EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

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BasicBooks
A Division of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Yalom, Irvin D 1931–
Existential psychotherapy.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Existential psychotherapy. I. Title.
RC489.E93Y34 616.89 80-50553
ISBN: 0–465–02147–6

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Vincent Torre
25 24

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CHAPTER 10

Meaninglessness

> Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in an open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and everyday of every year they are busy doing the same thing. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that instant on he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before.
>
> I am the moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks.[1]

THIS SUICIDE NOTE, these last words written by a despairing soul who killed himself because he saw no meaning in life, serve as a stark introduction to a question that is, indeed, a matter of life and death.

The question takes many forms: What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of *my* life? *Why* do we live? *Why* were we put here? What do we live *for*? What shall we live *by?* If we must die, if nothing endures, then what sense does anything make?

Few individuals were ever as tormented by such questions as was Leo Tolstoy, who for much of a long life grappled with meaninglessness. His experience (from *My Confession,* an autobiographical fragment) will launch us on our way:

> Five years ago a strange state of mind began to grow upon me: I had moments of perplexity, of a stoppage, as it were, of life, as if I did not know

> how I was to live, what I was to do. . . . These stoppages of life always presented themselves to me with the same question: "why?" and "what for?" . . . These questions demanded an answer with greater and greater persistence and, like dots, grouped themselves into one black spot.[2]

During this crisis of meaning or, as he termed it, "life arrest," Tolstoy questioned the meaning of everything he did. What was the point, he asked, of managing his estate, of educating his son? "What for? I now have six thousand desyatins in the province of Samara, and three hundred horses—what then?"[3] Indeed, he wondered why he should write: "Well, what if I should be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière,—than all the writers in the world—well, and what then? I could find no reply. Such questions demand an immediate answer; without one it is impossible to live. Yet answer there was none."[4]

With the dissolution of meaning, Tolstoy experienced a dissolution of the foundations on which his life rested: "I felt that the ground on which I stood was crumbling, that there was nothing for me to stand on, that what I had been living for was nothing, that I had no reason for living. . . . The truth was, that life was meaningless. Every day of life, every step in it, brought me nearer the precipice and I saw clearly that there was nothing but ruin.[5]

At age fifty Tolstoy veered close to suicide:

> The question, which in my fiftieth year had brought me to the notion of suicide, was the simplest of all questions, lying in the soul of every man from the undeveloped child to wisest sage: "What will come from what I am doing now, and may do tomorrow. What will come from my whole life?" otherwise expressed—"Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything?" Again, in other words: "Is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?"[6]

Tolstoy is joined by a legion of others who have experienced a crisis of meaning, a tormented "arrest of life." Albert Camus, to cite another example, held that the only serious philosophical question is whether to go on living once the meaninglessness of human life is fully grasped. He stated, "I have seen many people die because life for them was not worth living. From this I conclude that the question of life's meaning is the most urgent question of all."[7]

How often do patients with Tolstoy's malady seek therapy? Though no rigorous and comprehensive statistical studies exist, many experienced clinicians who are "tuned in" to the problem of meaninglessness state that the clinical syndrome is very common. C. G. Jung, for exam-

ple, felt that meaninglessness inhibited fullness of life and was "therefore equivalent to illness."[8] He wrote: "Absence of meaning in life plays a crucial role in the etiology of neurosis. A neurosis must be understood, ultimately, as a suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning. . . . *About a third of my cases* are not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives."[9]

Viktor Frankl states that 20 percent of the neuroses he encounters in clinical practice are "noogenic" in origin—that is, they derive from a lack of meaning in life. Frankl's conclusions are based on his own clinical impressions and upon statistical studies which unfortunately remain unpublished.[10] A meaninglessness crisis which has not yet crystallized into a discrete neurotic symptomatic picture (an "existential crisis") is even more common, occurring, according to Frankl, in over 50 percent of his patients in a Viennese hospital. Furthermore, Frankl, who has devoted his career to a study of an existential approach to therapy, has apparently concluded that the lack of meaning is *the* paramount existential stress. To him, existential neurosis is synonymous with a crisis of meaninglessness.

Other psychotherapists share that view. Salvatore Maddi, for example, in his splendid essay on the search for meaning, states that "existential sickness" stems from "a comprehensive failure in the search for meaning in life."[11] Maddi describes an "existential neurosis" in which the cognitive component is "meaninglessness, or a chronic inability to believe in the truth, importance, usefulness or interest value of any of the things one is engaged in or can imagine doing."[12] Benjamin Wolman defines existential neurosis in the same manner: "Failure to find meaning in life, the feeling that one has nothing to live for, nothing to struggle for, nothing to hope for . . . unable to find any goal or direction in life, the feeling that though individuals *perspire* in their work, they have nothing to *aspire* to."[13] Nicholas Hobbs agrees: "Contemporary culture often produces a kind of neuroses different from that described by Freud. Contemporary neuroses are characterized not so much by repression and conversion . . . not by lack of insight but lack of a sense of purpose, of meaning in life."[14]

Although such clinical impressions do not constitute firm evidence, certainly they suggest that the problem of meaning in life is a significant one that the therapist must confront frequently in everyday clinical work. Psychotherapy is a child of the Enlightenment. At bottom it always embraces the goal of unflinching self-exploration. The therapist must forthrightly accept and examine fundamental questions; and the

question of meaning, that most perplexing and insoluble question of all, must not be denied in therapy. It will not do to inattend selectively to it, to shrink away from it, or to transform it into some lesser but more manageable question. But where in professional training curriculums does the therapist learn about the development of a sense of life meaning, about the psychopathology of meaninglessness, or about psychotherapeutic strategies available to assist patients in a crisis of meaning?

A small cohort of therapists have addressed these questions in informal works or in literature peripheral to mainstream therapeutic theory and practice. This chapter will place these neglected theorists on center stage and supplement their ranks with those philosophers and artists whose speculations on meaning in life have clinical relevance. A satisfying response to the riddle of life's meaning has throughout written history eluded the grasp of every great thinker. It will come as no surprise to anyone that these pages contain neither a solution nor a wholly satisfactory synthesis of the many attempted solutions. What I shall attempt to do is raise the therapist's consciousness to the issue of life meaning, and to survey the major approaches taken by others. It is my hope that the therapist who is fortified with knowledge about tested and serviceable trails through the morass of meaninglessness will act as an informed and creative guide to the patient suffering a crisis of meaning.

The Problem of Meaning

The dilemma facing us is that two propositions, both true, seem unalterably opposed:

1. The human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke, as we have seen, considerable distress. In severe form it may lead to the decision to end one's life. Frankl noted that in the concentration camp the individual with no sense of meaning was unlikely to survive. As I shall discuss shortly, individuals facing death are able to live "better" lives, live with fullness and zest, if they are possessed of a sense of purpose. We apparently need absolutes—firm ideals to which we can aspire and guidelines by which to steer our lives.

2. Yet the existential concept of freedom described in chapters 6 and 7 posits that the only true absolute is that there are no absolutes. An existential position holds that the world is contingent—that is, everything that is could as well have been otherwise; that human beings constitute themselves, their world, and their situation within that world; that there exists no "meaning," no grand design in the universe, no guidelines for living other than those the individual creates.

The problem, then, in most rudimentary form is, How does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?

Meanings of Life

DEFINITIONS

"Meaning" and "purpose" have different connotations. "Meaning" refers to sense, or coherence. It is a general term for what is intended to be expressed by something. A search for meaning implies a search for coherence. "Purpose" refers to intention, aim, function. When we inquire about the purpose of something, we are asking about its role or function: What does it do? To what end?

In conventional usage, however, "purpose" of life and "meaning" of life are used interchangeably, and I shall treat them accordingly as synonyms. "Significance" is another closely related term. Used in one sense, "significance" has the same implication as "meaning"; another sense confuses since it also refers to "importance" or "consequence."

What is the meaning of life? is an inquiry about *cosmic meaning*, about whether life in general or at least human life fits into some overall coherent pattern. What is the meaning of *my* life? is a different inquiry and refers to what some philosophers term "terrestrial meaning."[15] Terrestrial meaning ("the meaning of my life") embraces purpose: one who possesses a sense of meaning experiences life as having some purpose or function to be fulfilled, some overriding goal or goals to which to apply oneself.

Cosmic meaning implies some design existing outside of and superior to the person and invariably refers to some magical or spiritual ordering of the universe. *Terrestrial meaning* may, as we shall see, have foundations that are entirely secular—that is, one may have a personal sense of meaning without a cosmic meaning system.

One who possesses a sense of cosmic meaning generally experiences a corresponding sense of terrestrial meaning: that is, one's terrestrial meaning consists of fulfilling or harmonizing with that cosmic meaning. For example, one might think of "life" as a symphony in which each life is assigned some instrumental part to play. (Of course, one may believe in cosmic meaning but be unable to comprehend one's own place in that grand design or may even feel that one has behaved in such a way as to forfeit one's position in the cosmic plan; but such individuals suffer less from a sense of meaninglessness than from one of personal guilt or fallenness.)

COSMIC MEANING

Within the Western world, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition has offered a comprehensive meaning-schema based upon the principle that the world and human life are part of a divinely ordained plan. Divine justice is one corollary of that postulate: life, lived properly, will be rewarded. The individual being's meaning-in-life is divinely ordained: it is each human being's task to ascertain and to fulfill God's will. How is one to know that will? A fundamentalist approach holds that God's meaning is contained in the holy word, and that a good life may be based on a close, literal exegesis of the Scriptures. Others are certain only that one has to have faith, that one can never know with certainty and has to be satisfied with hints, with guesses, about God's ordained meaning or with the thought that a mere human cannot hope to know God's mind. "The branch," said Pascal in the seventeenth century, "cannot hope to know the tree's meaning."[16] Viktor Frankl explicates this point of view by the analogy of an ape that was used in medical research to find an effective poliomyelitis serum.[17] The ape suffered much pain and could never, because of its cognitive limitations, discover the meaning of the situation. So, too, Frankl argues, it must be with the human being who cannot hope to know with fullness a meaning that exists in a dimension beyond comprehension.

Another view of cosmic meaning stresses that human life be dedicated to the purpose of emulating God. God represents perfection, and thus the purpose of life is to strive for perfection. Of the various types of perfection to be sought, Aristotle (and the whole rational intellectual tradition he launched) considered intellectual perfection as the ultimate. God, in Aristotelian terms, is "thought thinking itself"; and one approaches the deity through perfection of one's rational faculties. In the twelfth century Moses Maimonides in *The Guide of the Perplexed* described the four major common modes of striving toward perfection.[18]

He dismissed the first, perfection of physical possession, as imaginary and impermanent; and the second, perfection of the body, as failing to differentiate human from animal. The third, moral perfection, he found praiseworthy but limited in that it served others rather than oneself. The fourth, rational perfection, he considered to be "true human perfection," through which "man becomes man." This perfection is the ultimate goal and permits the human being to apprehend God.

The cosmic meaning afforded by a religious world view permits a vast number of interpretations of individual life purpose—some doctrinaire, some highly imaginative. In this century Jung, for example, had a deeply committed religious outlook and believed no one can be healed or find meaning unless one regains one's religious outlook.[19] Jung's view of his personal life purpose was to complete God's work of creation:

> Man is indispensable for the completion of creation; that is, in fact, he himself is the second creator of the world who alone has given to the world its objective existence—without which, unheard, unseen, silently eating, giving birth, dying, heads nodding through hundreds of millions of years, it would have gone on in the profoundest night of nonbeing down to its unknown end.[20]

Jung's idea that the human being completes the work of creation and "puts the stamp of perfection upon it," is a conclusion arrived at by others. Earlier Hegel wrote "without the world God is not god. . . . God is God only insofar as he knows himself and his self-knowledge is his consciousness of himself in man and man's knowledge of god."[21] Or the poet Rilke in this century:

> What will you do, God, if I die?
> I am your jug, what if I shatter?
> I am your drink, what if I spoil?
> I am your robe and your profession
> Losing me, you lose your meaning.[22]

A provocative comment by Thomas Mann echoes this thought: "With the generation of life from the inorganic, it was man who was ultimately intended. With him a great experiment is initiated, the failure of which would be the failure of creation itself. . . . Whether that be so or not, it would be well for man to behave as if it were so."[23]

Mann's thought that "it was man who was ultimately intended" forms the heart of the creative system of meaning posited by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the twentieth-century theologian who formulat-

ed an evolutionary synthesis in his remarkable book *The Phenomenon of Man.*[24] Teilhard de Chardin suggested a cosmic coherence in his law of "controlled complication": that life is a single unity, that the entire living world is a "single and gigantic organism* which, with predestined direction, enters into the evolutionary process. All of evolution is thus an orthogenetic process and, just as factors inside a single developing organism determine its ultimate outcome, so too do predetermined factors influence the ultimate outcome of the cosmic evolutionary process—a process destined to end with the human being in an absolute state of love and spiritual union.

In Teilhard de Chardin's system each individual, by playing a role in the shared enterprise, is provided with a personal sense of meaning: "Although only a small fraction of those who try to scale the heights of human achievement arrive anywhere close to the summit, it is imperative that there be a multitude of climbers. Otherwise the summit may not be reached by anybody. The individually lost and forgotten multitudes have not lived in vain, provided that they, too, made the efforts to climb."[27] Thus, there is shared, common entrance into a superhuman realm. "The gates of the future will admit only an advance of all together, in a direction in which all together could join and achieve fulfillment in a spiritual renovation of the earth."[28]

SECULAR PERSONAL MEANING

Personal Meaning in the Absence of Cosmic Meaning. Human beings are extraordinarily comforted by the belief that there is some supraordinate, coherent pattern to life and that each individual has some particular role to play in that design. One is not only provided a goal and a role but also a set of guidelines about how one should live life. Cosmic religious views constituted a major part of the belief system in the Western world until approximately three hundred years ago. Beginning at that time these views began to suffer an onslaught both from the burgeoning scientific attitude as well as from the Kantian questioning of the existence of a fixed objective reality. The more that the existence of something beyond man—either supernatural or some other

* The idea of the world as a single organism was a world view held by many primitive cultures and was prevalent in Western Europe until the sixteenth century. This scheme of cosmic meaning provided a firm, serviceable sense of terrestrial meaning, since each human being learned from birth that he or she was part of a larger unit and must conduct his or her life for the good of the mega-organism.[25] Thus, in the eighteenth century Alexander Pope could proclaim in his *Essay on Man* that "partial evil is for the universal good."[26]

abstract absolute—was called into doubt, the more difficult it was for the human being to embrace a cosmic meaning system.

But meaning systems cannot be relinquished without some substitute. Perhaps we can forgo the answer to the question, Why do we live? but it is not easy to postpone the question, How shall we live? Modern secular humans face the task of finding some direction to life without an external beacon. How does one proceed to construct one's own meaning—a meaning sturdy enough to support one's life?

Meaning in an Absurd World: Camus and Sartre. Let me begin by examining the thinking of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, two of the important thinkers who helped paint us into the corner of meaninglessness in the twentieth century. How did they deal with the question of life meaning?

Camus used the word "absurd" to refer to the human being's basic position in the world—the plight of a transcendent, meaning-seeking being who must live in a world that has no meaning. Camus stated that we are moral creatures who demand that the world supply a basis for moral judgment—that is, a meaning system in which is implicit a blueprint of values. But the world does not supply one: it is entirely indifferent to us. The tension between human aspiration and the world's indifference is what Camus referred to as the "absurd" human condition.[29]

What then are we to do? Are there no guidelines? No values? Nothing right or wrong? good or evil? If there are no absolutes, then nothing is more important than anything else, and everything is a matter of indifference. In his novels *A Happy Death*[30] and *The Stranger*,[31] Camus portrayed individuals who live in a state of value-nihilism. Meursault, in *The Stranger*, exists outside the moral world. "It's all the same to me," he says repeatedly. He attends his mother's funeral, copulates, works, and kills an Arab on the beach, all in the same state of profound indifference.

Earlier, in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explored the tension between his nihilism and his ethical demands and gradually began to forge a new, secular, humanistically based vision of personal life meaning and a set of guidelines for life conduct that flow from that vision. His new vision posits that we can construct a new life meaning by cherishing our "nights of despair," by facing the very vortex of meaninglessness and arriving at a posture of heroic nihilism. A human being, Camus believed, can attain full stature only by living with dignity in the face of absurdity. The world's indifference can be transcended by rebellion, a prideful rebellion against one's condition. "There is

nothing equal to the spectacle of human pride." "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."[32]

Camus's ideas were further shaped by the Second World War, during which he worked in the French Underground, and he conceived of an authentic revolt against the absurd as a fraternal revolt—a revolt in the name of the solidarity of humankind. In his novel *The Plague,* Camus described many human reactions to plague (in the book, a literal plague, but metaphorically the Nazi occupation of France or, beyond that, all forms of injustice and inhumanity).[33] The character who probably best represents the author's idealized self-image is Dr. Rieux, the tireless fighter of the plague who never fails to react with courage, vitality, love, and a sense of deep empathy with the plague's many victims.

In summary, then, Camus started from a position of nihilism—a position in which he despaired at the lack of meaning (and, thus, lack of purpose and values) in the world—and soon generated, gratuitously, a system of personal meaning—a system that encompasses several clear values and guidelines for conduct: courage, prideful rebellion, fraternal solidarity, love, secular saintliness.

Sartre, more than any other philosopher in this century, has been uncompromising in his view of a meaningless world. His position on the meaning of life is terse and merciless: "All existing things are born for no reason, continue through weakness and die by accident . . . It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die."[34] Sartre's view of freedom (a view that I discussed in chapter 6) leaves one without a sense of personal meaning and with no guidelines for conduct; indeed, many philosophers have been highly critical of the Sartreian philosphical system precisely because it lacks an ethical component. Sartre's death in 1980 ended a prodigiously productive career, and his long-promised treatise on ethics will never be written.

However, in his fiction Sartre often portrayed individuals who discover something to live *for* and something to live *by.* Sartre's depiction of Orestes, the hero of his play *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*), is particularly illustrative.[35] Orestes, reared away from Argos, journeys home to find his sister Electra, and together they avenge the murder of their father (Agamemnon) by killing the murderers—their mother Clytemnestra and her husband Aegistheus. Despite Sartre's explicit statements about life's meaninglessness, his play may be read as a pilgrimage to meaning. Let me follow Orestes as he searches for values on which to base his life. Orestes first looks for meaning and purpose in a return to home, roots, and comradeship:

> Try to understand I want to be a man who belongs to someplace, a man among comrades. Only consider. Even the slave bent beneath his load dropping with fatigue and staring dully at the ground and foot in front of him—why even that poor slave can say that he's in *his* town as a tree is in a forest or a leaf upon a tree. Argos is all around him, warm, compact, and comforting. Yes, Electra, I'd gladly be that slave and enjoy that feeling of drawing the city round me like a blanket and curling myself up in it.[36]

Later he questions his own life conduct and realizes that he has always done as they (the gods) wished in order to find peace within the status quo.

> So that is the right thing. To live at peace—always at perfect peace. I see. Always to say "excuse me," and "thank you." That's what's wanted, eh? The right thing. Their Right Thing.[37]

At this moment in the play Orestes wrenches himself away from his previous meaning system and enters his crisis of meaninglessness:

> What a change has come on everything . . . until now I felt something warm and living round me, like a friendly presence. That something has just died. What emptiness. What endless emptiness.[38]

Orestes, at that moment, makes the leap that Sartre made in his personal life—not a leap into faith (although it rests on no sounder argument than a leap of faith) but a leap into "engagement," into action, into a project. He says goodby to the ideals of comfort and security and pursues, with crusader ferocity, his newfound purpose:

> I say there is another path—my path. Can't you see it. It starts here and leads down to the city. I must go down into the depths among you. For you are living all of you at the bottom of a pit . . . Wait. Give me time to say farewell to all the lightness, the aery lightness that was mine . . . Come, Electra look at our city. . . . It fends me off with its high walls, red roofs, locked doors. And yet it's mine for the taking. I'll turn into an ax and hew those walls asunder. . . .[39]

Orestes's new purpose evolves quickly, and he assumes a Christlike burden:

> Listen, all those people quaking with fear in their dark rooms—supposing I take over all their crimes. Supposing I set out to win the name of "guilt-stealer" and heap on myself all their remorse.[40]

Later Orestes, in defiance of Zeus, decides to kill Aegistheus. His declaration at that time indicates a clear sense of purpose: he chooses justice, freedom, and dignity and indicates that he knows what is "right" in life.

> What do I care for Zeus. Justice is a matter between men and I have no God to teach me it. It's right to stamp you out like the foul brute you are, and to free the people from your evil influence. It is right to restore to them their sense of human dignity.[41]

And glad he is to have found his freedom, his mission, and his path. Though Orestes must carry the burden of being his mother's murderer, it is better thus than to have *no* mission, no meaning, to wander pointlessly through life.

> The heavier it is to carry, the better pleased I shall be; for that burden is my freedom. Only yesterday I walked the earth haphazard; thousands of roads I tramped that brought me nowhere, for they were other men's roads . . . Today I have one path only, and heaven knows where it leads. But it is *my* path.[42]

Then Orestes finds another and, for Sartre, an important meaning—that there is no absolute meaning, that he is alone and must create his own meaning. To Zeus he says:

> Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet. My youth went with the wind, and I know myself alone . . . and there was nothing left in heaven, no right or wrong, nor anyone to give me orders . . . I am doomed to have no law but mine . . . Every man must find his own way.[43]

When he proposes to open the eyes of the townspeople, Zeus protests that, if Orestes tears the veils from their eyes, "they will see their lives as they are: foul and futile." But Orestes maintains that they are free, that it is right they face their despair, and utters the famous existential manifesto: "Human life begins on the far side of despair."[44].

One final purpose, self-realization, emerges when Orestes takes his sister's hand to begin their journey. Electra asks,"Whither?" and Orestes responds:

> Toward ourselves. Beyond the river and mountains are an Orestes and an Electra waiting for us, and we must make our patient way towards them.[45]

And so Sartre—the same Sartre who says that "man is a futile passion," and that "it is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we

die"— arrived at a position in his fiction that clearly values the search for meaning and even suggests paths to take in that search. These include finding a "home" and comradeship in the world, action, freedom, rebellion against oppression, service to others, enlightenment, self-realization, and engagement—always and above all, engagement.

And *why* are there meanings to be fulfilled? On that question Sartre is mute. Certainly the meanings are not divinely ordained; they do not exist "out there," for there is no God, and nothing exists "out there" outside of man. Orestes simply says, "I *want* to belong," or *"It is right"* to serve others, to restore dignity to man, or to embrace freedom; or every man *"must"* find his own way, must journey to the fully realized Orestes who awaits him. The terms "want to" or "it is right" or "must" are purely arbitrary and do not constitute a firm basis for human conduct; yet they seem to be the best arguments Sartre could muster. He seems to agree with Thomas Mann's pragmatic position in the passage cited earlier: "Whether that be so or not, it would be well for man to behave as if it were so."

What is important for both Camus and Sartre is that human beings recognize that one must invent one's own meaning (rather than discover God's or nature's meaning) and then commit oneself fully to fulfilling that meaning. This requires that one be, as Gordon Allport put it, "half-sure and whole-hearted"[46]—not an easy feat. Sartre's ethic requires a leap into engagement. On this one point most Western theological and atheistic existential systems agree: *it is good and right to immerse oneself in the stream of life.*

Let me survey the secular activities that provide human beings with a sense of life purpose. These activities are supported by the same arguments that Sartre advanced for Orestes: they seem right; they seem good; they are intrinsically satisfying and need not be justified on the basis of any other motivation.

Altruism. Leaving the world a better place to live in, serving others, participation in charity (the greatest virtue of all)—these activities are right and good and have provided life meaning for many humans. Both Camus's Dr. Rieux and Sartre's Orestes fulfilled themselves through service—one by nursing plague victims, and the other by being a guilt-stealing Pied Piper who opens the eyes of others to dignity, freedom, and blessed despair.

In my clinical work with patients dying of cancer I have been in a particularly privileged position to observe the importance of meaning systems to human existence. Repeatedly I have noted that those patients who experience a deep sense of meaning in their lives appear to live more fully and to face death with less despair than those whose

lives are devoid of meaning. (Jung commented, "Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything."[47]) Though at this juncture patients experienced several types of meaning, both religious and secular, none seemed more important than altruism. Some clinical cases are illustrative.

Sal was a thirty-year-old patient who had always been vigorous and athletic until he developed multiple myeloma, a painful disabling form of bone cancer from which he died two years later. In some ways Sal's last two years were the richest of his life. Though he lived in considerable pain and though he was encased in a full body cast (because of multiple bone fractures), Sal found great meaning in life by being of service to many young people. Sal toured high schools in the area counseling teen-agers on the hazards of drug abuse and used his cancer and his visibly deteriorating body as powerful leverage in his mission. He was extraordinarily effective: the whole auditorium trembled when Sal, in a wheelchair, frozen in his cast, exhorted: "You want to destroy your body with nicotine or alcohol or heroin? You want to smash it up in autos? You're depressed and want to throw it off the Golden Gate bridge? Then give me your body! Let me have it! I want it! I'll take it! I want to live!"

Eva, a patient who died of ovarian cancer in her early fifties, had lived an extraordinarily zestful life in which altruistic activities had always provided her with a powerful sense of life purpose. She faced her death in the same way; and, though I feel uneasy using the phrase, her death can only be characterized as a "good death." Almost everyone who came into contact with Eva during the last two years of her life was enriched by her. When she first learned of her cancer and again when she learned of its spread and its fatal prognosis, she was plunged into despair but quickly extricated herself by plunging into altruistic projects. She did volunteer work on a hospital ward for terminally ill children. She closely examined a number of charitable organizations in order to make a reasoned decision about how to distribute her estate. Many old friends had avoided close contact with her after she developed cancer. Eva systematically approached each one to tell them that she understood their reason for withdrawal, that she bore no grudge, but that still it might be helpful to them when they faced their own death, to talk about their feelings toward her.

Eva's last oncologist, Dr. L., was a cold, steel-spectacled man who sat behind a desk the size of a football field and typed on Eva's medical record while he talked to her. Though Dr. L. was exceptionally skilled technically, Eva considered changing doctors in order to find someone

warmer and more caring. She decided instead to stay with him and to make her final goal in life "the humanization of Dr. L." She demanded more time from him, requested that he not type and that he listen to her. She empathized with his position with patients: how hard it must be to see so many of his patients die—in fact, because of his specialty, almost *all* of his patients. Shortly before she died she had two dreams which she reported both to me and to Dr. L. The first was that he was in Israel but could not muster the resolution to visit the Holocaust museum. In the second dream she was in a hospital corridor and a group of doctors (including Dr. L.) were walking away from her very quickly. She ran after them and told them: "O.K. I understand that you can't deal with my cancer. I forgive you, it's all right. It's perfectly normal you should feel this way." Eva's perseverance won out, and eventually she had the gratification of breaking down Dr. L's barriers and touching him in a deeply human manner.

She was in a support group for patients with metastatic cancer and found meaning until the end of her life in the fact that her attitude toward her death could be of value to many other patients who might be able to use Eva's zest for life and courageous stance toward death as a model for their own living and dying. One of these patients, Madeline Salmon, a marvelous poet, wrote this poem to be read at Eva's memorial:

> Dear Eva,
> Whenever the wind is from the sea
> Salty and strong
> You are here.
>
> Remembering your zest for hilltops
> And the sturdy surf of your laughter
> Gentles my grief at your going
> And tempers the thought of my own.

"Tempers the thought of my own" expresses beautifully an important source of meaning for so many persons facing death. The idea of being a model for others, especially for one's children, of helping them to diminish or remove the terror of death can fill life with meaning until the moment of death. One extends oneself into one's children and into one's children's children and so on in the great chain of being. Eva, of course, influenced me profoundly and, in so doing, shares in the process by which I find my meaning by passing on her gift to my readers.

Altruism constitutes an important source of meaning for psychother-

apists—and, of course, for all helping professionals—who not only invest themselves in helping patients grow but also realize that one person's growth can have a ripple effect whereby many others who touch on that patient's life are benefited. This effect is most obvious when the patient is someone who has a wide sphere of influence (teacher, physician, writer, employer, executive, personnel manager, another therapist), but in truth it obtains for every patient in that one cannot in one's everyday life avoid innumerable encounters with others. In my own clinical work I try with every patient to make this an explicit area of inquiry; I examine their interpersonal contacts, both intimate and casual; I explore with them what they want from others and what they contribute to the lives of others.

The belief that it is good to give, to be useful to others, to make the world better for others, is a powerful source of meaning. It has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and has been accepted as an *a priori* truth even by those who reject the theistic component.

Dedication to a Cause. "What man is, he has become through that cause he has made his own."[48] Karl Jasper's words indicate another important secular source of life meaning—devotion to a cause. Will Durant, the philosopher and historian, wrote a book entitled *On the Meaning of Life,* which consists of statements by eminent men on their notions of meaning in life. Working for some "cause" is a pervasive theme.

In his conclusions Durant states his personal position:

> Join a whole, work for it with all your body and mind. The meaning of life lies in the chance it gives us to produce, or to contribute to something greater than ourselves. It need not be a family (although that is the direct and broadest road which nature in her blind wisdom has provided for even the simplest soul); it can be any group that can call out all the latent nobility of the individual, and give him a cause to work for that shall not be shattered by his death."[49]

Many kinds of cause may suffice: the family, the state, a political or religious cause, secular religions like communism and fascism, a scientific venture. But the important thing, as Durant states, is that "it must, if it is to give life meaning, lift the individual out of himself, and make him a cooperating part of a vaster scheme."[50]

"Dedication to a cause" as a source of personal meaning is complex. Durant's statement contains several aspects. First, there is the altruistic component: one finds meaning by contributing to others. Many causes have altruistic underpinnings—either they are dedicated toward direct service, or they may be more complex movements whose direction is

ultimately utilitarian ("the greatest good for the greatest number"). It seems important, if an activity is to supply meaning, that it "lift the individual out of himself," even though it is not explicitly altruistic. This concept of "self-transcendence" is central to life-meaning schemas and will be discussed shortly. When, however, Durant speaks of a cause "that shall not be shattered by death" or of "becoming a part of something" greater than oneself," he is referring to other issues (for example, death transcendence, the anxiety of isolation and helplessness) rather than to meaninglessness *per se*.

Creativity. Just as most of us would agree that service to others and dedication to a cause provide a sense of meaning, so too would we agree that a creative life is meaningful. To create something new, something that rings with novelty or beauty and harmony is a powerful antidote to a sense of meaninglessness. The creation justifies itself, it defies the question What for?, it is "its own excuse for being." It is right that it be created, and it is right that one devotes oneself to its creation.

Irving Taylor suggests that creative artists who have worked with the greatest personal handicaps and the greatest social constraints (only think of Galileo, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Freud, Keats, the Brontë sisters, Van Gogh, Kafka, Virginia Woolf) may have had faculties of self-reflection so highly developed that they had a keener vision than most of us of the human existential situation and the universe's cosmic indifference.[51] Consequently, they suffered more keenly from a crisis of meaninglessness and, with a ferocity born of desperation, plunged into creative efforts. Beethoven said explicitly that his art kept him from suicide. At the age of thirty-two, in despair because of his deafness, he wrote, "Little kept me back from putting an end to my life. Art alone held me back. Alas, it seems to be impossible for me to leave the world before I have done all that I feel inclined to do, and thus I drag on this miserable life."[52]

The creative path to meaning is by no means limited to the creative artist. The act of scientific discovery is a creative act of the highest order. Even bureaucracy may be approached creatively. A research scientist who changed fields described the importance and the feasibility of being creative in an administrative position.

> If you go into administration, you must believe that this is a creative activity in itself and that your purpose is something more than keeping your desk clean. You are a moderator and arbiter, and you try to deal equitably with a lot of different people, but you've also got to have ideas, and you've got to persuade people that your ideas are important and to see them into reality. . . . This is part of the excitement of it. In

> both research and administration, the excitement and the elation is in the creative power. It's bringing things to pass. Now, I think administration is more exciting than research.[53]

A creative approach to teaching, to cooking, to play, to study, to bookkeeping, to gardening adds something valuable to life. Work situations that stifle creativity and turn one into an automaton will, no matter how high the salary scales, always generate dissatisfaction.

A friend of mine, a woman sculptor, when asked whether she found joy in her work pointed to another facet of creativity: self-discovery. Her work was dictated, in part, by unconscious forces within. Each new piece was doubly creative: the work of art in itself and the new inner vistas illuminated by it.[54]

This expanded view of creativity was exceptionally useful to a composer who sought therapy because the approach of his fifty-fifth birthday had impelled him to examine his life—a process that led him to conclude that he had contributed little to his field. He had a profound sense of purposelessness and was convinced that none of his efforts would have any lasting value. He sought therapy to increase his professional creativity, knowing at the same time that his talent as a composer was limited. Therapy was unproductive until I expanded the concept of creativity to include his entire life. He became aware of how stifled his life was in many areas. For one thing, he had been locked into an unsatisfying marriage for over thirty years and yet could bring himself neither to change it nor to end it. Therapy forged ahead when we reformulated his initial complaint into a new one: "How could he be creative in fashioning a new type of life for himself?"

Creativity overlaps with altruism in that many search to be creative in order to improve the condition of the world, to discover beauty, not only for its own sake but for the pleasure of others. Creativity may also play a role in a love relationship: bringing something to life in the other is part of mature loving and of the creative process as well.

The Hedonistic Solution. A philosophy professor asked members of an undergraduate class to write their own obituaries. One segment of the responses was characterized by such statements as:

> Here I lie, found no meaning, but life was continuously astonishing.

or:

> Shed your tears for those who have lived dying—
> Spare your tears for me for I've died living.[55]

The purpose of life is, in this view, simply to live fully, to retain one's sense of astonishment at the miracle of life, to plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure in the deepest possible sense. A recent textbook on humanistic psychology summed it up: "Life is a gift. Take it, unwrap it, appreciate it, use it, and enjoy it."[56]

This view has a long heritage. In the *Philebus*, Plato presented a debate about the proper goal of every human being. One view argues that one should aim toward intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom. The opposing position is that pleasure is the only true goal in life. This view, hedonism, has had many champions from the time of Eudoxus and Epicurus, in the third and fourth centuries B.C., through Locke and Mill, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, until the present. The hedonists can muster powerful arguments that pleasure as an end in itself is a satisfactory and sufficient explanation for human behavior. One makes future plans and chooses one course over another if, and only if, says the hedonist, one thinks it will be more pleasant (or less unpleasant) for oneself. The hedonistic frame of reference is formidable because it is elastic and can include each of the other meaning schemes within its generous boundaries. Such activities as creativity, love, altruism, dedication to a cause, can all be viewed as important because of their ultimate pleasure-producing value. Even behavior that seems to aim at pain, displeasure, or self-sacrifice may be hedonistic since one may consider it as an investment in pleasure. This is an instance of the pleasure principle yielding to the reality principle—to temporary discomfort that will yield future dividends of pleasure.

Self-Actualization. Another source of personal meaning is the belief that human beings should strive to actualize themselves, that they should dedicate themselves to realizing their inbuilt potential. (See chapter 6 where I discuss the concept of self-actualization in the context of responsibility).

The term "self-actualization" is a modern reformulation of an ancient concept explicitly expressed as early as Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. in his system of teleological causation—a doctrine of internal finality which postulates that the proper end or aim of each object and each being is to come to fruition and to realize its own being. Thus, the acorn is realized in the oak, and the infant in a fully actualized adult.

Later the Christian tradition emphasized self-perfection and offered the figure of Christ, the man-God, as a model to be imitated by those seeking to perfect their God-given being. *The Imitation of Christ*—the fifteenth-century devotional work by Thomas à Kempis and second

only to the Bible in its influence on the faithful—and numerous books on the lives of the saints provided guides for generations of practicing Christians, especially the literate ones, into our own time.

In today's secular world "self-actualization" is enmeshed in a humanistic, individualistic framework. Sartre's Orestes sets off on a journey, not toward God but toward the potential, the fully actualized Orestes awaiting within him.

Self-actualization has particular significance for Abraham Maslow who holds that one has within oneself proclivity toward growth and unity of personality and a type of inherent blueprint or pattern consisting of a unique set of characteristics and an automatic thrust toward expressing them. One has, according to Maslow, a hierarchy of inbuilt motives. The most fundamental of these—from the standpoint of survival—are physiological. When these are satisfied, the individual turns toward satisfaction of higher needs—safety and security, love and belongingness, identity and self-esteem. As these needs are met, then the individual turns toward satisfying self-actualizing needs which consist of cognitive needs—knowledge, insight, wisdom—and esthetic needs—symmetry, congruence, integration, beauty, meditation, creativity, harmony.

Self-actualization theorists propose an evolutionary morality. Maslow, for example, states "the human being is so constructed that he presses toward fuller and fuller being and this means pressing toward what most people would call good values, toward serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness."[57] Maslow thus answers the question What do we live *for?* by stating that we live in order to fulfill our potential. He answers the trailer question What do we live *by*? by claiming that the good values are, in essence, built into the human organism and that, if one only trusts one's organismic wisdom, one will discover them intuitively.

Thus, Maslow takes the position that actualization is a natural process, *the* basic organismic process in the human being, and will take place without the aid of any social structure. In fact, Maslow views society as an obstruction to self-actualization because it so often forces individuals to abandon their unique personal development and to accept ill-fitting social roles and stifling conventionality. I am reminded of an old psychology text where I once saw two pictures, juxtaposed. One showed children playing with one another in all the freshness and spontaneity of childhood exuberance and innocence; the other, a crowd of New York subway travelers with vacant stares and mottled gray faces dangling lifelessly from the subway straps and poles. Under the two pictures was the simple caption: "What happened?"

Self-Transcendence. The last two types of meaning (hedonism and self-actualization) differ from the previous ones (altruism, dedication to a cause, and creativity) in one important aspect. Hedonism and self-actualization are concerned with self, whereas the others reflect some basic craving to transcend one's self-interest and to strive toward something or someone outside or "above" oneself.

A long tradition in Western thought counsels us not to settle for a nonself-transcendent purpose in life. To take one example, Buber, in his discussion of hasidic thought, notes that, though human beings should begin with themselves (by searching their own hearts, integrating themselves, and finding their particular meaning), they should not end with themselves.[58] It is only necessary, Buber states, to ask the question "What for? What am I to find my particular way for? What am I to unify my being for?" The answer is: "Not for my own sake." One begins with oneself in order to forget oneself and to immerse oneself into the world; one comprehends oneself in order not to be preoccupied with oneself.

"Turning" is a crucial concept in Jewish mystical tradition. If one sins and then turns *away* from sin, toward the world and *toward* fulfillment of some God-given task, one is considered uniquely enlightened, standing above even the most pious holy man. If, on the other hand, one continues absorbed with guilt and repentance, then one is considered to be mired in selfishness and baseness. Buber writes: "Depart from evil and do good. You have done wrong? Then counteract it by doing good."[59]

Buber's essential point is that human beings have a more far-reaching meaning than the salvation of individual souls. In fact, through excessive preoccupation with gaining an advantageous personal place in eternity, a person may lose that place.

Viktor Frankl arrives at a similar position and expresses strong reservations about the current emphasis on self-actualization. It is his view that excessive concern with self-expression and self-actualization thwarts genuine meaning. He often illustrates this point with the metaphor of a boomerang that returns to the hunter who threw it only if it misses its target; in the same way human beings return to self-preoccupation only if they have missed the meaning that life has for them. He illustrates the same point with the metaphor of the human eye which sees itself or something in itself (that is, it sees some object in the lens or in the aqueous or vitreous humor) only when it is unable to see outside of itself.

The dangers of a nontranscendent posture are particularly evident in interpersonal relationships. The more one focuses on oneself, for exam-

ple, in sexual relationships, the less is one's ultimate satisfaction. If one watches oneself, is concerned primarily with one's own arousal and release, one is likely to suffer sexual dysfunction. Frankl—quite correctly, I believe—feels that the contemporary idealization of "self-expression" often, if made an end in itself, makes meaningful relationships impossible. The basic stuff of a loving relationship is not free self-expression (although that may be an important ingredient) but reaching outside of oneself and caring for the being of the other.

Maslow uses different language to convey the same concept. In his view, the fully actualized person (a small percentage of the population) is not preoccupied with "self-expression." Such a person has a firm sense of self and "cares" for others rather than uses others as a means of self-expression or to fill a personal void. Self-actualized individuals, according to Maslow, dedicate themselves to self-transcendent goals. They may work on large-scale global issues—such as poverty, bigotry, or ecology—or, on a smaller scale, on the growth of others with whom they live.

Self-transcendence and the life cycle. These life activities that provide meaning are by no means mutually exclusive; most individuals derive meaning from several of them. Furthermore, as Erik Erikson long ago theorized[60] (a theory that has been thoroughly corroborated by the adult life cycle research in the 1970s[61]), there is gradual evolution of meanings throughout an individual's life cycle. Whereas in adolescence and early and middle adulthood one's concerns are centered on self as one struggles to establish a stable identity, to develop intimate relationships, and to achieve a sense of mastery in professional endeavors, in one's forties and fifties one passes (unless one fails to negotiate an earlier developmental task) into a stage where one finds meaning in self-transcendent ventures. Erikson defined this stage ("generativity") as "the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation,"[62] and it may take the form of specific concerns for one's progeny or, more broadly, in care and charity for the species.

George Vaillant, in his splendid longitudinal study of Harvard undergraduates, reported that during their forties and fifties successful men "worried less about themselves and more about the children."[63] One representative subject stated at fifty-five: "Passing on the torch and exposure of civilized values to children has always been of importance to me, but it has increased with each ensuing year." Another:

> The concerns I have now are much less self-centered. From 30–40 they had to do with too many demands or too little money, whether I could make it in my profession, etc. Past age 45 concerns are more philosophi-

> cal, more long term, less personal . . . I am concerned about the state of human relations, and especially of our society. I am concerned to teach others as much as I can of what I have learned.

Another: "I don't plan on leaving any big footsteps behind, but I am becoming more insistent in my attempts to move the town to build a new hospital, support schools, and teach kids to sing."[64]

The emergence of self-transcendent concerns is reflected in the professional careers of several of Vaillant's subjects.[65] One scientist had pioneered, in his twenties, a new method of making poison gas; at fifty he chose to research methods of reducing air pollution. Another had, during his youth, worked for the military industrial establishment and helped calculate the blast radius of atomic warheads; at fifty he pioneered a college course in humanism.

A major longitudinal study at Berkeley, California, conducted by Norma Haan and Jack Block compared thirty-year-old and forty-five-year-old individuals to themselves as adolescents and arrived at similar findings. Altruism and other self-transcendent behavior increased over time. Individuals at forty-five were "more sympathetic, giving, productive and dependable" than they were at thirty.[66]

Much developmental research has dealt primarily with the male life cycle and has not taken special circumstances in the lives of women sufficiently into consideration. Recent feminist scholarship has offered an important corrective. Middle-aged women, for example, who earlier in their lives devoted themselves to marriage and motherhood, seek different meanings to fulfill than their middle-aged male counterparts. Traditionally women have been expected to meet the needs of others before their own, to live vicariously through husbands and children, and to play a nurturing role in society as nurses, volunteers, and purveyors of charity. Altruism has been imposed upon them rather than freely chosen. Thus, at a time when their male counterparts have achieved worldly success and are ready to turn to altruistic considerations, many middle-aged women are, for the first time in their lives, concerned primarily with themselves rather than with others.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VIKTOR FRANKL

Self-transcendence is the cardinal feature of Viktor Frankl's approach to the question of meaning, and this is an appropriate place to consider some of Frankl's views on meaning and psychotherapy.

Few clinicians have made any substantial contributions to the role of meaning in psychotherapy, and virtually none have in their published work maintained a continued interest in this area. Viktor Frankl is the

single exception; and from the beginning of his career, his professional interest has focused exclusively on the role of meaning in psychopathology and therapy. Frankl, a Viennese and an existentially oriented psychiatrist, first used the world "logotherapy" (*logos*="word" or "meaning") in the 1920s. Later he used the term "existential analysis" as a synonym; but to avoid confusion with other existential approaches (notably that of Ludwig Binswanger), Frankl has in recent years referred to his approach, in either a theoretical or a therapeutic context, as "logotherapy." Although Frankl is aware of the many clinical issues stemming from the other existential ultimate concerns, he maintains in all his work a singular accent on meaning in life. When he speaks of existential despair, he refers to a state of meaninglessness; and when he speaks of therapy, he refers to the process of helping the patient find meaning.

Before I discuss Frankl's contributions, a few words about his methods and style of presentation are in order. Despite his prolific output and the fact that he has, in my opinion, made an important contribution to psychotherapy theory, he has not gained the recognition he deserves from the academic community.

In part this neglect may be a function of the content of Frankl's thought which, like most contributions to existential therapy, can find no home in the "better" academic neighborhoods. Logotherapy belongs neither to psychoanalytically oriented schools, nor to formal psychiatry, nor to religious studies, nor to behaviorally oriented academic psychology, nor even to the "pop" personal growth movement. (Nonetheless his books have a wide general audience: his first book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, sold over two million copies.)

Furthermore, many scholars find Frankl's method offensive. His arguments are often appeals to emotion; he persuades, makes *ex cathedra* proclamations, and is often repetitive and strident. Furthermore, though he claims to present a secular approach to meaning (he states that as a physician who has taken the oath of Hippocrates, he is obliged to develop treatment methods that apply to all patients, atheists and devout alike), it is clear that Frankl's approach to meaning is fundamentally religious.

Serious readers are often troubled by many distractions in reading Frankl. In virtually every work there are numerous self-aggrandizing comments: self-citations, reminders about the many universities at which he has lectured, his many titles, the many eminent people who endorse his approach, the number of professionals who assist him, the occasions when medical students have broken out into unrestrained

applause during one of his interviews, the foolish questions posed to him and his pithy rejoinders. Works by Frankl's disciples are particularly unenlightening and consist of a restatement of his remarks and an idealization of his person.

Still, I would urge the reader to persevere. Frankl has made a significant contribution in placing the issue of meaning before the therapist and in his many penetrating insights into the clinical implications of the search for meaning.

Frankl first presented his views on the role of meaning in psychotherapy in *From Death Camp to Existentialism* (later retitled *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*).[67] In the first part of this book Frankl describes his grim existence in Auschwitz from 1943–45, and in the remainder, a system of therapy that sprang from his insight that a continued sense of life meaning was crucial for survival in the concentration camp. His book was written on scraps of paper he sequestered in the camp and provided him with meaning and, thereby, with a reason to survive. Frankl's own meaning in life has been since that time "to help others find their meaning."[68]

Basic Assumptions. Frankl begins by taking issue with Freud's basic laws of motivation, the homeostasis principle, which posited that the human organism attempts unceasingly to maintain an inner equilibrium. The pleasure principle acts to maintain homeostasis and has as its fundamental goal the removal of tension. The pleasure principle operates in naked, unashamed form early in life; later, as the individual matures, the workings of the pleasure principle become more obscure when the reality principle requires delay or sublimation of gratification.

The problem with a theory that posits some inbuilt drive (that is, the "drive to pleasure" or "tension reduction") is that it is ultimately and devastatingly reductionistic. In this view man is "nothing but . . ." (and here may follow any of an infinite array of formulas). Frankl's favorite is: "Man is nothing but a complex biochemical mechanism powered by a combustion system which energizes computers with prodigious storage facilities for retaining encoded information."[69] Correspondingly, love, or altruism, or the search for truth, or beauty, is "nothing but" the expression of one or the other of the basic drives in duality theory. From this reductionistic point of view, as Frankl points out, "all cultural creations of humanity become actually by-products of the drive for personal satisfaction."[70]

The press toward reductionism in psychology has important implications for therapy. Human behavior is often motivated by unconscious

forces, and it is the task of the therapist to lay bare the patient's underlying psychodynamics. But Frankl argues (and quite correctly, I believe) that there comes a time when the unmasking has to stop. Materialism (that is, explaining the higher by the lower) is often undermining. Peace Corps volunteers do not always, to choose one example, elect to serve for self-serving reasons. Their desire to serve needs no "lower" or "deeper" justification; it reflects a will toward meaning, a reaching outside of self toward finding and fulfilling a purpose in life.

Frankl—along with many others (for example, Charlotte Buhler[71] and Gordon Allport[72])—believes that homeostatic theory fails to explain many central aspects of human life. What the human being needs, Frankl says, "is not a tensionless state but rather a striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him."[73] "It is a constitutive characteristic of being human that it always points, and is directed, to something other than itself."*[74]

Another major objection Frankl offers to a nontranscendent pleasure-principle view of human motivation is that it is always self-defeating. The more one seeks happiness, the more it will elude one. This observation (termed the "hedonistic paradox" by many professional philosophers[75]) led Frankl to say, "Happiness ensues; it cannot be pursued." (Alan Watts put it: "It's only when you seek it that you lose it."[76]) Pleasure is thus not the final goal but is a by-product of one's search for meaning.

Frankl calls his orientation the "third" Viennese school of psychotherapy:

> According to logotherapy, the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a "will to meaning" in contrast to the pleasure principle (or as we could also term it the "will to pleasure") on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the "will to power" stressed by Adlerian psychology.[77]

Elsewhere he states (following a suggestion of Aaron Ungersma[78]) that the primary motivating force in the human being undergoes a developmental sequence, and that the three Viennese schools reflect this evo-

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* Frankl's position is supported by a long line of phenomenologists, beginning with Franz Brentano and later Edmund Husserl, who discovered that consciousness is always "intentional": it is always directed to something outside of itself. One is always conscious of something outside of oneself.

lution: "The Freudian pleasure principle is the guiding principle of the small child, the Adlerian power principle is that of the adolescent, and the will to meaning is the guiding principle of the mature adult."[79] Frankl is careful to distinguish between drives (for example, sexual or aggressive) that *push* a person from within (or, as we generally experience it, from below) and meaning (and the values implicit in the meaning system) that *pulls* a person from without. The difference is between drive and strive. In our most essential being, in those characteristics that make us human rather than animal, we are not driven but instead actively strive for some goal. Striving, as opposed to being driven, implies not only that we are oriented toward something outside of self (that is, we are self-transcendent) but also that we are free—free to accept or to deny the goal that beckons us. "Striving" conveys a future orientation: we are pulled by what is to be, rather than pushed by relentless forces of past and present.

Meaning is essential for life, Frankl claims. It was essential for survival at Auschwitz, and it is essential for all people at all times. He cites a public opinion poll in France that showed that 89 percent of the general population believed that humans need "something" for the sake of which to live, and that 61 percent felt that there was something for which they would be willing to die.[80] Frankl is fond of commenting that, "though some psychiatrists state that life-meaning is nothing but defense mechanism and reaction formations, speaking for myself I would not be willing to live merely for my defense mechanisms and would be even less inclined to die for my reaction formations."[81]

Three Categories of Life Meaning. Though Frankl stresses that each individual has a meaning that no one else can fulfill, these unique meanings fall into three general categories: (1) what one accomplishes or gives to the world in terms of one's creations; (2) what one takes from the world in terms of encounters and experiences; (3) one's stand toward suffering, toward a fate that one cannot change.[82]

These three meaning systems—creative, experiential, and attitudinal—have all been touched upon in the previous discussion of various systems of personal meaning. Frankl defines creativity in conventional terms—that is, as a creative work or art or a scholarly endeavor that beckons one, and that each of us alone is uniquely equipped to fulfill. Frankl's sense that he, and only he, could write the book that illuminated the role of meaning in psychotherapy was, by his account, the major factor (aside from pure chance) that permitted him to endure and to survive Auschwitz. A wide array of life's activities, if approached creatively, may imbue one with meaning. "What matters," Frankl says,

"is not how large is the radius of your activities but how well you fill its circle."[83]

Frankl is less clear about the meaning derived from experience, but in general he refers to what one derives from beauty, from truth, and especially from love. Engagement in deep experience constitutes meaning: "If someone tapped your shoulder while listening to your favorite music, and asked you if life were meaningful, would you not," asks Frankl, "answer Yes? The same answer would be given by the nature lover on a mountain top, the religious person at a memorable service, the intellectual at an inspiring lecture, the artist in front of a masterpiece."[84]

Frankl's personal life experiences in Auschwitz demanded that he think deeply about the relationships between meaning and suffering, between pain and death. Survival in extreme circumstances depends upon one's being able to find a meaning in one's suffering. In the depth of despair in the concentration camp Frankl searched for ways to give meaning to his suffering and to the suffering of others. He concluded that only by surviving could he give meaning to his anguish. For him, survival meant that he could complete his work, that he could forge a valuable psychotherapeutic approach out of the horrors of his Auschwitz experience. Some inmates wished to survive for the sake of others, for children or a spouse who awaited them; some for the sake of completing some unique life project; some wished to survive to tell the world about the camps; some wished to survive for revenge. (One thinks of the Lithuanian ghetto at Kovno whose citizens wished to stay alive for the sake of recording all the atrocities that were perpetrated upon them: written narrative accounts, artists' drawings of faces, uniform serial numbers of SS officers and men were carefully noted and stored in an underground vault where, after the war, they were retrieved and used to bring the guilty to trial). At other times Frankl found meaning in suffering by remembering another aphorism of Nietzsche's: "That which does not kill me makes me stronger."[85] Suffering can have a meaning if it changes one for the better. And finally, even when there is no hope of escape from suffering and death, Frankl states that there is meaning in demonstrating to others, to God, and to oneself that one can suffer and die with dignity.

Frankl's categories of meaning supply him with psychotherapeutic strategies to aid the patient who is in a crisis of meaning. I shall consider these contributions shortly in the discussion on therapy, but shall now turn to the clinical implications of the loss of life meaning.

Loss of Meaning: Clinical Implications

OUR CHANGING CULTURE: WHERE HAVE ALL THE MEANINGS GONE?

Many clinicians have noted that, with accelerating frequency, patients come in for therapy because of complaints associated with lack of a sense of meaning in life. Why? What are the factors in contemporary culture that contribute to a decreasing sense of life meaning?

Citizens of the pre-industrial agricultural world were beset by many life problems, but today's malady of meaninglessness does not seem to have been one of them. Meaning was supplied then in many ways. For one thing the religious world view supplied an answer so comprehensive that the question of meaning was obscured. Furthermore, people of earlier ages were often so preoccupied with the task of meeting other more basic survival needs, such as food and shelter, that they were not afforded the luxury of examining their need for meaning. Indeed, as I shall discuss later, meaninglessness is intricately interwoven with leisure and with disengagement: the more one is engaged with the everyday process of living and surviving, the less does the issue arise. Tolstoy, whose crisis of meaninglessness I described at the beginning of this chapter, observed that the simple peasant on his estate seemed relatively untroubled by fundamental doubts. Tolstoy concluded that the peasant knew something that he did not, and, accordingly, he sought for relief from his torment by attempting to emulate the peasant in order to discover the latter's secret knowledge.

Citizens of the pre-industrialized world had other meaning-providing activities in their everyday life. They lived close to the earth, felt a part of nature, fulfilled nature's purpose in plowing the ground, sowing, reaping, cooking, and naturally and unself-consciously thrusting themselves into the future by begetting and raising children. Their everyday work was creative as they shared in the creation of life amongst their livestock and seed and grain. They had a strong sense of belonging to a larger unit; they were an integral part of a family and community and, in that context, were provided scripts and roles. Moreover, their work was intrinsically worthwhile. Who, after all, can challenge the task of growing food with the question What for? Growing food is an endeavor that is simply right beyond questioning.

But all those meanings have vanished. A citizen of today's urbanized, industrialized secular world must face life *sans* a religiously based cosmic meaning-system and wrenched from articulation with the natural world and the elemental chain of life. We have time, too much time,

to ask disturbing questions. As the four- and three-day work week loom ahead, we must brace ourselves for increasingly frequent crises of meaning. "Free" time is problematic because it thrusts freedom upon us.

Work, what there is of it, no longer supplies meaning. Not even an extraordinarily fertile imagination could imbue many common forms of modern work with creative potential. The assembly line worker, for example, not only has no creative outlet on the job but systematically begins to consider himself or herself as a mindless cog in the factory machinery. Furthermore, much work lacks intrinsic value. How can the members of clerical armies performing "busy" work in vast, wasteful bureaucratic systems believe that their activities are worthwhile? With the population explosion, and its exposure on the mass media, how can the individual help but doubt that the begetting and rearing of children is doing a favor to anyone, least of all to the planet or the human species?

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS

How does the clinician encounter the phenomenon of meaninglessness in everyday clinical work? Few clinicians doubt that the complaint is common: earlier in this chapter I cited comments by Jung, Frankl, Maddi, Wolman, and Hobbs attesting to the frequency of meaninglessness as a clinical complaint. Unfortunately few systematic clinical inquiries have been made.

My colleagues and I conducted a project several years ago that, though it studied only a small clinical sample, lends some support to the claims that meaninglessness is a frequent clinical complaint.[86] The chief problems of forty consecutive patients applying for therapy at a psychiatric outpatient clinic were investigated in three different ways: patient's written self-report, therapist's report, conclusions of three clinicians observing a videotape of a clinical interview with each patient. Of the forty patients, nine listed some problem (most patients compiled a total list of three to six problems) centering around lack of meaning (such as "lack of purpose," "need for meaningfulness in my life," "don't know why I'm doing what I'm doing," "drifting without a goal," "lack of direction in my life"). The therapist and independent raters rated five of these nine patients as having a major problem surrounding meaning, but also included three additional patients (who listed the problems of "lacks meaning in life," "purposelessness," and "vague life goals"). Thus of forty patients, twelve (30 percent) had some major problem involving meaning (as adjudged from self-ratings, therapists, or independent judges).

Jill Gardner studied eighty-nine patients applying for therapy at an outpatient clinic.[87] The patients were asked to indicate the importance of sixteen different reasons for entering therapy. Of the patients 68 percent rated "to seek increased meaning in life" as "moderately" or "very" important. This item ranked ninth of the sixteen reasons and well ahead of such items as "to change how I relate to people" and "loneliness."

Meaninglessness is rarely mentioned as a clinical entity because it is generally considered to be a manifestation of some other, primary, and more familiar clinical syndrome. Indeed, Freud once stated, "The moment a man questions the meaning of life, he is sick. . . . By asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression."[88] Accordingly, meaninglessness is considered a symptom of some more significant underlying condition, such as chronic alcoholism, other forms of substance abuse, low self-esteem, depression, and identity crisis.

But let us examine what observations have been made of the clinical manifestations of meaninglessness. First, there is its ubiquity. I find that virtually every patient I have worked with has either gratuitously expressed concern about the lack of meaning in his or her life or has readily responded to inquiries I have made about the issue.

Existential Vacuum and Existential Neurosis. Frankl distinguishes two stages of a meaninglessness syndrome: the existential vacuum and the existential neurosis. The existential vacuum—or, as he sometimes terms it, "existential frustration"—is a common phenomenon and is characterized by the subjective state of boredom, apathy, and emptiness. One feels cynical, lacks direction and questions the point of most of life's activities. Some complain of a void and a vague discontent when the busy week is over (the "Sunday neurosis"). Free time makes one aware of the fact that there is nothing one *wants* to do. Frankl claims that existential frustration is increasing in frequency and spreading into all parts of the world. In one study he reports an incidence of "existential vacuum" of 40 percent for college students in Vienna and of 81 percent for American college students.[89] In another study he reports a rapid spread into such areas as Czechoslovakia, other Iron Curtain countries, and Africa.[90] Alois Habinger reports a rise in the incidence of existential frustration among youngsters over a two-year period in Vienna (1970–72)—30 to 80 percent![91] As the method of inquiry is not reported in any of these accounts (aside from the comment "improvised statistical survey"), we cannot take these hyperbolic data literally; but if they

even remotely reflect the incidence of existential vacuum, they are noteworthy.

If the patient develops, in addition to explicit feelings of meaninglessness, overt clinical neurotic symptomatology, then Frankl refers to the condition as an existential or "noogenic" neurosis. He posits a psychological *horror vacui: when there is a distinct (existential) vacuum, symptoms will rush in to fill it.* The noogenic neurosis may, according to Frankl, take any clinical neurotic form; he mentions various symptomatic pictures—alcoholism, depression, obsessionalism, delinquency, hyperinflation of sex, daredevilry. What differentiates noogenic neurosis from conventional psychoneurosis is that the symptoms are a manifestation of a thwarted will to meaning. Behavioral patterns also reflect a crisis of meaninglessness. Modern man's dilemma, Frankl states, is that one is not told by instinct what one *must* do, or any longer by tradition what one *should* do. Nor does one know what one *wants* to do. Two common behavioral reactions to this crisis of values are *conformity* (doing what others do) and *submission to totalitarianism* (doing what others wish).

Crusadism, Nihilism, and Vegetativeness. Salvador Maddi suggests that a significant amount of current psychopathology emanates from a sense of meaninglessness.[92] (Note, however, that Maddi's clinical material is limited,[93] and his basic orientation is that of a macrotheoretician and academic psychologist.) He describes three clinical forms of "existential sickness" (as he terms pervasive meaninglessness): crusadism, nihilism, and vegetativeness.

Crusadism (also termed "adventurousness"[94]) is characterized by a powerful inclination to seek out and to dedicate oneself to dramatic and important causes. These individuals are demonstrators looking for an issue; they embrace a cause almost regardless of its content. As soon as one cause is finished, these hard-core activists must rapidly find another in order to stay one step ahead of the meaninglessness that pursues them.

The fact that the crusader searches out causes almost indiscriminately does not, of course, imply that most or even many supporters of any given social movement are motivated by similar factors. Nor is zeal for social change to be regarded as a defense mechanism. But involvement in a social movement is generally time-consuming, exhausting, and, if it involves civil disobedience, often dangerous. When a movement's purpose is accomplished, the participants, unlike the crusader, generally return to the business of their everyday lives. Crusadism, as Maddi describes it, is thus a reaction formation; the individual engages compulsively in activities in response to a deep sense of purposelessness.

10 / *Meaninglessness*

Nihilism is characterized by an active, pervasive proclivity to discredit activities purported by others to have meaning. The nihilist's energy and behavior flow from despair; he or she seeks the angry pleasure involved in destruction to quote Maddi:

> He will be quick to point out that love is not altruistic but selfish, how philanthropy is a way of expiating guilt, that children are vicious rather than innocent, how leaders are vain and power-mad rather than inspired by a grand vision, and how work is not productive but rather a thin veneer of civilization hiding the monster in us all.[95]

Nihilism is so common, Maddi suggests, that it is not even recognized as a problem; in fact, it often masquerades as a highly enlightened, sophisticated approach to life. He cites the novelist and film maker Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose film, *Last Year at Marienbad,* contains seemingly meaningful threads but each defies the attempts of the moviegoer to discover its meaning. The film, Maddi suggests, was intended to frustrate any search for meaning in order to demonstrate the futility of believing in the meaningfulness of anything.

The *vegetative* form of existential sickness is the most extreme degree of purposelessness. One does not compulsively search for meaning in causes; nor does one angrily lash out at meaning embraced by others. Instead, one sinks into a severe state of aimlessness and apathy—a state that has widespread cognitive, affective, and behavioral expressions. The *cognitive* component is the chronic inability to believe in the usefulness or the value of any of life's endeavors. The *affective* tone is one of pervasive blandness and boredom, which are punctuated by episodic depressions. As the condition progresses, the individual settles into indifference, and periods of depression become less frequent. Overall *behavioral* levels are low to moderate, but even more important is the lack of selectivity of behavior: it becomes immaterial to the person which activities, if any, he or she pursues.

The vegetative trend is widespread in contemporary culture. Maddi suggests that it is clearly reflected in such artistic creations as the films of Antonioni, T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland,* Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story,* Jean Genet's *The Balcony.* The contemporary film *Easy Rider* is a particularly vivid example of apathy and meaninglessness.

Individuals with a developing vegetative syndrome may seek therapeutic help for the associated depression and painful doubting. The therapist may note that such a patient is not troubled with guilt or esteem-identity problems or with manifestations of sexual or aggressive concerns. Instead, the patient voices such concerns as: Why bother working all your life if everything ends in death? Why spend half your

life going to school? Why marry? Why raise a family? Why endure any deprivation? Aren't all values arbitrary, all goals illusionary?

If the condition progresses unchecked, the patient sinks deeper into indifference. He or she may withdraw from any engagement with life by becoming a recluse, a chronic alcoholic, or a hobo or by adopting some other analogous life pattern. Maddi suggests that many institutionalized patients are in a vegetative form of meaninglessness but, because they must be labeled with some official nosological diagnosis, are generally referred to as simple schizophrenics—a term now recognized to be a misnomer. Some vegetative patients are diagnosed as psychotically depressed. Even though they may not show the signs and symptoms of depression, the assumption is made that if they are vegetative they must be depressed. Maddi argues that at least some proportion of institutionalized patients with these diagnoses or other makeshift labels might, more appropriately, be considered existentially ill.

Compulsive Activity. The preceding clinical forms of meaninglessness are not, of course, observed commonly as full-blown entities but represent a clinical paradigm. Features and varying degrees of severity may be seen in many patients, often mingled with other clinical complaints. In my experience one of the more common clinical forms of meaninglessness is a pattern of frenetic activity that so consumes the individual's energy that the issue of meaning is drained of its toxin. This pattern is related to crusaderism but is broader in scope. Not only some dramatic social cause but any compelling human activity can be so cathected that it serves as a caricature of meaning. When the activity has no intrinsic "goodness" or "rightness," then it sooner or later will fail the individual. This phenomenon, which James Pike referred to as a "false centering" of life,[96] generally comes to the clinician's attention when the vehicle of meaning has collapsed or is in obvious danger of collapsing. Examples abound in which individuals in pursuit of meaning through social position, prestige, material acquisitions, or power suddenly are forced to question the value of these goals as life pursuits.

Harvey, a forty-two-year-old patient provides a clinical illustration. Harvey's original request for therapy was unusual: a quarrel with his wife over whether to buy first-class or tourist airline tickets propelled him into therapy. The circumstances were as follows. Harvey's father was a middle-class, compulsively busy merchant. The whole family, including Harvey, worked long hours six to seven days a week in the family grocery store. Gradually the business expanded into a second and a third store. The business constituted the universe of the family and of Harvey as well. He subscribed to the family's work ethic and

considered business prosperity as his *raison d'être*. His long working hours even as a child precluded his developing important chumships or heterosexual relationships, and at the time of graduation from high school he had never spent a night away from home. His identity was that of a "good boy," who never questioned, never rebelled, never thought deeply about himself or about life.

Following graduation from college (a business curriculum), he took over the family business (his father had died in harness) and had a highly successful business career. Through a variety of circumstances—an economically brilliant marriage, an excellent and experienced partner, and his own circumspect intelligence—he built up a nationwide chain of stores which he then sold for a dazzling sum to a large corporation. At thirty he had amassed a fortune of several million 1965 dollars. At this point he might have let up for a brief while, relaxed, perhaps even thought deeply about What next? Whither? or What for? Instead, he plunged immediately into another business enterprise, soon was working over seventy hours a week, and was so consumed with business concerns that his marriage was in peril. When he came for therapy, he had plans for a third empire, since he wanted to see if he could start a business from scratch, with little capital, no business partners, and no outside counsel (the business equivalent of wilderness survival).

Harvey became aware of certain troublesome incongruities. The economical practices of his family of origin stayed with him; and, despite the fact that his income from interest alone was enormous, he searched the newspaper for sales when he shopped and was perfectly willing to drive several miles to save a few dollars on a television set.

But it was the airline ticket caper that spurred him into taking a serious look at his goals in life. He, his wife, and another couple were planning a vacation to the Orient. The difference between first class and coach for the twelve-hour flight was several hundred dollars a ticket. Harvey's wife, his friend (who incidentally worked for Harvey), and the friend's wife all wished to fly first class. Harvey refused to spend the extra money for a wider seat and free champagne (as he put it); and he booked a coach ticket, while the other three, including his wife, traveled first class! Harvey had a good sense of humor and recognized the comedy of the situation; still, he was deeply troubled by the situation and developed anxiety, insomnia, and some hypochondriacal complaints. At this juncture he sought psychotherapy.

In therapy the airline ticket episode became the fulcrum for a far-ranging discussion of values. If money was to be spent lavishly for triv-

ial comforts, why was Harvey killing himself to make more money? Why devote his entire life to money? He had already more than he could spend and had proved he could earn it. He began to question his basic life-long meaning system. One of the first insights Harvey acquired in therapy was that he had falsely centered his life, since material good constituted at best a fragile sense of life meaning—one that would not withstand examination.

The event that propelled Harvey into a crisis of meaning was that he had successfully and precociously achieved his life goal (always a danger in a nontranscendent life-meaning schema). Other events that may precipitate such a crisis include a confrontation with death or some urgent (boundary) experience that confronts the individual with his or her existential situation and illuminates the insubstantial nature of many systems of meaning. Some major upheaval that suddenly uproots the ritual and tradition of the social order may also throw certain values (for example, the social customs of "society") into sharp relief: one not only stops being rewarded extrinsically for adherence to ritual but, even more important, one becomes aware of the absolute relativity of the values one once considered as absolutes.

Some patients undergo a crisis of meaning as a result of psychotherapy. As patients explore themselves deeply and open new vistas within, old compulsive patterns are undermined and eventually decathected. Patients who for much of their life have lived narrowly within the confines of fixed repetitive patterns are faced with the freedom that their compulsivity has guarded them from. For example, the sexually compulsive patient Bruce, whom I described in chapter 5, had always filled "free" or reflective time with sexual fantasy or pursuit. When, in the course of successful therapy, Bruce's compulsivity weakened and then entirely loosened its hold on him, he passed through a crisis of meaning. (It was not that he had a prior, satisfying sense of meaning, but his compulsive activity had always provided a potent antidote to meaninglessness—namely *engagement*. The problem was that *content* of Bruce's compulsive engagement was so limited and restrictive that he failed to realize many of his deeply human potentials. Consequently he had no conscious crisis of meaning in his life, but in its place he experienced massive existential guilt—guilt at not becoming what he had it in him to be.)

When Bruce first faced life *sans* compulsive activity, life seemed to him flat, colorless, zestless, and, above all, pointless. Much time in therapy was then devoted to an exploration of goals, to examining what Bruce's internal wisdom told him about what should be the basis for his life.

Clinical Research

The Purpose in Life Test. In 1964, James Crumbaugh and Leonard Maholick, two psychologists greatly influenced by the work of Viktor Frankl, published a psychometric instrument designed to measure purpose in life.[97] This questionnaire, *the Purpose in Life Test* (PIL), consists of twenty items to be rated on a seven-point scale.* On each item, position 4 is designated as "neutral," and different descriptive terms are given for positions 1 and 7. For example the first item reads: "I am usually . . ."; and position 1 is defined as "completely bored," while position 7 is "exuberant, enthusiastic." The other nineteen items, with their two defined anchor points, are:

2.	Life to me seems:	(1) completely routine;	(7) always exciting.
3.	In life I have:	(1) no goals or aims at all;	(7) very clear goals and aims.
4.	My personal existence is:	(1) utterly meaningless, without purpose;	(7) very purposeful and meaningful.
5.	Every day is:	(1) exactly the same;	(7) constantly new and different.
6.	If I could choose, I would:	(1) prefer never to have been born;	(7) like nine more lives just like this one.
7.	After retiring, I would:	(1) loaf completely the rest of my life;	(7) do some of the exciting things I've always wanted to.
8.	In achieving life goals I have:	(1) made no progress whatever;	(7) progressed to complete fulfillment.
9.	My life is:	(1) empty, filled only with despair;	(7) running over with exciting good things.
10.	If I should die today, I would feel that my life has been:	(1) completely worthless;	(7) very worthwhile.
11.	In thinking of my life I:	(1) often wonder why I exist;	(7) always see a reason for my being here.
12.	As I view the world in relation to my life, the world:	(1) completely confuses me;	(7) fits meaningfully with my life.
13.	I am a:	(1) very irresponsible person;	(7) very responsible person.
14.	Concerning man's freedom to make his own choices, I believe man is:	(1) completely bound by limitations of heredity and environment;	(7) absolutely free to make all life choices.

*The instrument originally consisted of two additional sections: a thirteen-item completion part and an open-ended paragraph to be written on personal ambitions and goals; however, only the first section has been used in subsequent research.[98]

15. With regard to death, I am:	(1) unprepared and frightened;	(7) prepared and unafraid.
16. With regard to suicide, I have:	(1) thought of it seriously as a way out;	(7) never given it a second thought.
17. I regard my ability to find a meaning, a purpose, or mission in life as:	(1) practically none;	(7) very great.
18. My life is:	(1) out of my hands and controlled by external factors;	(7) in my hands and I am in control of it.
19. Facing my daily tasks is:	(1) a painful and boring experience;	(7) a source of pleasure and satisfaction.
20. I have discovered:	(1) no mission or purpose in life;	(7) clear-cut goals and a satisfying life purpose.

The PIL test has enjoyed wide usage; over fifty Ph.D. dissertations on purpose in life have been written which employ it as a major measuring tool; but before discussing some of the results of this research, I shall closely examine the validity of the instrument.

First, the face content of the items deals with several different concepts. Eight items (3,4,7,8,12,17,20) deal explicitly with life meaning (purpose, mission); six items (1,2,5,6,9,19) deal with life satisfaction (life is boring, routine, exciting, or painful); three items (13,14,18) deal with freedom, one item (15), with fear of death; one (16), with contemplation of suicide; and one (10) with worthwhileness of one's life. To my mind this conceptual confusion raises serious questions about the validity of the instrument. Although, for example, life satisfaction or consideration of suicide may be related to meaning in life, they are even more obviously related to other psychological states—most notably depression. Little information has been provided by the test authors about methods of item selection or of individual item behavior. In the light of these methodological shortcomings, one reviewer suggested that a single item "How meaningful is your life?" might be as valid as the entire scale.[99]

Furthermore, the PIL is obviously loaded in social desirability (a correlation coefficient of .57 is reported with the Marloew-Crowne Social Desirability scale).[100] The PIL, as critics have pointed out,[101] reflects certain values: for example, it assumes that responsibility acceptance is equivalent to a positive sense of life meaning. Although this is an interesting hypothesis, it is not clear that responsibility and meaning are so related.

Charles Garfield administered the PIL to subjects from several sub-

cultures (ghetto residents, engineers, graduate students in psychology and religious studies, commune inhabitants) and then interviewed subjects with high, low, and intermediate scores to determine what each item meant to them.[102] Depending in part upon their culture, subjects interpreted the items in highly idiosyncratic ways. For example, on item 9 ("My life is: empty . . . [or] running over with exciting good things") ghetto residents thought of empty stomachs, commune residents viewed "empty" as associated with losing one's ego in meditation and bliss, engineers equated "empty" with dullness, and psychology students viewed "exciting" as not a good thing but associated it with agitation or nervous activity. Similar divergent responses on other items underscored the facts that not only is the wording ambiguous but also that the test is highly value-laden and based on assumptions inherent in a Protestant work ethic, with emphasis on goal-directed behavior, future orientation, activity over passivity, and the positivity of high levels of stimulation.

These criticisms are substantial, indeed devastating, and have never been satisfactorily answered by researchers using the PIL; they all make it difficult for one to have a high level of confidence in the instrument. Still, it is the only game in town, the only psychological instrument that has been used widely to study meaninglessness in a systematic manner. Keeping these reservations in mind, let me consider some of the research findings.

First, several validity studies have indicated that the test results correlate satisfactorily with therapists' ratings of life purpose in patients (correlation of .38) and with ministers' ratings of parishioners (.47).[103] By and large, patient populations have a lower PIL than have nonpatients (although some studies are equivocal; for example, one showed a surprisingly small difference in the scores of indigent psychiatric patients and undergraduate students—108 versus 106).*[104] Furthermore, the PIL seems to measure an independent personality variable: it does not correlate highly with other scales (aside from the MMPI Depression Scale,[105] some moderate overlap with the Srole Anomie Scale, and , as I already noted, the Social Desirability Scale).

The PIL has been employed in many clinical settings with diverse populations. Delinquent adolescents[106] and high school students[107] who abuse drugs have been shown to have low PIL scores. Patients hospitalized for chronic alcoholism and psychotic disorders have lower PIL

* Note that there are twenty items, each with a seven-point scale: the highest score is, thus, 140; the lowest, 20.

scores than have neurotic outpatients.[108] The mean of both hospitalized patients and outpatients is significantly lower than in a nonpatient sample.[109] Alcoholics have been reported as having particularly low PIL scores.[110] Another study showed only low-normal scores for hospitalized alcoholics but did note that, with a month-long treatment program, the PIL score rose significantly.[111] A study of outpatients in a British clinic demonstrated that the more highly neurotic and socially introverted patients (as measured by the Eysenck Personality Inventory) have lower PIL scores.[112] Sexual adjustment was studied in a group of normal undergraduates, and it was found that the more sexually frustrated and maladjusted students have lower PIL scores.[113] One study compared PIL scores of physically ill patients and reported an interesting finding: patients who were critically ill had higher PIL scores than had patients with a minor ailment or nonpatients.[114] The authors speculated that these results indicate the approach of death catalyzed the critically ill patients to come to terms with their lives, to "work through" their doubts, and to come to some inner peace.

The relationship between social and religious attitudes and values (Rokeach Value Survey) has been much studied. A low PIL score has been shown to correlate with high valuing of hedonism, excitation, and comfort.[115] A high PIL has been shown to correlate with strong religious beliefs that play a central role in the individual's life.[116] (However, another study fails to replicate this finding.[117]) Another study demonstrates a correlation between a high PIL and conservatism, antihedonism, religious-puritanical values, and idealism.[118] Successfully matriculating Dominican nuns have higher PIL scores than have their less successful cohorts.[119] Two studies demonstrate that a high purpose in life is associated with low death anxiety.[120]

Earlier I discussed how involvement in a meaningful group or cause increases one's sense of meaning. Several studies have tested this concept and demonstrate that a high PIL score is correlated with involvement in organized groups (either religious, ethnic, political, or community service)[121] and involvement in sports and hobbies.[122] (One study, however, reveals no correlation between social activism [civil rights demonstrations] and PIL.[123] Could this be a result of the presence of some of Maddi's "crusaders"?) An Australian study reports a correlation between high PIL and a positive world view, goal orientation, and self-transcendent goals (that is, interests that extend beyond the individual's material and mental well-being).[124] Another study indicates that high PIL undergraduates are significantly more likely to have made vocational choices than are those with low PIL scores.[125] How-

ever, a study of business executives and nurses indicates no relationship between PIL scores and work attitudes or work motivation.[126]

Finally, it has been shown that ghetto residents, blacks[127] or Mexican-Americans[128] have lower PIL scores. There are contradictory findings on the general relationship between PIL and social-economic class[129] and also between males and females—with males generally found to have higher PIL scores.[130]

The Life Regard Index. Before considering the implications of these findings, let me briefly examine one other instrument designed to study life meaning. The Life Regard Index (John Battista and Richard Almond) is more conceptually sophisticated than the PIL but has unfortunately had no subsequent use.[131] The instrument differentiates "framework" items (such as "I have a clear idea of what I'd like to do with my life") from fulfillment items (such as "I feel that I am living fully"). The authors suggest that both a framework and a belief that one is fulfilling that framework is necessary to a sense of life meaning. The instrument was successfully validated via interviews of subjects, correlates highly with the PIL, and is probably free of the confounding effects of social desirability. The relation between self-esteem and a life-regard (meaning in life) was explored. The authors concluded that a satisfactory level of self-esteem is necessary but not sufficient for a well-developed sense of meaning: that is, it is possible for an individual with high self-esteem to have low meaning in life but not for one with low esteem to have high meaning. One must, as Erik Erikson suggested, solve the task of establishing self-worth and personal identity before being able to develop a satisfying sense of life meaning.

The research suggests that positive life meaning is dependent upon some fit between one's goals and values and the roles and needs of the social structure in which one is enmeshed. Finally, the authors demonstrated that one has a greater sense of meaning if one perceives oneself as approaching one's goals at a satisfactory rate.

Summary of Research Results. The empirical research on meaning in life corroborates the following:

1. A lack of sense of meaning in life is associated with psychopathology in a roughly linear sense: that is, the less the sense of meaning, the greater the severity of psychopathology.
2. A positive sense of meaning in life is associated with deeply held religious beliefs.
3. A positive sense of life meaning is associated with self-transcendent values.

4. A positive sense of meaning in life is associated with membership in groups, dedication to some cause, and adoption of clear life goals.
5. Life meaning must be viewed in a developmental perspective: the types of life meaning change over an individual's life; other developmental tasks must precede development of meaning.

A caveat: it is important to note the wording of these conclusions. The phrase "is associated with" recurs: for example, a low sense of meaning in life "is associated with" psychopathology. That does not mean, however, that there is any evidence that the absence of meaning *causes* psychopathology. All the research studies are correlative: they merely demonstrate that diminished life meaning and pathology co-occur. One might equally well argue from this research that diminished life meaning is a function—that is, a symptom—of pathology. Indeed, one study demonstrates that in depressed patients, the sense of life meaning is dramatically increased by electroshock therapy![132]