

Chapter 4

The search for meaning

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalisation' of instinctual drives.

Viktor Frankl¹

This chapter examines what is understood by the notion of search for meaning, which is regarded as a key developmental task for adolescents. It proposes a preliminary set of criteria for what constitutes healthy meaning. Taking a value stance on what sort of meaning young people need is a prerequisite for planning an education in meaning.

The phrase 'search for meaning' was popularised by Viktor Frankl's book *Man's search for meaning* (1964).² As shown in the last two chapters, searching for meaning has long been a defining characteristic of the human person. But over the last fifty years it has become a more prominent issue for three reasons: first, a decline in the relevance of traditional sources of meaning like religion and family; second, a greater emphasis on individualism where people rely more on their own resources for constructing personal meaning; and third, that 'progress' and 'development' in Western technological societies have not always equated with increased happiness, and people are puzzled about the causes of personal and social unrest. Hence more time and angst is going into trying to make sense of life, whereas in the past more of the meaning people relied on was taken for granted.

Research and writings about youth have suggested that the search for meaning and identity is a more problematic developmental task for young people than it was formerly.³ But not enough attention has been given to what this search entails and why it is needed. More needs to be done in clarifying just what is understood by 'meaning' and how it functions psychologically.

4.1 What is the 'search for meaning'?

What does it mean to 'search' for meaning? And why do people need to do this? Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl believed that looking for meaning was a fundamental human drive – essential to what it means to be human, something like a basic human instinct, as expressed in the quotation above. However, while the capacity to make meaning appears to be genetic, meaning itself does not come instinctively; it has to be absorbed and constructed from experience and community resources; and eventually, as one matures, it needs to be consciously chosen and articulated. To adapt St Anselm's words (2.5), one could describe the search for meaning as 'Life seeking understanding'.

Frankl believed that it was natural for people to articulate their personal meaning in belief statements, whether or not they were religious. Just how much individuals constructed their own personal statements of meaning, or the extent to which they adopted existing formulae from particular communities of meaning, would vary. Frankl proposed a central role for understanding and reason and he cautioned against exaggerated individualism in the search for meaning:

A human being is not one in pursuit of happiness, but rather in search of a reason to become happy.

The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected.⁴

[2 separate quote paras]

Frankl stressed a genetic 'will to meaning' and its dimensions of rationality and commitment. This provides a basis for an education in meaning. However, it would be a mistake to presume that all young people show an overt need for meaning, or an interest in searching for it. For some adolescents the search for meaning is a central concern; others may not want to give it much thought; while for others, the search for meaning may be a health hazard! For many, the pursuit of immediate happiness and satisfaction is more important than finding meaning. Some young people occupy each of these positions at different periods of their life. Nevertheless, the idea of promoting personal meaning is a good ideal to propose for personal development, and as such it can be a valuable educational goal.

The idea of a search for meaning suggests that

- people consciously look for theories that give satisfying insight into life;
- conscious effort is required for appropriating and developing meaning – it does not come automatically or easily;
- there may be a felt deficit of meaning that motivates people to look for something more meaningful than currently held theories;
- usually the individual is the one who ultimately decides for himself/herself what is meaningful;
- the search may involve a conscious evaluation of available meanings;
- meaning or a satisfying interpretation may come after the event – it can develop through attempts to understand what has happened.

It may be that searching for meaning is a symptom of something more fundamental. When things go wrong, whether this is a traumatic event or a gradual change, current meaning can be called into question. It may no longer provide a satisfactory explanation of life, or adequate motivation. If this is the case, then a better description of what is happening is 'problems in life that prompt a review of personal meaning'.

If there is to be a *search* for meaning, the impression readily given is that the search is catalysed and driven by some sensed lack of meaning; there is angst about meaning. A dissonance between new experience and older meaning may prompt the individual to try to find a more satisfying explanation of new circumstances. In some cases, individuals may learn to live in a different way and only then detect the new meaning in what they are doing. In other words, it is not just a cognitive task of looking for new meaning and adopting it. It may entail experimenting with different ways of living and then putting the practice into theory.

An interesting empirical question emerging from this discussion is to discover what prompts change in personal meaning. What are the sorts of experiences that young people think have changed their meaning? Is it always triggered by difficulty or trauma? Or is the change slower? Do many seek to develop their personal meaning through reflection, study and reading?

For those who are depressed and without hope, the search for meaning may be the last crucial process in the maintenance of mental health. If they have some beliefs they feel are worth living for, this can make a difference. On the other hand, if they do not have any robust inner meaning, this can add to the depression and make the search for meaning a further health hazard; more thinking can be more depressing. In these circumstances, searching for meaning may be better postponed. Being helped to get on with life and involved in activities, putting aside negative thoughts, may be a more useful therapy, with the development of meaning from this experience coming into the picture at a later stage.

4.2 Issues related to the search for meaning

Issues that have a bearing on the search for meaning are considered in the following sequence:

- 4.2.1 Individual and community frames of reference for meaning
- 4.2.2 Flight from meaning and the avoidance of meaning
- 4.2.3 Maturity in the development of meaning
- 4.2.4 Maturity of meaning in the light of postmodern concerns about uncertainty in personal knowledge

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4.2.1 Individual and community frames of reference for meaning

Problems arise where people are relatively alone and too dependent on their own psychic resources for the construction of meaning. There is a need for a community frame of reference, and for community support, especially for the early stages of meaning development in children and adolescents.

One of the major cultural problems with individualism is that it may appear to young people to be one of the few things left for them to believe in. American psychologist Martin Seligman considered that

one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self; and the larger that entity, the more meaning you can derive.

To the extent that it is now difficult for young people to take seriously their relationship to God, to care about their relationship to the country, or to be part of a large and abiding family, meaning in life will be very difficult to find. The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning.⁵

Young people can feel caught in a bind. The culture lauds individualism; the commercial world does everything it can to make individualism a marketable commodity. But excessive individualism can be the cause of a pathological aloneness; it can erode a sense of community, and it can put unnecessary pressure on young people to have to work out meaning and purpose by themselves.

While meaning ultimately needs to be appropriated by the individual, it may be expecting too much of the human condition to have children and adolescents construct meaning entirely by themselves. They need resources in meaning from the community. It is a question of balance.

4.2.2 Flight from meaning and the avoidance of meaning

This section looks at ways in which people avoid searching for meaning (3.2.2). Reflection and interpretation are central to meaning. Those who invariably act on their immediate feelings may consciously avoid the reflection and interpretation that might acknowledge the implied meaning in their behaviour because it is questionable. While they may have interaction with others, and while they may nominally espouse causes (such as the environment and animal welfare), their frame of reference for values is self-centred. Everything is measured in terms of its convenience or advantage to individuals, who may devote much of their time to the sort of entertainment that distracts from reflection.

Television, now with extensive programming available through cable and satellite, offers enormous scope for entertainment at home; it provides unlimited opportunities for engaging the viewer's attention and for time-wasting. Television may thus inhibit the sort of reflection that is important for the development of meaning. For some, excessive time spent absorbed in television soap operas, sitcoms, dramas and 'reality' programs can signal a life without much meaning – also evident in the hours spent flicking a remote control up and down the spectrum of available channels, searching for something that will attract and hold their attention. Such an addiction to television watching can help settle people into life at a superficial level. Much of the programming they watch shows little of the depth and complexity that characterise real life, while the so-called 'reality' programs pick up on a few issues that are inevitably distorted in the quest for entertainment ratings (see Chapter 15).

4.2.3 Maturity in the development of meaning

This section looks at some of the characteristics that might be expected of people with wise meaning that gives direction, purpose and energy to their living. In 1980, James Fowler, a developmental psychologist in the United States with a special interest in Christian religious education, published his research in a book titled *Stages of faith*.⁶ It had a significant effect on thinking about spiritual development, and it complemented other theories of personal development that involved structural developmental stages (such as those of Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, and Kegan).

One of the focal points of Fowler's theory was evident in the subtitle to his book: *The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. He explored the processes through which meaning was constructed across the life cycle. His developmental stages showed how children were dependent on parental figures for meaning; as they grew older, they were socialised into community meanings. He highlighted the ways in which individuals progressed from authority-dependent meaning to more autonomy. In the later stages of development, they did not need to defend the boundaries of their meaning so strongly, and they could be open to a wider range of new meanings without anxiety or threat to their own identity. They did not need to collapse the polarities and tensions within their meanings.

Fowler's work is a useful resource for appraising maturity in meaning. Any such appraisal inevitably involves value judgments. Also, maturity needs to be assessed in both the *content* and the *process* of meaning-making. The extent to which personal meaning flows into action is an additional aspect of maturity; this thinking moves closer to the relationship between meaning and *character* or *virtues*.

While the notion of a self-appraisal of meaning can readily be recommended, the extent to which others and community agencies (like schools) might be engaged in the appraisal of personal meaning is difficult to determine, and it involves ethical

questions. While in therapy and counselling people give privileged access to their personal meanings, their meaning needs protection in the public domain; here, the evaluation of meaning is more appropriately concerned with a general educational exploration of content and process in meaning-making, leaving individuals free to draw their own personal implications.

4.2.4 Maturity of meaning in the light of postmodern concerns about uncertainty in personal knowledge

Section 2.10.9 drew attention to the questioning and uncertainty that typify culture in Western technological societies. Hence a key task in the contemporary search for meaning is how to negotiate the apparent agnosticism about meaning that goes with cultural postmodernity. Two issues need to be addressed: Can there be trustworthy meaning when there is so much questioning, uncertainty and relativism? What does truth mean in a constantly changing landscape of meanings?

The postmodern uncertainty about meaning is one of the defining characteristics of Western culture at the turn of the millennium. There have always been wars, violence, political unrest and corruption; but now people are told about it on a daily basis – every time they turn on the television, they are confronted with what is happening in the various trouble spots around the globe. In addition, terrorism has become a more prominent threat worldwide, as has the widening gap between the rich and the poor. All of this heightens the uncertainty and anxiety people are feeling. They are puzzled about what is happening in the world; they cannot make sense of it; they are not sure of where things are going. For many, traditional beliefs and values do not provide the security and direction they appeared to give formerly. There is a need to understand how and why culture is moving from a period of apparent security and certainty in meaning towards one where there is more uncertainty and less security.

It is not just that a lot of new uncertainties have been introduced but that the incipient uncertainties that were always there in the past, just beneath the surface, have become more visible. This is disconcerting for a greater number of people. No longer is it a matter of finding meaning within an accepted framework; cultural postmodernity tends to call frameworks into question. Where the questioning of meaning becomes excessive, there is a danger that people will become increasingly self-centred and will channel most of their energies into satisfying present needs in an individualistic way, with disdain for both the support and the responsibilities associated with communities of meaning.

A first step in addressing the crisis of meaning is to *acknowledge* and *articulate* the naturally high levels of complexity and uncertainty in life across many domains that have resulted from cultural and technological progress – although the meaning of what constitutes ‘progress’ is part of the problem. Hence it may be unrealistic to expect that meanings should be absolutely certain or true, and that they should be totally secure; that is not the nature of human meanings. They always have some measure of inbuilt uncertainty, even though people may have been unwilling ever to acknowledge this; human meaning always involves interpretation, even if an interpretation of reality outside the person. In other words, there may be access to absolute truths outside the individual, but this access will always be partial as far as the individual’s knowing and meaning is concerned.

Then there is the question of how one can live constructively, comfortably and securely with partial meanings; and how one can accept a tolerable level of

uncertainty that goes naturally with both the personal meaning-making process and a culture that is very critical and questioning. It is not a matter of being unable to know absolute truth, but of acknowledging that one cannot know *all* of the absolute truth, because it is too large and complex. This is not relativism, classic agnosticism or a pragmatic functionalism. Constructive, functional meaning does not have to be perfect or absolute. Fidelity in commitments can be maintained while admitting natural uncertainties in the personal knowing and meaning-making processes.

From this point of view, growth towards maturity in meaning involves replacing *false certainties* with *true uncertainties*. It means learning how to cope with a natural level of complexity and live with the valuable partial meanings that individuals can construct in connection with community life; and it includes valuing traditional meanings even if they are reinterpreted anew from generation to generation. This approach to meaning-making applies to those who are religious believers as well as to those who are not. Admittedly, it is the sort of maturity that might be expected of adults. Also, it can be more suited to some personalities than others; some find it difficult to live with too many 'loose ends', especially as regards their ultimate meanings. Inevitably, some will reject this view as relativism of a sort because it admits to a level of uncertainty in personal knowledge that they are not prepared to accept.

This interpretation has implications for religious people: for example, acknowledging a degree of uncertainty in the physical or historical details related to their religious beliefs and accepting this as a normal part of faith, as well as accepting that religious doctrine is socially constructed and has usually evolved over time. Some, however, would want a stronger place for historicity and unchanging doctrine.

The differences in epistemology implied in the above discussion need to be acknowledged; this is significant in the public debate about what might be entailed in an education in meaning. We think there will never be full community consensus about the issues. But it is still possible to work at clarifying what can be attempted in an education in meaning.

A capacity to live with some uncertainty in the meaning system has probably always been a part of the makeup of mature people. It is just that in contemporary Westernised societies there is a greater need for such a capacity just for psychic survival and mental health. Those who favour a more absolute and certain meaning system will be in for a harder time, even if they are supported and reassured by a strong group of the like-minded.

It is too much to expect that this sort of adult maturity in meaning can be realistically achieved by children and adolescents. Nevertheless, if it is an appropriate ideal, it should have implications for school education.

4.3 Young people's search for meaning

We have already noted that searching for meaning, and trying to make sense of life, is an important developmental task for young people. Many of the meaning-related issues considered in the last three chapters are pertinent to youth, even though the implications will depend on their age and maturity.

More will be said in later chapters about the dynamics of young people's search for meaning, but it will be done more appropriately under the headings of youth identity

and youth spirituality. This is consistent with the close relationships between meaning, identity and spirituality.

4.4 Healthy meaning

Planning an education in meaning (Chapter 10) requires that a value position be taken with regard to the nature of meaning and its place in human development. At a basic level this means articulating a view of the human person on which education should be based. It also implies taking a value position with respect to the role of culture in informing personal meaning. How the community might foster the development of young people's meaning presumes an account of what constitutes healthy meaning. What follows is a preliminary list that needs to be refined, extended and contextualised by the communities variously responsible for school education.

Defining healthy meaning in a generic way is not about judging individuals' personal meaning; neither will it propose outcomes that can readily be achieved and measured; but it will propose meaning-related hopes for personal development that can inform education. It may also inform the work of other professionals engaged variously in the care of youth.

4.4.1 Preliminary list of the characteristics of a healthy personal meaning (this includes aspects of both content and the meaning-making process)

Personal meaning

- a sense of satisfying purpose and goals in life;
- a readiness to consider questions about an ultimate meaning to life – including the transcendent, death and the existence of God; this may include a specifically religious interpretation;
- an adequate range of meanings covering different areas of personal and social life that does not revolve exclusively around individual needs and interests;
- a view that healthy, satisfying personal relationships are a key to happiness and wellbeing;
- an understanding of the human value of work and leisure.

Resources for meaning and interaction with cultural meanings

- access to the basic shared understandings of one's family and primary community of meaning; this may include the beliefs of the religious group to which the child's parents or guardians belong (whether or not they are practising members);
- knowledge and understanding of a range of cultural meanings; this should include knowledge of the beliefs of various religious groups in the community (usually the most common ones) as well as of non-religious worldviews and political meanings, and a tolerance of religious and ethnic diversity within the limits set by the law of the land;
- while acknowledging and assimilating community meanings, development of a capacity to be more autonomous in one's own personal meaning, at the same time not neglecting the need for interdependence with the community.

Normally, trust in authorities and commitment to institutions can be healthy parts of personal and social life. But this does not mean an ultimate surrendering of personal judgment and informed choices.

Personal and social responsibility

- as meaning is appropriated and personalised, taking personal responsibility for its maintenance and further development;
- awareness of the individual's own rights and freedoms, complemented by a sense of responsibility;
- acknowledgment of others, and respect for their rights and freedoms, within the limits of tolerance set by the law of the land;
- constructive values and ethics that inform action;
- a commitment to the common good and a sense of justice;
- some understanding of the interconnectedness of humankind with the natural world, and a sense of environmental stewardship.

Identification and evaluation of meaning

- some understanding of the ways in which people construct meaning;
- the capacity to keep personal meaning open to revision and development;
- skills in the evaluation of cultural meanings according to a set of values, and in relation to a view of what constitutes a healthy meaning, which will help with the appraisal of different cultural options and lifestyles;
- recognition that people carry different views of what constitutes truth;
- a conviction that one can develop a satisfying meaning to life despite the cultural problems that affect the personal search for meaning.

This preliminary listing is an example of the task that communities need to undertake when exploring their role in communicating meanings to the next generation and in fostering the development of young people's personal meaning.

Notes

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- 1 V Frankl, from the Frankl/Logotherapy website, <http://www.top-biography.com/9124-Victor%20Frankl/quotation.htm> Accessed July 2001.
 - 2 V Frankl 1964, *Man's search for meaning*.
 - 3 For example, R Webber 2002, Young people and their quest for meaning; M Mason et al. 2006, *The spirit of generation Y: Summary of the final report of a three year study*.
 - 4 Frankl/Logotherapy website, http://www.romus.co.nz/ezone/m_meaning.htm Accessed July 2001.
 - 5 R Eckersley 1997, Portraits of youth, p. 246.
 - 6 JW Fowler 1980, *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*.