

• I chose something that was worth saving for.

- I decided that something was worth making a sacrifice for.
- I learned something by myself.
- I succeeded in spite of difficulties.
- I did something I am proud of.
- I finished something that was hard to start.
- I used my anger in a positive way.
- I was angry at someone and took it out on someone else.
- I overcame my anger.
- This is my favorite excuse.
- I took on a new responsibility.
- I made a promise and kept it.

These topics are, of course, only starting points, but each one can be the beginning of a valuable dialogue to discover areas of responsibility that contain guideposts to meaning.

## Chapter Nine

# Guideposts to Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence is the specifically human capacity to reach beyond yourself and act for the sake of someone you care about, or for the sake of a cause that means something to you. Self-transcendence is the fifth area where meaning can be found. For therapeutic purposes, it is perhaps the most important condition, but also the most difficult to achieve.

Self-transcendence is important because it encompasses all other areas where meaning is available (self-discovery, choice, uniqueness, and responsibility), and because it provides meaning in exactly the area where you feel defeated: it turns your defeat into victory. But there is an inherent problem—how can you be motivated to transcend your instinctive egocentricity? Why should you do anything for others, when life has dealt unkindly with you?

Think about a man who has been in a serious automobile accident. His car has been smashed by a drunken driver. His wife has been killed. He has suffered injuries that force him to retire early. Many of the relationships, activities, and conditions that gave his life content and meaning are now gone—his marriage, his work, his health. He is bitter, grieving, angry, depressed. And with good reason. How can this man be motivated to find meaning in helping others in a world that has been so cruel to him?

### Motivation

The helper must use great ingenuity in a Socratic dialogue, to show the seeker that he is not expected to *forget* his self-interests, but rather to *transcend* them, to include others into his circle of self-interests—perhaps only one person to begin with. The seeker must be led to see that helping others is, in a way, “selfish,” because it will help him, too. Here are some ways to seek motivation.

### Logical Arguments

Logical arguments will help with people who are open to such arguments. A discussion of the world view of logotherapy may be a motivating force, and so may any other positive world view, religious or secular. The Golden Rule, in one form or another, has been a true and (unfortunately seldom) tried way to mental health.

### Role Models

Role models can be another source of motivation. Which literary or historical figures or personal acquaintances do you admire? What are the qualities you admire in these people? People you admire are likely to have some self-transcending qualities. Their examples may be the first inspiration for your self-transcending actions.

### Examples from Your Past

Recall examples from your past, when you helped others and felt good about it. Such incidents may range from the trivial (giving up a weekend to help a friend move) to the profound (a teacher treated you badly but you were able to transcend your resentment, and the incident prompted you to become a teacher with the understanding of children that your teacher had lacked.) While exploring past experiences, you can ask yourself:

- Was it anger about an injustice that motivated you to do something positive to rectify a situation?
- Did you learn from a painful episode and help others in a similar situation?
- Did you do some work, paid or unpaid, that helped others?
- Did you help someone even though you really didn't want to?
- Did you make a special effort to do something in which you believed?
- Did you help someone who needed your help, even though that person didn't ask you for help?
- Did you take a risk to help someone and feel good about the outcome?
- When you were in despair, did someone help you by sharing with you how she overcame similar despair?
- Did you learn to accept a difficulty by seeing someone else live with a similar difficulty?
- Did someone show you kindness when you felt you didn't deserve it?

### Guided Fantasies

When the Socratic dialogue has yielded a logohint, that may lead you to guided fantasies about possible choices. The logohint may be contained in a situation. For example, the man who lost his wife and his health in a car accident caused by a person who was driving under the influence of alcohol may be led to see himself:

- promoting legislation against drunk drivers
- starting a grief group for widows and widowers, to help them face, share, and heal their pain
- starting a group or an organization that helps people who have been forced into early retirement
- joining or starting an organization that helps people who have physical handicaps to find independent work
- joining an activity that is important to him and that he had neglected because his work and home life did not leave him enough time

### No Way But Up

Sometimes the motivation lies in the despair. You are at the end of your wits, you have tried everything, and nothing has helped. So you tell yourself: "I know this so-called self-transcendence won't do any good, but what do I have to lose?" So you make a list—at the prompting of your helper—of all the things you could do to help someone or some cause. You pick one activity that has some appeal and take the first hesitant step toward that goal. You hold out a hand, and it just may be that your gesture will be received with gratitude. This step often requires R-A-P: Risk (of being rejected, ridiculed, mistrusted); Action (not just thinking about something, but doing it); and Patience (success may not immediately be evident). If, after an honest attempt, this way does not seem right, you can go back to your list and pick another alternative.

### Accepting the Challenge

Some people are able (perhaps with the guidance of a helper) to see the challenge hidden in a blow of fate. The easy life often seems empty, and meaning comes with the challenge to turn defeat into victory. Edward Wilson was a student of English literature at Harvard. He had a brilliant mind that made studying so easy that he was bored. He saw no meaning in life, and in a dark moment shot himself. When he regained consciousness, he realized that he had failed to kill himself, but that he had blinded himself. While he lay in the hospital he saw that with this handicap, studying—and life—would be challenging. Wilson became a teacher and an inspiration for especially gifted students.

Many people are resistant to reaching beyond themselves to find satisfaction. But it is worth the effort, because self-transcending behavior helps you to see the three-dimensional fullness of your person: Your body and your psyche may be damaged but your spirit is healthy. The self that is being transcended is the body/psyche part of you. The self that is transcending is your spirit. Self-transcendence makes you aware that what you *are* (your spirit) can win over what you *have* (your body and psyche). This awareness opens you up to meaning potentials.

### Activities

Many people have difficulty motivating themselves to reach out to others or to make a commitment to a cause as they search for meaning in their lives. Many self-transcendent activities are unpaid, at least in the beginning, so a change in values may be required for participation in such activities. The woman who devotes her time to promoting legislation against drunk drivers, or the man who grieves for his wife and forms a support group for other widowers, won't get paid for their efforts. Such volunteer work occasionally leads to paid employment. But, paid or unpaid, these are fulfilling activities.

Such self-transcending actions approach meaning from all the directions mentioned earlier. They promote *self-discovery* by releasing your best innate human qualities—qualities you might not have discovered if you had followed the pleasure-and-success ways of our society. *Choice* is, of course, crucial, and all the more meaningful because it includes two more paths to meaning: *uniqueness* and *responsibility*.

The tragedy you experience makes you uniquely qualified to help others in similar situations. A brilliant doctor may try to convince a patient in a wheelchair that she can still find meaning in life. But a person in a wheelchair or on crutches who is able to say "I know how you feel—I went through the same trauma myself, and I have found strengths I never suspected I had" will be more convincing than the doctor. A quadriplegic said: "I don't want to be called physically handicapped. I am physically *challenged*."

Alcoholics Anonymous has long made use of the fact that few people are able to help alcoholics as well as those who have overcome an addiction. Similarly, the blind can help others without sight, and the incurably ill can help others in the same situation. Volunteer organizations and action groups are full of people who help where they were hurt. They may have been discriminated against because of color, race, religion, or sex, or lost loved ones to cancer, emphysema, or AIDS. The choice of self-transcendent activity must be made by the seeker. The helper can suggest possibilities after the seeker has given some loghints. Human beings are capable of amazing behavior, both planned and spontaneous.

inmates from a fire, of the mother who lost a child in a senseless accident and volunteered her child's organs to save the life of another child. Logotherapists have reported deeds that no one would dare to suggest, but that patients have chosen. Dr. Takashima, director of the Tokyo Institute of Logotherapy, describes a girl born without arms—she learned to paint with her toes, and inspired other children with similar handicaps. Viktor Frankl writes of several people who transcended their tragedies and turned those experiences into triumphs. Here are three incidents Frankl mentions in his speeches.

An inmate in a Florida prison found Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* in the prison library. After reading this book, the prisoner wrote to Frankl, saying that he wanted to establish self-help groups within the prison, so that he and other inmates could discuss the book and talk about their lives after release from prison. Frankl encouraged this man, who overcame the doubt and heckling of fellow-inmates and formed a group of recidivists (like himself). The group continued to meet even after the men were released. As a result, all but one of those men stayed out of prison.

A Jewish woman wore a bracelet with the milk teeth of her children. "This one is Miriam's," she said. "This is Samuel's, and this one is from Sarah." She had a tooth from each of her nine children who had died in concentration camps. When asked how she was able to wear such a bracelet, the woman replied simply, "I am now the director of an orphanage in Israel."

A man who had no family worked as a garbage collector in a medium-sized city. His situation certainly seemed to limit the likelihood that he would find meaning in his life. But he did. From the trash that he collected this man took broken toys, and he spent his evening fixing them. Then he took the toys to a children's home in a slum in the city where he lived—he was Santa Claus all year round.

Self-transcendence, under much simpler names such as friendship or good will, is an unconscious but important aspect of the lives of many people. A woman in an old-age home, suffering from arthritis but able to drive her car, transports others in the home to church and doctor and grocery store. A recent widower fills his empty time baby-sitting for a single mother who needs to go to work. A man lying in the hospital with an incurable disease is visited separately by his best friend and the friend's son. Father and son have been feuding for years, and their sick friend makes it his business to reconcile them. A retired woodworking teacher, whose hands are no longer steady enough for him to work, makes his tools and garage workshop available to kids in his neighborhood.

People who have suffered blows from fate are not the only ones who find meaning through self-transcendence. A growing group in our affluent society is made up of people who feel empty—not because they have lost something, but because they have everything. They are "birds in golden cages," trapped in their affluence. Albert Schweitzer speaks of a moral

principle he calls "good fortune obligates"—people who have everything have an obligation to help those who have little or nothing.

Elisabeth Lukas applies this principle in her therapy. She illustrates this with an incident about two drivers on a freeway. One has an accident, drives into a ditch, smashes his car, and is hurt. The other driver, unhurt, has the obligation to help. Here responsibility and self-transcendence come together.

Many people who are not required to work—people who are wealthy or retired—feel useless, empty, depressed, and neurotic, and they are apt to become addictive. This situation challenges such people to find commitments. The world is full of people who need help and causes worth supporting, not just in the Third World but also in our own First World. Frankl concluded a talk with this sentence: "To the extent that the First World sees its task as fighting hunger in the Third World, it helps itself to overcome its own meaning crisis: we give them bread, they give us meaning—not a bad bargain." Meaning through self-transcendence is usually not as dramatic as the examples presented. It is the stuff of daily life and available to all age groups.

Until recently children helped their parents in the home, on the farm, or in the workshop. This help has become unnecessary, even impossible. Consequently, children feel unneeded and bored. They passively watch television and play with purchased mechanical toys, activities that feed the desire for pleasure but not the need for meaning. Children can still help their parents, especially in homes where both parents have jobs. Children can take care of small siblings. They can provide companionship for grandmother or a lonely neighbor. They can do many of the simple, repetitive chores that consume precious time, such as setting the table, sweeping and vacuuming, doing the laundry.

Lukas reports on an experiment she did with a group of destructive children. Usually these children played with purchased toys that they quickly unwrapped, broke, and threw away. She had the children *make* toys. They designed and constructed simple machinery, carved boats from blocks of wood, and made rag dolls with faces they painted, clothes they sewed, and hair they made from yarn. These children did not break the toys they had made. And they proudly shared those toys with other children.

At the other end of life, the elderly can use their triple assets—experience, wisdom, and time-at-hand—to find meaningful activities and relationships. Bored children, adults who chase pleasure and money, and the "useless" elderly can find meaning in reaching out for each other within and beyond the family.

Self-transcendence as a road to meaning is available to everyone, in all circumstances and at all ages. Its value is most dramatically evident for people who are suffering from meaningless pain and grief. But self-transcendence is also achieved by anyone who stays up with a friend, takes a neighbor to the hospital, visits someone who is sick, invites a new neighbor over for coffee, or does any of the kindnesses that come naturally.

## Chapter Ten

# Values

Values are the traffic signs on your journey through life. They say "stop" and "go" and "yield" and "wrong way." They warn that the road has a "sharp turn" or "children crossing" or that it is "slippery when wet." Values, like road signs, are useful, even life saving, and ordinarily you obey them automatically. Frankl calls values "universal meanings,"—what people in standard situations have found to be meaningful responses. Values make it unnecessary for you to decide what is meaningful in a specific situation. You simply follow the "road signs" established by parents, teachers, religious or secular leaders, government, peers, society.

But this convenience has a price. Values can contradict each other. The values of your parents may say "no sex before marriage." Those of your peers may say "waiting until marriage is silly," or even "marriage is silly." You may hear contradictory value statements about a woman's place at home and at work, about having children, abortion, homosexuality, career, participation in community and civic affairs.

There is also the possibility that your conscience may give you conflicting messages in an unusual situation. For example, if you are driving your wife, who is in labor, down an empty road toward the hospital, you might drive right through a stop sign. Or you might stop at a green light because an old man is limping across the road. The artist who refuses to take over his father's business is heeding his own values and ignoring his father's values. The man who lies down in front of a train that is carrying nuclear weapons is expressing his own values and is clearly expressing his disagreement with the values of his society. The man who refuses to pay taxes because he disapproves of how his money is spent (Henry Thoreau, for example, did not want his money spent to support slavery) is acting on his values and opposing those of his government.