had a

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* Psychometric Affiliates, P.O. Box 3167, Munster, Indiana 46321.
relevant role as an etiological factor in the origin of the neurosis or of the suicidal attempt.”

One might also consider the result of a survey published by the American Council on Education: among 171,509 students screened, the highest goal—held by 68.1 percent—was “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.”* Another survey, of 7,948 students at forty-eight colleges, was conducted by Johns Hopkins University under the sponsorship of the National Institute of Mental Health. Of these, only 16 percent said their first goal was “making a lot of money,” whereas 78 percent checked “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.” † Parallel findings were collected by the University of Michigan: 1,533 working people were asked to rank various aspects of work in order of importance, and “good pay” came in a distant fifth. Small wonder that Joseph Katz of the State University of New York, reviewing some recent opinion polls, said that “the next wave of personnel entering industry will be interested in careers with meaning, not money.” ‡

Let us return for a moment to the research initiated by the National Institute of Mental Health. Seventy-eight percent of the students screened said their first goal was finding meaning to life—seventy-eight percent, which, as it happens, is exactly the percentage of Polish youngsters who regarded as their highest purpose in life something wholly different, namely, “to improve their living standard” (Kurier, August 8, 1973). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs appears to apply here: first one must achieve a satisfactory standard of living and only then may he approach the task of finding a purpose and meaning in life, as the American students put it. The question is whether or not, if one wants to establish a good life, he has only to settle the socioeconomic situation (so that he can afford a psychoanalyst in order to settle the psychodynamic situation). I believe not. It goes without saying that someone who is ill wishes to become healthy, so health will seem to constitute his supreme goal in life. But in fact health is no more than a means to an end, a precondition for attaining whatever might be considered the real meaning in a given instance. In such a case it is mandatory first to inquire what is the end that stands behind the means. An appropriate method for such an inquiry may well be some sort of Socratic dialogue.

Maslow’s motivation theory does not suffice here, for what is needed is not so much the distinction between higher and lower needs, but rather an answer to the question of whether individual goals are mere means, or meanings. In everyday life we are fully aware of this difference. If we were not, we wouldn’t laugh at a comic strip that shows Snoopy complaining of a feeling of meaninglessness and emptiness—until Charlie Brown comes in with a bowl full of dog food, and Snoopy exclaims, “Ah Meaning!!” What makes us laugh is precisely the confusion of means and meaning: while food is certainly a necessary condition for survival, it is no sufficient condition to endow one’s life with meaning and thus relieve the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness.

Maslow’s distinction between higher and lower

† Los Angeles Times, February 12, 1971.
needs does not take into account that when lower needs are not satisfied, a higher need, such as the will to meaning, may become most urgent. Just consider such situations as are met in death camps, or simply on deathbeds: who would deny that in such circumstances the thirst for meaning, even ultimate meaning, breaks through irresistibly?

As to deathbeds, this goes without saying. Less obvious might be what happened in the ghetto of Theresienstadt: A transport with about 1,000 young people was scheduled to leave the next morning. When the morning came, it turned out that over night the ghetto library had been burglarized. Each of the youngsters—who were doomed to death in the concentration camp of Auschwitz—had provided himself with a couple of books by his favorite poet or novelist or scientist, and had hidden the books in his rucksack. Who now would like to persuade me that Bertold Brecht was right when he proclaimed, in his Dreigroschenoper, “First comes food and second, morals” (Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral)?

Yet as we have seen, not only extremity, but also affluence can trigger man’s search for meaning—or as the case may be, it can frustrate his will to meaning. This holds for affluence in general and particularly for affluence in the form of leisure time. As both the satisfaction and the frustration of lower needs may challenge man to search for meaning, it follows that the need for meaning is independent of other needs. Hence, it can neither be reduced to them, nor deduced from them.

The will to meaning is not only a true manifestation of man’s humanness, but also—as has been substantiated by Theodore A. Kotchen—a reliable criterion of mental health. This hypothesis is supported by James C. Crumbaugh, Sister Mary Raphael and Raymond R. Shrader, who measured the will to meaning and obtained the highest scores among well-motivated and successful professional and business populations. Conversely, lack of meaning and purpose is indicative of emotional maladjustment, as has been empirically evidenced by Elisabeth S. Lukas. To quote Albert Einstein, “The man who regards his life as meaningless is not merely unhappy but hardly fit for life.” This is not only a matter of success and happiness, but also of survival. In the terminology of modern psychology, the will to meaning has “survival value.” This was the lesson I had to learn in three years spent in Auschwitz and Dachau: ceteris paribus (other things being equal), those most apt to survive the camps were those oriented toward the future—toward a task, or a person, waiting for them in the future, toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future.*

* It is true that if there was anything to uphold man in such an extreme situation as Auschwitz and Dachau, it was the awareness that life has a meaning to be fulfilled, albeit in the future. But meaning and purpose were only a necessary condition of survival, not a sufficient condition. Millions had to die in spite of their vision of meaning and purpose. Their belief could not save their lives, but it did enable them to meet death with heads held high. I therefore deemed it appropriate to pay tribute to them on the occasion of the inauguration of the Frankl Library and Memorabilia at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, when I presented the custodian with a donation: a sample of soil and ashes I had brought with me from Auschwitz. “It is to commemorate,” I said, “those who lived there as heroes and died there as martyrs. Uncounted examples of such heroism and martyrdom bear witness to the
The same conclusion has since been reached by other authors of books on concentration camps, and also by psychiatric investigations concerning Japanese, North Korean and North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps. When I once had as students three American officers who had served long terms—up to seven years—in North Vietnamese POW camps, they too had found that the prisoners who felt there was something or someone waiting for them were the ones most likely to survive. The message—the legacy—is that survival depended on the direction to a "what for," or a "whom for." In a word, existence was dependent on "self-transcendence," a concept that I introduced into logotherapy as early as 1949. I thereby understand the primordial anthropological fact that being human is being always directed, and pointing, to something or someone other than oneself: to a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love. Only to the extent that someone is living out this self-transcendence of human existence, is he truly human or does he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self's actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward. Consider the eye, an analogy I am fond of invoking. When, apart from looking in a mirror, does the eye see anything of itself? An eye with a cataract may see something like a cloud, which is its uniquely human potential to find, and fulfill, meaning even 'in extremis' and 'in ultimum'—in an extreme life situation such as Auschwitz and even in the face of one's death in a gas chamber. May from unimaginable suffering spring forth a growing awareness of life's unconditional meaningfulness."

The Unheard Cry for Meaning

cataract; an eye with glaucoma may see its glaucoma as a rainbow halo around the lights. A healthy eye sees nothing of itself—it is self-transcendent.

What is called self-actualization is, and must remain, the unintended effect of self-transcendence; it is ruinous and self-defeating to make it the target of intention. And what is true of self-actualization also holds for identity and happiness. It is the very "pursuit of happiness" that obviates happiness. The more we make it a target, the more widely we miss. This is most conspicuous when it comes to sexual happiness, to sexual "pleasure-seeking." Sexual neuroses are the result. The more a male patient wishes to demonstrate his potency, the more surely he is doomed to failure. The more a female patient wishes to demonstrate to herself that she is capable of orgasm, the more likely she is to wind up with frigidity. Here, let me just refer you to the chapter that deals explicitly with the clinical applications of logotherapy and its techniques ("Paradoxical Intention and Dereflexion"), where the subject is elaborated, with pertinent case material to illustrate the point.

In a well-known experiment, reported by Carolyn Wood Sherif, group aggressions were built up in a group of young people. However, once they were united in the common task of dragging a carriage out of the mud, they simply "forgot" to live out their aggressions. Their will to meaning, one may say, had taken over! And I think that peace research, rather than confining itself to the rehash of clichés about aggressive potentials and the like, should zero in on the will to meaning, and take into account that what is true of individual men holds equally for mankind. Wouldn't
the survival of humanity to be contingent on whether or not men arrive at a common denominator of meaning? Shouldn’t it be contingent on whether or not people, and peoples, find a common meaning, become united in a common will to a common meaning?

I do not have the answer. I would be content if I knew that I asked the right question. Yet it would seem that in the final analysis there is hope for planetary survival only if nations can be united in confronting and committing themselves to a common task.

So far, one may say only that we are under way. But man’s search for meaning—obviously—is a worldwide phenomenon of which our generation is witness, and why shouldn’t this common search for meaning also lead up to a common goal and purpose?

A Meaning to Life

So there is a will to meaning in man; but is there also a meaning to life? In other words, having dealt with the motivational-theoretical aspect of logotherapy, we now turn to “logo-theory”—i.e., logotherapy’s theory of meaning. And to begin with, let us ask ourselves whether a logotherapist can impart meaning. I would say that, in the first place, he should see to it that meaning not be taken away—because this is precisely what is being done by reductionism. In the following chapters, as well as in other books of mine, numerous examples are cited.

Let me here just recall an incident that happened to me when I was thirteen years old. Once my science teacher walked up and down between the rows and taught the class that, in the final analysis, life was nothing but a combustion process, an oxidation process. I jumped up and, without asking permission as was customary at that time, threw him the question, “What meaning, then, does life have?” Of course, he could not answer, because he was a reductionist.

The question is, how do we help people in despair over the apparent meaninglessness of life. I said at the outset that values are disappearing because they are transmitted by traditions and we are facing a decay of traditions. Even so, I think it is still possible to find meanings. Reality presents itself always in the form of a specific concrete situation, and since each life situation is unique, it follows that also the meaning of a situation must be unique. Therefore it would not even be possible for meanings to be transmitted through traditions. Only values—which might be defined as universal meanings—can be affected by the decay of traditions.

One may say that instincts are transmitted through the genes, and values are transmitted through traditions, but that meanings, being unique, are a matter of personal discovery. They must be sought and found by oneself, and such discovery of unique meanings, as we now understand, will be possible even if all universal values disappear totally. To put it succinctly: the values are dead—long live the meanings.

But how is this discovery of meaning really enacted? It goes to the credit of James C. Crumbaugh to have pointed out that the business of finding meanings boils down to a process of Gestalt perception. I
myself have come to see a difference, for in a Gestalt perception in the traditional sense of the term we are perceiving a figure against a background; in finding meaning, however, we are perceiving a possibility embedded in reality. Specifically, this is a possibility to do something about a situation confronting us, to change a reality, if need be. Since each situation is unique, with a meaning that is also necessarily unique, it now follows that the “possibility to do something about a situation” is unique also insofar as it is transitory. It has a “kairos” quality, which means that unless we use the opportunity to fulfill the meaning inherent and dormant in a situation, it will pass and be gone forever.

Yet it is only the possibilities—the opportunities to do something about reality—that are transitory. Once we have actualized the possibility offered by a situation, once we have fulfilled the meaning a situation holds, we have converted that possibility into a reality, and we have done so once and forever! Then it is no longer assailable by transitoriness. We have, as it were, rescued it into the past. Nothing and nobody can deprive and rob us of what we have safely delivered and deposited in the past. In the past, nothing is irrevocably and irreconcilably lost, but everything is permanently stored. Usually, to be sure, people see only the stubblefield of transitoriness—they do not see the full granaries into which they have brought in the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the works created, the loves loved, the sufferings courageously gone through. In this sense we may understand what has been said of man, in Job: that he comes to his grave “like a shock of corn cometh in in his season.”

As meanings are unique, they are ever changing. But they are never missing. Life is never lacking a meaning. To be sure, this is only understandable if we recognize that there is potential meaning to be found even beyond work and love. Certainly we are used to discovering meaning in creating a work or doing a deed, or in experiencing something or encountering someone. But we must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation as its helpless victim, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then counts and matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a tragedy into a personal triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease, say, an inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves.

This is brought home most beautifully by the words of Yehuda Bacon, an Israeli sculptor who was imprisoned in Auschwitz when he was a young boy and after the war wrote a paper from which I would like to quote a passage: “As a boy I thought: ‘I will tell them what I saw, in the hope that people will change for the better.’ But people didn’t change and didn’t even want to know. It was much later that I really understood the meaning of suffering. It can have a meaning if it changes oneself for the better.” He finally recognized the meaning of his suffering: he changed himself.

Changing oneself often means rising above oneself, growing beyond oneself. Nowhere will you find a more
gripping illustration than in Leo Tolstoy’s novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich.* May I also draw your attention to the title of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s recent book, *Death, the Final Stage of Growth,* a title that in this context is highly significant.

What I wanted to convey to you is the secret of life’s unconditional meaningfulness, which owes to the third possibility of finding meaning in life, the possibility of investing meaning even in suffering and death. Seen in this light, it is fitting that in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* a statement is to be found to the effect that “unconditional faith in an unconditional meaning is Dr. Frankl’s message.” However, I think it is more than “faith.” It is true, my conviction of that life is unconditionally meaningful began as an intuition. Small wonder: at that time I was a high school student. But since then the same conclusion has been reached on strictly empirical grounds. Let me just mention the names of Brown, Casciani, Crumbaugh, Dansart, Durlak, Kratochvil, Lukas, Lunceford, Mason, Meier, Murphy, Planova, Popielski, Richmond, Roberts, Ruch, Sallee, Smith, Yarnell and Young. These authors have evidenced by tests and statistics that in fact meaning is available to each and every person—regardless of sex or age, IQ or educational background, environment or character structure, or—last but not least—whether or not he is religious, and if he is, the denomination to which he may belong.

None of this alters the fact that conditions may vary in the degree to which they make it easier or more difficult for an individual to find a meaning in his life or to fulfill the meaning of a given situation. Just consider the different societies and the different extents to which they promote or inhibit meaning fulfillment. In principle, nonetheless, the fact remains that meaning is available under any conditions, even the worst conceivable ones.

To be sure, a logotherapist cannot tell a patient what the meaning is, but he at least can show that there is a meaning in life, that it is available to everyone and, even more, that life retains its meaning under any conditions. It remains meaningful literally up to its last moment, up to one’s last breath.

The trichotomy of meaning potentials I have presented exists in a hierarchy—and, remarkably enough, both the meanings and their hierarchy have been empirically corroborated by Elisabeth S. Lukas. When data obtained by tests and statistics were submitted to factorial analysis, evidence emerged in favor of my assumption that the meaning found in suffering belongs to a different dimension than the meanings found in work and love—or, to stick to the factorial-analytical terminology, it is located on an orthogonal axis.

*In the chapter “Symptom or Therapy?” I tell of addressing the prisoners of San Quentin and, in this setting, quoting from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich.*
Usually, man is seen as the *homo sapiens*, the clever man who has know-how, who knows how to be a success, how to be a successful businessman or a successful playboy, that is, how to be successful in making money or in making love. The *homo sapiens* moves between the positive extreme of success and its negative counterpart, failure.

It is different with what I call the *homo patiens,* the suffering man, the man who knows how to suffer, how to mold even his sufferings into a human achievement. The *homo patiens* moves on an axis perpendicular to the success/failure axis of the *homo sapiens*. He moves on an axis which extends between the poles of fulfillment and despair. By fulfillment we understand fulfillment of one's self through the fulfillment of meaning, and by despair, despair over the apparent meaninglessness of one's life.

Only if we recognize that there are two different dimensions† involved is it possible to understand how on one hand we can meet people who in spite of success are caught in despair—just remember the Idaho students who attempted suicide in spite of their affluence—while on the other hand we come across people who in spite of failure have arrived at a sense of fulfillment and even happiness, because they have found meaning even in suffering. Just remember the

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† Really the dimension of the *homo patiens* is not only different from, but also superior to the dimension of the *homo sapiens*. It is a higher dimension, for by changing ourselves (if we can no longer change our fate), by rising above and growing beyond ourselves, we exercise the most creative of all human potentials.

two letters from which I quoted at the beginning. In conclusion, let me quote from two more letters I received, one from Frank E., who was Number 020640 in an American state prison: “I have found true meaning in my existence even here, in prison. I find purpose in my life, and this time I have left is just a short wait for the opportunity to do better, and to do more.” And from another prisoner, Number 552022:

Dear Dr. Frankl,

During the past several months a group of inmates have been sharing your books and your tapes. Yes, one of the greatest meanings we can be privileged to experience is suffering. I have just begun to live, and what a glorious feeling it is. I am constantly humbled by the tears of my brothers in our group when they can see that they are even now achieving meanings they never thought possible. The changes are truly miraculous. Lives which heretofore have been hopeless and helpless now have meaning. Here in Florida's maximum security prison, some 500 yards from the electric chair, we are actualizing our dreams. It is near Christmas, but logotherapy was my Easter Morning. Out of the Calvary of Auschwitz has come our Easter Sunrise. From the barbed wire and chimney of Auschwitz rises the sun... My, what a new day must be in store.

Sincerely, Greg B.

I thank Greg for this letter, which I treasure because it is more than just a letter—I rather see therein a *document humain*, a document of humanness.