

## LOGOTHERAPY: INFUSING COUNSELOR EDUCATION WITH A MEANINGFUL SPIRIT

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### ABSTRACT

Our world is increasingly complex. Technological advances in modern weaponry, instant communication systems, and environmental, political, and theological instability have all resulted in vicarious suffering on a global scale. Suffering is no longer confined to the boundaries of the somatic and psychic dimensions of human existence. Instead, traumatic reverberations are shaking humans to the core of who they are as meaning-centered persons. Counselors of the future must be educated to address clients' issues related not only the soma and psyche, but the noös as well. Logotherapy is the only theoretical approach that places emphasis on all three dimensions. Thus, this paper serves as a call for meaningful change in counselor education and identifies key Logotherapy concepts on which to base counselor education programs.

Today's clients bring problems rarely confined to the mind and body. Rather, contemporary problems are global in nature and strike at the spirit of the person. These global and local issues have whittled away at our cognitions, dulled our emotions, and shaped our behaviors. The problems of today become "who we are" instead of "what we have created." The self-created, perceived, and perpetuated global and local problems are disrupting our perceptions of life as a meaningful adventure, our acceptance of freedom and responsibility, and our core as spiritual beings.

To meet the needs of the contemporary casualties of life, we need a paradigm shift in how we educate counselors to meet the needs of clients. We urgently need an approach to counseling, to counselor education, and to life that addresses the problems that are found today and those which could be conceived of in the future. I believe Logotherapy is such an approach.

Frankl (1992) captured the essence of human existence when he contended that life does not promise us happiness but rather the opportunity to find meaning. In fact, he argued that

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life... this meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (p. 105)

Examples of human suffering and the importance of finding meaning in life are found in the literature. Studies related to combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic

stress disorder (Southwick, Gilmartin, Mcdonough, & Morrissey, 2006), cancer patients/survivors (Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000), abstinent Alcoholics Anonymous members (Kairouz & Dube, 2000), and HIV patients (Vaughan & Kinnier, 1996) all have elucidated the importance of finding meaning and purpose in life during times of suffering.

### **Logotherapy: Key concepts for counselor education integration**

Logotherapy offers counselors and counselor educators an approach that is especially relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

#### **The three-dimensional man**

Logotherapy is the only major theoretical approach that places primary emphasis on the unity of psychological (psychical), physical (somatic), and spiritual (noëtic) dimensions of man (Fabry, 1968; Frankl, 2000). Frankl referred to the psyche and soma as a “psychophysical unity.” These two dimensions represent “what we have,” but it is the noös that reflects “who we are.” The noös is uniquely human. It is our spirit. It is who we are with or without a “religious” affiliation or disposition.

While the problems confronting humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a psychophysical component which must be addressed, it is the noetic dimension that is being silently eroded and is in need of greatest attention. Conceptualizing and treatment planning with a client without considering his or her spiritual core is like planning a vacation in the family car without checking the oil. Perhaps you’ll arrive at your destination without incident, but it is simply a matter of time before the engine breaks down. Our thoughts and feelings serve as a lubricant to prevent the problems of life from sticking to who we are—a spiritual creation. The problems that stick to the three dimensions of man are converted into perceptions of suffering.

#### **The Tragic Triad: pain, guilt, and death**

Frankl noted that suffering results when people ask “why” questions. That is, why did this or that happen to me? Why is life so unfair? Why has God left me? Why do my kids hate me? Asking this type of question inevitably leads to suffering because the answer is unclear. Consequently, the argument could be made that humans create their own opportunities for suffering. Whether the suffering is somatic and the consequence of drinking polluted water, psychical suffering attributed to the anxieties of nuclear annihilation, or noetic suffering that occurs when contemplating the end of life, all are examples of suffering that is created from within the individual. Life simply asks the questions. We provide the response.

Humans are partial to avoiding the experience of suffering and frequently label suffering a “tragedy.” We speak of the tragedy of the Holocaust and the suffering endured by those who survived the experience. Having survived the concentration camps himself, Frankl was in a unique position to speak of human suffering. The experiences of pain, guilt, and death—each unavoidable manifestations of suffering—he termed the “Tragic Triad” (Frankl, 2000; 1988). Graber (2004) referred to the Tragic Triad as parts of the human experience. She noted that clients in therapy who are experiencing despondency

are likely in the Tragic Triad, feeling overwhelmed and victims of fate. Logotherapy provides suggestions for overcoming and rising above the inescapable sufferings that inevitably come with life and the Tragic Triad.

### **Love: the ultimate and highest goal**

It is difficult to imagine a more hopeless situation than that experienced by Frankl and others in the concentration camps. The suffering endured by the psyche, soma, and noös on a moment-by-moment basis must have been exponential. In an environment in which pain, guilt, and death were always present, Frankl (1992) acknowledged that “love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which one can aspire” (p. 49). Frankl tenderly expanded on this concept while reflecting on his wife during captivity. Not knowing if she was alive or dead, he said:

Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understand how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. (p. 49)

Many have found Frankl’s words alone to be therapeutic and restorative. While the global challenges presented on a daily basis in our contemporary world are disturbing, most of us will never face the magnitude of suffering endured by Frankl and others in the concentration camps. Through his touching words we are vicariously given an opportunity to confront our own perceptions of suffering. We can silently superimpose our own perceptions of suffering over those of a person who in all likelihood endured greater hardships than we could ever imagine. With a clearer and more relative perspective than possessed prior to reflecting on Frankl’s words, we can better appreciate our own opportunities to see love as the ultimate and highest goal.

### **The will to meaning**

Most counselor education programs will at some point discuss the theories of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. These two individuals are obviously among the giants in counseling and psychotherapy and their respective contributions to the field are indeed great. As a junior contemporary of Freud and Adler, Frankl (1988) fully acknowledged the contributions of the giants to his own work, but used the analogy of a little person standing on the shoulders of a giant who can see farther. That is, Freud’s “will to pleasure” is confined to the “basement” of human existence and Adler’s “will to power” resides in the psyche. It is the “will to meaning” that sets Frankl’s approach above the others and allowed him to see farther. But what did his vision allow us to see?

The will to meaning acts as a bridge that connects the soma and psyche to the noös. The bridge leads us up and over the situational problems of life in the direction of an ultimate, and absolutely unique, meaning that awaits our discovery. With each step, life is asking us questions and we sense its “demand quality” (Graber, 2004). It is a demand quality that lovingly pulls us forward from within... one step to the next. Each

question has only one right answer, and “there is only one meaning to each situation, and this is its true meaning” (Frankl, 1988, p. 61). Many of the questions are easy. The base-level questions are set intentionally low for all to experience the “thrill of victory” as we skip across the bridge. But life is the true high-stakes test. The questions become progressively more difficult and at times we struggle to find the correct answer. We know it is there, but the answer lies on the tip of our tongue, temporarily lost in the psychical fog bank and just beyond our reach. In this test, however, there are no shortcuts and no crib notes. The human spirit knows the correct response from each individual and patiently waits for the fog to clear. The unique meanings, the answers to life’s questions, are “discovered but not invented... found rather than given” (Frankl, 1988, pp. 60-61).

The question is how does one follow the bridge which leads to the discovery of ultimate meaning in life? Logotherapy teaches that the most fundamental way of discovering meaning in any present moment is through the awareness of values. These values may be experiential, creative, or attitudinal in nature. Each of the values serves as a key uniquely designed to unlock the mysteries of the meaning of the moment. Life is to be lived as an adventure!

### *Experiential Values*

Experiential values are the pro bono gifts from life (God and others). They are given to us free of charge. In order to use experiences as a means of finding meaning, one simply needs to become aware and be grateful for the experience. Common gifts of an experiential nature include such things as the first ray of sunshine as it reflects off the still waters of a lake; the smell of rain during a long run; a Tiger Butterfly landing gently on a sunflower; a kiss on the forehead and a cup of soup when one is suffering from the flu. Each of these examples, and an infinite number of others that are individually unique, if simply brought to conscious awareness, can answer the question whether life has inherent meaning.

### *Creative Values*

Creative values are our returns of favor to the universe. They are actions or activities that we generate in order to be a blessing to others. Stopping to change a flat tire for someone, cooking dinner for a loved one (especially if we don’t particularly enjoy cooking), taking extra time with a struggling student, taking the family dog on vacation when it is easier to kennel the animal—these are all examples of doing something for the universe that makes it better. Becoming aware that your actions make a meaningful difference in the life of another can lead to discovering your own meaning of the moment. A particularly good example of invoking creative values during times of suffering comes from Frankl himself. Frankl (1992) shares with his readers a final speech he gave to his fellow prisoners. He began by quoting Nietzsche ‘That which does not kill me makes me stronger.’ He continued:

I had no intention of losing hope and giving up. For no man knew what the future would bring, much less the next hour. I asked them to face up to the seriousness of our position. They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and meaning. I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult

hours—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God—and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die. (p. 90–91)

Frankl acknowledged that his speech was successful, and his words are memorable, but for me, his final comment on this speech was most powerful. He said, “But I have to confess here that only too rarely had I the inner strength to make contact with my companions in suffering and that I must have missed many opportunities for doing so” (p. 91). This is a golden key that must be remembered by each of life’s sojourners. When we are presented an opportunity to do something creative for another, we must recognize this as one of life’s challenging questions. That is, “what are you going to do when you become aware that another life sojourner needs assistance?” The response we provide, when we have the means to respond, will determine whether the question was answered correctly or incorrectly.

If we consider life’s questions in hierarchical order, we find the base-level question in our EXPERIENTIAL values. For example:

GOD/Life: “Did you notice that beautiful cloud just on the horizon?”

SELF: “Yes!”

GOD/Life: “Was it meaningful?”

SELF: “Absolutely!”

GOD/Life: “Well done. That is the correct response.”

Questions of a CREATIVE nature become somewhat more challenging and may be seen in the following dialogue between self and God/Life:

SELF: “I’m really in a hurry today.”

GOD/Life: “Did you see that person crying as you entered the building?”

SELF: “Yes, but I’m late to class! I don’t have time for social work!”

GOD/Life: “Is that your ‘final’ answer?”

SELF: “Hmmm... I think I’ll go see if I can be of assistance.”

GOD/Life: “Good answer.”

### *Attitudinal Values*

The ceiling-level questions are ATTITUDINAL in nature and represent the toughest questions known to humanity. Attitudinal values are to man as long hair is to Samson and spinach is to Popeye. We only employ attitudinal values to find meaning in life when we are faced with an unalterable fate. We typically conceptualize “fate” as the negative events that happen in life. They are the villains and the Brutuses whose sole purpose is to kick sand in our face. They are the situations that “life happens” bumper stickers are made of. Those young men and women returning from the war, missing somatic pieces, with psyches blown, yet noetically intact, are facing a psychophysical reality that is unalterable. The “medicine chest” (Frankl, 1986) they require is in their spirit—the fully intact aspect of who we are that can never be damaged or destroyed. The change of attitude, from one of “why did this happen to me?” to “what is life asking of me given my present condition?” places the next footprint on the bridge that leads to a meaningful destiny. No longer is the wounded soldier a victim of the war... of fate. He or she is now a victor and in charge of her destiny. An example of the Socratic dialogue between God and a returned WARRIOR may resemble the following:

GOD/Life: “Wake-up.... Are you aware the war has taken your left leg and your right arm?”

WARRIOR: “I am aware that I am alive. I have my right leg and my left arm. I can see my future and climbing mountains is still a part of it. I am loved and I am lovable. The war did not kill my spirit... simply a couple pieces of what I had, but not who I am.”

GOD/Life: “You have correctly answered MY most challenging question. You have found love and meaning in spite of your inescapable suffering. I AM most pleased.”

### **Freedom, responsibility and ultimate meaning**

Although life possesses a demand quality, and posed questions will always be present, there is no cosmic mandate that says we must answer the questions. We are given the right to live our lives as a spectator in the audience as the game of life is played out on the stage before us. We have the freedom to choose whether we want to watch the game, take a nap as a somnambulist, or walk away from the game completely. However, choosing to ignore life’s questions comes with a heavy responsibility. The responsibility is to shoulder the load of fate and one’s own incessant questions of why life is so unfair. “Why has this happened to me?” “Where is God when He is needed?” “What am I supposed to do NOW?” These questions posed to life, rather than responding to the questions posed by life, materialize a bridge that leads to the “existential vacuum” (Graber, 2004), the place where accomplishments produce only temporary happiness, love is debased to libido, and life itself becomes hollow and meaningless. Freely choosing, however, to engage and embrace life’s questions, from the most basic to the most profound, likewise materializes a bridge. Instead of leading to a living hell—courtesy of the existential vacuum—this bridge carries one to a “destiny” rather than a fate. This destiny leads to the front door steps of God Himself and the realization of ULTIMATE MEANING in one’s life.

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