

# **Guideposts to Meaning**

## **Discovering What Really Matters**

**by Joseph Fabry**

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Joseph Fabry

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## Chapter Two

# Socratic Dialogue

The Socratic dialogue is the tool that the helper uses most frequently to aid the seeker in the search for meaning. This dialogue brings you in touch with your healthy core, the spirit, so that you can use its resources.

One of the basic assumptions of logotherapy is that, in the depth of your spiritual dimension, you know what kind of person you are, what your potentials are, what is important and meaningful to you. Socrates believed that it was the task of the teacher, not to pour information into the students, but rather to elicit from the students what they know intuitively. Frankl believes it is the task of the logotherapist, not to tell seekers what the meanings in their lives are, but rather to elicit the wisdom that is hidden within the spirit of each seeker.

### **Relaxation**

The Socratic dialogue helps you achieve access to your spiritual resources. It is wise to get into the right mood before starting a dialogue. If you are excited, nervous, fearful, or despondent, the dialogue should be preceded by a brief relaxation exercise. Many of these exercises are described in detail in *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (Davis, Eshelman, and McKay, 1982). As preparation for a Socratic dialogue, a short exercise of five to ten minutes is usually sufficient:

The seeker sits in a comfortable position in a chair, with feet planted on the ground, hands on lap, palms open. The helper talks in a low, calming voice; sometimes a short piece of music is played. Three approaches—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (body sensation)—are available to clear the seeker's path to the unconscious. Some

people react best to one of these approaches, but a combination of the three is usually most effective.

The helper conjures up images of pleasant surroundings—a quiet forest, a sunset on a beach, a flower-filled meadow (for the visual seeker); song birds, bubbling brooks, beautiful music (for the auditory person); and the feeling of being grounded in the earth, relaxing muscles, imagining pleasant warmth or heaviness of the body (for the kinesthetically inclined seeker).

The purpose of this brief exercise is to quiet the chattering of your mind and to find the calm center in yourself. Reading a poem that stresses the positive aspects of life can also be part of this relaxing exercise.

## First Questions

The Socratic dialogue uses the five guideposts to probe the areas in which meaning is most likely to be found:

**1. Self-discovery.** The more you find out about your real self behind all the masks you put on for self protection, the more meaning you will discover.

**2. Choice.** The more choices you see in your situation, the more meaning will become available.

**3. Uniqueness.** You are most likely to find meaning in situations where you are not easily replaced by someone else.

**4. Responsibility.** Your life will be meaningful if you learn to take responsibility where you have freedom of choice, and if you learn not to feel responsible where you face an unalterable fate.

**5. Self-transcendence.** Meaning comes to you when you reach beyond your egocentricity toward others.

These guideposts, which are discussed more fully in chapters Five to Nine, can be explored by a Socratic dialogue. You start with questions that deal with the situation the seeker is in, and gradually lead to where the seeker wants to be. If you are confronted with a work-related problem, the first question could be: "How do you earn your living?" Follow-up questions could include:

Where do you see meaning in your work? In the work itself? The people you come in contact with? The product or service your company provides? The prestige it gives you? The money you make? What do you do with the money you earn? If you were financially independent, would you want to do the same work you do now? What other activities do you have? Hobbies? Volunteer work? How many of your activities do you share with your family? Would you like to have more time with your family? How much time do you spend with your family? With friends?

Make a “pie chart” that shows how you spend your time.

Are you satisfied with this distribution?

In what way would you want to change it? What would you do first to change the distribution of time, to make it fulfill your preference?

Here are some questions that can be used to initiate a Socratic dialogue, and some follow-up questions:

Under what circumstances do you feel good? If you have difficulty describing such circumstances, make a list of the things that you like to do and mark those you actually have done within the past two weeks.

What *would* make you feel good?

What could you do to create a situation in which you would feel good?

What does “feeling good” mean to you?

What prevents you from doing things that would make you feel good? How can you overcome those obstacles?

You feel that you are in a mess now. Tell me about other times when you were in a mess.

Looking back now, has anything positive come from those situations? Have you learned something from those? Grown? Had experiences you otherwise would not have had?

Did you risk anything to get out of the mess?

How did you get out of it?

Is there anything you can learn from this past experience that can be applied to the current situation?

What are a few of the things you want to accomplish during the next year? The next three years?

What keeps you from realizing these things?

Pick out the one thing you want most to accomplish.

What would be the first step toward this goal?

What price would you be willing to pay to achieve this goal?

Describe situations when you have had the feeling that the world is good and orderly, and you are part of it.

Is there a quality that is common to these situations?

How could you achieve this quality now, perhaps in a completely different form?

Who are your role models?

What do you admire about them? Do you have any qualities they have?

Could you achieve some of the qualities you admire in your models?

What could you do to achieve these qualities, even in a small way?

Does thinking about these qualities give you an inkling about what kind of person you are? About what kind of person you could be? What are your strong points? Your talents? What do you need to do to realize your talents? What are the obstacles to realizing them? How could you overcome these obstacles?

In logotherapy, the goal is to help the seekers feel good by finding something that is *meaningful* to them, not just something that provides pleasure, money, or power. Remember Frankl's assumption that pleasure is a by-product of having done something meaningful, and that money and power are merely means to an end, not final goals. What meaningful things would the seeker do with money or power?

The Socratic dialogue is not an intellectual discussion, not argumentation or manipulation. Rather, it is teaching/learning that uses experiences—those of the seeker and those of the helper. During the dialogue, the helper elicits ideas and feelings from the seeker by asking questions based on what the seeker says—from “logohints” that the helper finds in the seeker's words.

## Picking up Logohints

In a Socratic dialogue the helper does more than listen sympathetically, more than express understanding of the seeker's problems. A mere expression of understanding (a mirroring) of what the seeker is complaining about can enmesh the seeker in the problems even more deeply.

If a seeker says, “I no longer enjoy my life,” a helper who is using the principles of logotherapy will *not* say “I understand that very well after all you have gone through” (expressing understanding) or “You mean you don't want to go on living?” (mirroring). Instead, the response will be, “What about all the tasks out there in life that are still waiting for you?”

In logotherapy the helper plays a more active role than in most other therapies. The helper listens carefully and picks up phrases that express positive aspects of the seeker. But the helper must be careful not to err by taking too active a part, by trying to persuade.

Persuasion will be effective only when it is based on something the seeker has said that suggests a positive direction. The helper's response needs to pick up on that “logohint”—something positive that the seeker has said—and to suggest some positive attitude or action.

A logohint is a phrase—even a word or a nonverbal indication such as a sudden tone of excitement, that hints at what is meaningful to the seeker, or at a value that is held in high esteem and is manifested in a religious belief, a marital vow, a vocation, or a hobby. These preferences of meaning and values often are stored on an unconscious level, and the helper must

have a fine ear to hear these hints from the seeker's unconscious. Logohints give the helper the right to support the meaning direction that has been indicated.

### Case History

In the Socratic dialogue below, between Ann and a helper, you can see how the helper picked up logohints from what Ann said, and how the helper used the logohints to help Ann help herself.

Ann was a 55-year-old woman who was suffering from depression and headaches. She was divorced, but her three children were successful in their own lives, she lived in a beautiful home, she had no financial worries, and her health had been good until the onset of the depression about a year earlier. Helper:

*Helper:* Was there a time when you felt really good about yourself?

*Ann:* I'd say when I was in college.

*Helper:* What was it about your life then that felt good?

*Ann:* I wanted to be a dancer. I saw myself on the stage.

*Helper:* What happened?

*Ann:* I fell in love with Henry. We got married. I had one child after the other. Oh, I don't regret it. I was busy bringing up the children. I had a good life. Henry was very successful, we entertained, traveled. But now ...

*Helper:* What has changed?

*Ann:* We are divorced. The children are gone, one in Massachusetts, one in Florida, one in Australia. I have four grandchildren but I hardly ever see them. Now I'm 55 and alone. No one needs me.

During this fragment of the dialogue, the helper found a logohint: Ann had indicated that the idea of becoming a dancer had been meaningful to her.

*Helper:* Do you still love dancing?

*Ann:* Oh yes, I do. I go to the ballet often. But that only makes me sad. I imagine how it would be if I were up there on the stage.

*Helper:* Tell me what you feel.

*Ann:* Envy. Those girls are young, they are talented, they have careers ahead of them. I think I was as talented as many of them. Perhaps more so. I'll never know.

*Helper:* Isn't there a way in which you could use your love for dancing, even now?

*Ann:* Are you kidding? At my age? No, no, life has passed me by.

*Helper:* Some things have passed. You cannot go back to college and be 18 again. You cannot bring your husband back. You cannot make your children small enough so that they need you. But you can use your love for dancing in a meaningful way, even at 55.

Here the helper is making clear to Ann the difference between the areas of “fate,” which she has to accept, and the areas of “freedom,” in which she still has choices.

*Ann:* No, I can't. I tried to get my daughters interested in dancing when they were small, and my grandchildren. But no luck.

Two logohints have now surfaced in the dialogue—Ann's interest in dancing, and her interest in helping children to become dancers. These make it possible for the helper to lead Ann to new meaningful alternatives.

### *New Alternatives*

When seeking new alternatives suggested by logohints, you consider the five guidepost to personal meaning discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Usually it is most practical to start with the area of choice.

The seeker is guided to convert the logohint into a series of alternatives and to examine the positive and negative consequence of each alternative. The method for doing this is described in detail in Chapter Six. The seeker is encouraged to include as many alternatives as possible, even those that may seem impractical. This is done to show the seeker that he or she is not trapped, that choices are available.

Next, the seeker decides which alternative is best. “Best” is understood to mean, not necessarily the most pleasant, remunerative, or prestigious (although pleasure, money, or prestige may be a by-product), but the most meaningful in the situation at hand. All five areas of meaning are considered. Choice, of course, has center stage, but the other five areas are also important. Among the questions that deal with choice are the following:

Does your final choice from among the alternatives express your personality (self-discovery), rather than an “ought” that comes from outside yourself?

Does your choice express your uniqueness? Does it create a situation in which you are, at least to some extent, irreplaceable?

Does your choice consider the interests of other people (responsibility)? Is it harmful to others or to your relationship with others?

Is your choice helpful to others who are important to you, or to a cause you want to support (self-transcendence)? This does not mean that you must not have any selfish motivations. It does mean, however, that you extend your interest beyond yourself to include other people and causes. You will find that fulfillment is a by-product of helping others.

After choosing the best alternative, the seeker takes concrete steps to implement that alternative. The decision must be translated into action.



### *Application of Alternative*

During the Socratic dialogue, Ann made lists as she sought guideposts to meaning. She was encouraged to make a list of alternatives that included her love for dancing and for children. At this point she raised—as many people do—a number of “yes, but” objections: Yes, but—she was no longer young; she did not keep up with modern dancing trends; she had no talent for organizing, no business sense; she didn’t know any talented children. The helper encouraged Ann to list all the alternatives she could think of, and to list her “yes, but” arguments as negative consequences. The helper must be careful, at this stage of the dialogue, not to “prescribe” alternative solutions, but instead to “describe” a number of alternative and let the seeker decide which to include in the list.

After considerable prodding, Ann made a list that included the following:

Volunteer to work in a dancing school for children. (“What could I do there? Answer the phone? Keep records? Any high school girl could do that.”)

Help the dance instructors with ideas about teaching dance. (“My ideas are out of date. They would laugh at me.”)

Go to classes to learn about modern trends in dance. (“I am too old to go to school.”)

Establish a dance school. (“I’m not a business woman. I would fail.”)

Buy an established dance school. (“I do not have enough money for that.”)

Help dance school graduates obtain engagements. (“I have no talent for that.”)

Find a talented girl who cannot afford dance school, and help her with her career. (“How can I find such a girl?”)

When Ann looked over her list, she showed some interest in the last alternative. Then the helper was justified in supporting this choice by following it up in a Socratic dialogue.

*Helper:* Doing that would not require much money and it would give you personal contact with a young woman who is beginning to dance, as you once were.

*Ann:* (tentatively) I could give that girl the chance I gave up.

*Helper:* It would make a crucial difference in that girl’s life.

*Ann:* (warming up to the idea) I could spare her the disappointments I had. I could go to some of the classes with her. I could give her some advice. I think I do still do know something about dancing that could be valuable. Yes, I’d like to try that.

*Helper:* What would be the first step you would take?

At this point in the dialogue, the helper and the seeker are going through the important transition from self-chosen goal to action. With some suggestions from the helper, Ann made a list of ways to find the girl she would help: Put an ad in the newspapers. Go to a welfare agency and make inquiries. Go to dance schools. Then, abruptly, Ann crumpled up the list.

*Ann:* No, I want to find her myself.

*Helper:* How would you do that?

*Ann:* I have a good eye for kids who have talent. I would go through poor neighborhoods and watch children at play.

Ann searched for a child and found an adopted Korean girl. And Ann helped that girl to start a career as a dancer.

Ann's decision encompassed all five guideposts to meaning:

She discovered what she really wanted at this particular stage in her life, rather than what her friends approved of, or what her counselor suggested.

She saw that she had choices, that she was not trapped in a stage of life that seemed empty.

She felt that she could do something in which she would feel irreplaceable.

The choice considered other people, and her financial limitations.

Most important, the choice clearly was self-transcending—she helped another human being and felt fulfilled.

## Techniques of the Dialogue

Like other logotherapeutic techniques the Socratic dialogue requires a lot of improvisation and intuition. There are many ways to probe a person's unconscious and its hidden knowledge about personal meanings. The Socratic dialogue uses certain methods. Among these are:

- recall of past meaningful experiences;
- dream interpretation that focus on unconscious hopes and wishes rather than on repressed traumas;
- guided and unguided fantasies to reveal what the seeker considers meaningful;
- meaningful experiences of people the seeker considers to be role models; and
- recall of peak experiences that have shown the seeker, often in a flash, that life does have meaning.

## *Recalling Experiences*

The experiences of both the seeker and the helper are used in the search for meaning. If you ask a person who feels negative, "When did your life have meaning?" you are not likely to receive a positive answer. A preferred approach is to ask, "When was there a time when you felt happy or good about yourself?" This question encourages the seeker to reminisce about the past, looking for experiences that were positive, rather than for abstract positive meanings.

Here is part of a dialogue between a helper and a seeker, Harry, who was living in self-chosen isolation. Harry talked about his life. Eventually he said:

*Harry:* I never married after I saw what my mother did to my father. He became an alcoholic, beat me up. I was a poor student in school, and the kids all teased me because I was no good in sports. If it hadn't been for Tom, I don't know how I'd have survived.

*Helper:* Tell me about Tom.

*Harry:* Tom was a neighbor, two years older. We collected stamps together, and went hiking in wilderness areas. We did a lot of things together. And he was always supportive when things were bad at home with my parents.

Gradually Harry became less negative. He remembered other people who were supportive. He began to move away from being a no-sayer, in spite of his conviction that "most people are beasts."

In later dialogues Harry recalled situations in which some people "were a little less beastly than the rest of the human zoo" (his form of humor). He decided to join a hiking club and a stamp club. The helper recognized Harry's earlier mentions of engaging in these activities with Tom as logohints and so felt justified in supporting these choices. And the helper suggested to Harry that he make an orderly collection from the odd boxes of stamps in his basement (a task to fulfill), and that he help a boy in his neighborhood to start a stamp collection (self-transcendence). These actions were small first steps on Harry's way back to the human community.

The use of past experiences as the basis for future activities is especially helpful for people who feel negative, empty, depressed, and alienated, and for people who are bored because of their affluence.

## *Dreams*

Sigmund Freud called dreams the royal road to the unconscious. Viktor Frankl agrees, and sees the unconscious not only in a psychological but also in a spiritual dimension as a royal road into a much wider land. It can lead to meaning.

The unconscious that Freud described contains repressed thoughts and feelings that we don't want to face consciously. Repression can cause neurosis curable by psychoanalysis. Frankl has an expanded concept of the unconscious. He asserts that it contains, also, repressed hopes, goals, and meanings to which dreams are "royal road." Repressed meanings do not necessarily cause neurosis, but an inner emptiness into which neurosis can enter, especially in conflicts of conscience or existential frustration. For these disturbances, logotherapy is indicated.

Dreams may make you aware of repressed drives and traumas that are too painful to face. But dreams may also contain and convey advice from the conscience. A dream interpretation from this perspective can help you discover what is meaningful.

### Case History

Betty, a 34-year-old woman who did not get along with her father, dreamed that she lay in bed with him and embraced him tenderly, and he responded. Alarmed, she awoke. Was it possible that she had repressed incestuous desires, after all the rejections she had experienced since childhood? Her father had always preferred her older brother, had never spent much time with her, was never satisfied with her grades although she was a good student, was very strict with her, and so on.

A logotherapeutic dream interpretation revealed a different explanation. Perhaps the dream was saying: "Be nice to your father, and he will be nice to you." The young woman phoned her father (he lived two hundred miles away) and asked him whether she could visit—something she almost never did.

"What do you want?" he growled.

Under ordinary circumstances that question would have been enough to irritate her. This time she simply said she wanted to have dinner with him. She went to see him and, still under the impact of her dream, she responded to his mistrust with gentleness. After that she visited her father every two weeks, and talked with him about the years of her childhood. Her brother had been born with a clubfoot and needed more attention. She was healthy and gifted; her father was proud of her and had prodded her to get even better grades. He wanted her to go to college, to become a doctor or a lawyer. The young woman began to see her childhood in a new light. A few weeks before her father died, a year later, he told her: "I'm glad that I got to know you as one adult to another." The logotherapeutic interpretation of her dream had given them the opportunity to do that.

Frankl published several case histories in which the dream was the royal road to the conscience. Tony, a composer who wrote cheap music for the movies, dreamed he wanted to make a telephone call but the dial on the phone was so complicated that he couldn't select the right number. He wanted to dial the number of a woman for whom, during a recent summer, he had composed religious music that had given him great

artistic satisfaction. He had no romantic intentions—their relationship was purely professional. The dream did not reveal repressed sexual desires; it represented the voice of his conscience, which seemed to be telling him: “Choose between composing cheap music for a lot of money and composing music that really satisfies you, even if the income is less.” No wonder that dialing (choosing) had been difficult. In German, the same word—wählen—means choosing and dialing.

A logotherapeutic interpretation of a dream can reveal the deepest reason for a depression or a neurosis, the spiritual causes for physical or psychosomatic illnesses, the direction that you really want to go in a conflict situation. Dreams can also give advice, from your unconscious to your conscious self. Frankl reports a case of a mother who dreamed that she put her favorite cat in the washing machine. When she opened the machine to hang up the wash, the cat was dead. When this woman engaged in a Socratic dialogue, she discovered this interpretation: Her favorite cat represented her favorite daughter, Joan. The mother disapproved of Joan's lifestyle, and she often criticized Joan, even in front of other people. The dream was a warning: “Don't wash ‘dirty linen’ in public, or you may lose your daughter!”

Dreams have many functions in logotherapy. They can be useful for starting a Socratic dialogue, or for getting one off dead center. A widow had withdrawn from her circle of friends. In a dream she saw a college professor she had greatly admired. But she was disappointed when he quoted an overused piece of Greek wisdom: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Not until the next day did she realize that in her dream the professor had reversed the idea, saying to her “The unlived life is not worth examining.” You could say that Socrates himself helped this widow as she went on from that realization through a Socratic dialogue to find direction.

### *Unguided Fantasies*

Dreams have two disadvantages. First, you cannot create a dream at will. And second, dreams speak in a hard-to-understand, symbolic language. Fantasies, both unguided and guided, can be more directly helpful.

To elicit fantasies, the seeker must be in a quiet mood that has stopped the “chattering of the mind,” so that images can float up freely from the unconscious. Any kind of meditation—or a few minutes from a relaxation tape, or a poem read in a calm voice—can be used to achieve a quiet state.

An unguided fantasy can be the starting point of a Socratic dialogue—for those who see no meaning in life, no goal or purpose, no task, nothing worth striving for. They may be the young who have not yet discovered meaningful direction in their lives, or those in midlife crises, or people whose meaning possibilities have changed because the circumstances of

their lives have changed. The helper can elicit such a fantasy by asking the seeker to imagine that one year has passed (or three, or five) then giving no other instructions except saying something like: "It's Monday morning and you wake up. Describe where you are and what you do."

As the seeker replies, prompted as necessary by questions from the helper, logohints turn up. One young man saw himself married, with a child, working in a hospital as a male nurse. The Socratic dialogue could then be pointed in a particular direction: How could this young man combine his wish for a family with the training he would need to become a nurse? He was earning a fair amount of money as a salesman, a job he hated and wanted to give up. And he was spending much of his earnings at bars and race tracks. Was he willing to keep his unwanted job as a salesman so that he could save money to use to go back to college and eventually take on the responsibility of having a family? The young man decided that this long-range goal was worth the temporary sacrifices.

A dramatic example of a Socratic dialogue based on unguided fantasy was provided by a high school girl. She had wanted to become a librarian, but then had lost her eyesight as the result of an accident with a rifle. A therapist helped this young woman through the process of grieving for her lost sight. But she was still in deep despair about her future. In an unguided fantasy, she saw herself as a librarian. A blind man came to her and asked her to read to him. She told him that she was blind herself.

The young woman discussed various possibilities with the helper, who worked with logohints found in the unguided fantasy: The young woman wanted to help other blind people, and she still wanted to be a librarian. The helper suggested several scenarios in which these two goals could be combined. The blind girl decided to become a librarian in a school for the blind. With this self-transcending task challenging her, the young woman overcame her depression, finished high school, learned Braille, and went to library school.

Ann, the middle-aged woman who decided to help a young, aspiring dancer, used unguided fantasy to think through how she would accomplish that goal. She talked about seeing herself wandering through playgrounds, talking to girls, making friends with their mothers, inviting them to her home, testing their talent, selecting one special girl, contacting the right school, and guiding the girl—with financial and human support—through her career until she stood on the stage for the first time.

### *Guided Fantasies*

When a Socratic dialogue meanders and comes to a halt, guided fantasy can be used. It is facilitated with symbols and images. The individual thinks about a particular kind of setting, then begins to define that in specific terms.

A forest can represent the way you see your life. Dark, threatening, confusing, or lush and fragrant, with hills and flowers. No path, or a clear path, a lot of forks in the road, a lot of undergrowth. Roots to stumble over, or berries to pick.

A mountain can represent striving, hopes. Steep, no path, rugged, frightening. Inviting, with broad rocks, rocks that encourage climbing.

A creek or stream can represent the course of life. You can follow it to your source—your past—or to its mouth—your future. You can swim in it, row on it, wander alongside it, sit on the shore and watch, fish. It can be full of rapids. It can have natural or man-made dams. It can flow peacefully, rush gently, be refreshing, inviting, threatening. It can meander through a meadow full of flowers or through a dark forest, over boulders, into a plain or desert or swamp.

A building—can represent your person. A simple farm house or a palace, a large apartment building, a ramshackle hut, a suburban villa, built by yourself or designed by an architect. With a vegetable or herb or flower garden, well groomed or wild. With a swimming pool, backyard, play area. In a slum, downtown, in a suburb or the country. With a basement (the unconscious), few or many rooms (the conscious life), and an attic (the mind), with views—to a beautiful garden or a bare wall.

Many images can be given symbolic meaning: a ship on a high sea, an empty or full granary, dangerous or friendly animals, vehicles (cars, planes, ships, gondolas). You can introduce many people into a guided fantasy—father, mother, partner, child, friend, enemy, boss, stranger.

While unguided fantasy is helpful for people with a general feeling of meaninglessness, guided fantasy is helpful with a specific problem.

**Example 1: Lack of self-confidence.** The seeker is guided toward a situation that will strengthen self-image. To encourage the seeker to begin the fantasy, the helper makes suggestions:

“You are standing in a meadow full of flowers. It is a sunny day. The sky is blue and birds are singing. You walk slowly through the meadow, on a path toward a building. When you get there, you find that the door is locked. You ring the bell, but no one answers. You want to get into the building. You walk around it, trying other doors. Finally you find one that is open. You go inside and find yourself in a room full of people, all talking in small groups. They are all people you know, some friends, some casual acquaintances. You are aware that they cannot see you. You are surprised that they are all talking about you, and they are all saying positive things. You go from one group to another, listening. What are they saying?”

The images are chosen to fit the needs. In this example, the person who lacks self-confidence is placed in happy surroundings (flowers, birds, sunshine), on a definite path toward a place in life (the building). An effort is needed to find access (the doors are locked), but the effort pays off (one door is open). The rest of the imagery is based on the premise

that, deep within, we know our strong points, which have been repressed and need to be made conscious.

The same goal can be achieved through another guided fantasy, one based on the seeker's realization that at a memorial service only the good aspects of the deceased are mentioned:

"Imagine that you are attending your own memorial service. Your favorite music is being played. Your favorite minister (or rabbi or lay friend) gives a eulogy and then asks those present to speak up and tell what the minister member about you, and why they are sad that you died."

**Example 2: A difficult decision that needs to be made.** The answer is buried in your unconscious. You are led through pleasant surroundings and are asked to enter a dark, wide room with a figure dimly visible in the distance.

You approach the figure slowly, wondering who it might be but certain that it is an important figure in your life, a person who will have the answer you are seeking. You think about the question you need to answer as you approach the distant figure. You know that you will be able to ask only one question. Finally you are close enough to recognize the figure. You face the figure and ask your question, and eagerly await the answer. Then the figure speaks. Who was the figure? What was your question? What was the answer?

In this and other fantasies, the guidelines must be nondirective. The helper says "building," not "house" or "villa" or "shack." The word "figure" is used, not "man" or "woman." "He" and "she" are avoided. So is any indication of whether the figure is young or old, a real person or a figure from religious or secular literature. The identification by the seeker provides logohints that can then be used to carry the dialogue forward. Some seekers will see *themselves* as the figure. This indicates that, deep within, they know the answer to the question. Others will see a religious figure or an important person in their lives—perhaps a parent, grandparent, friend, teacher. One man saw the grandfather whom, as a child, he had helped on a farm. This seeker was trying to decide whether to leave his wife. The grandfather said, "You can't plant a peach tree and expect to get cherries." That answer led to a discussion about how much the man could expect his wife to change, and that discussion became the basis the couple used to work out their difficulties.

Another man was in despair because he had lost a leg. What was he to do in this new situation? He saw his favorite teacher, a person he credited with having a great influence on his life. The teacher was wearing a long coat, which he lifted to reveal that he, too, had only one leg. The teacher said nothing, but smiled. This fantasy opened up a Socratic dialogue that led to the realization that handicapped, too, can be great teachers. The helper and the seeker talked about what the seeker, as a man with only one leg, could still do that would be meaningful for him.



**Example 3: Conflicting values.** The founder and owner of a successful company was suffering from headaches and depressions, and also from some marital problems. The helper suspected a conflict between the man's devotion to his business and the attention he was giving to his wife and children. In a guided fantasy, the man was led into a dark cellar (his unconscious). When his eyes got used to the darkness, the man saw that the room was filled with packages, small and large, some wrapped gaily and others in newspapers or cartons. He was allowed to poke and shake the packages, to guess what was in them, but he was not allowed to open them. After he had explored for a while, the man was told to pick the one package that he wanted. And then he was allowed to take the chosen package to the lighted room upstairs and open it. He was disappointed to find that it contained a bust of Richard Wagner. That made no sense to him, because he didn't care for music and especially not for Wagner. He was then told to go downstairs again and select a second package, and bring it upstairs. Again he was disappointed—the second package contained a Monopoly game, something he had not played since his children were small and that he had always considered a waste of time. The man was allowed to go to the cellar a third time to pick a third package, with the understanding that this would be his last chance. When he unwrapped it in the light, he was disappointed once more. The third package contained a plastic Christmas tree and cheap but colorful decorations. Christmas had little meaning for him, and he had always resented spending money on decorations that were used only once a year, or even thrown away.

In the Socratic dialogue that followed, this man had an “aha” experience. He realized that the message contained in the three packages was: “Play, relax, enjoy! Don't be a workaholic! Music (Wagner), games (Monopoly), celebrations (Christmas trees).” He followed the advice of his unconscious and his depression disappeared.

### *Experiences of Others*

At different times in our lives, we have all had role models. The experiences of such role models can be useful in advancing a Socratic dialogue, especially for the person who has suffered a loss or is caught in some trap from which there seems to be no escape. Many people have been inspired by the stories of Helen Keller and Franklin Roosevelt, who led meaningful lives in spite of their handicaps.

Leland Stanford, the California railroad builder, lost his son just as the boy was about to enter college. Stanford decided to establish a university to enable other young people to get the education his son no longer could get. Recently Stanford's story was told to a woman who had lost her son just as he was about to enter college. She was, of course, not able to start a university. But during a Socratic dialogue she decided to establish a scholarship that would enable at least one student each year to afford a

university career. She found some comfort and meaning in administering the fund and selecting recipients.

Viktor Frankl's experiences in the concentration camps have inspired many people to find meaning in their own analogous experiences—situations that were, for them, traps from which they could not escape. In a Socratic dialogue, one must be careful not to deprecate the seeker's problems. However, many people, as they have discussed their situations in Socratic dialogues, have come to the conclusion that "if Frankl could survive the death camps and build a meaningful life, I can find meaning in my life." One woman, whose husband left her at about the same time she lost her job, read Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Afterward she said "Frankl made me aware that my spiritual pilot light was still on." A Socratic dialogue can turn up that spiritual pilot light and get life bubbling again.

### *Peak Experiences*

A peak experience can spark a Socratic dialogue. The helper cannot bring about a peak experience during a dialogue. But certainly the helper can point out the meaning-carrying messages of such an experience when it is recalled by the seeker during a Socratic dialogue.

The helper must keep a keen ear open for such episodes, which the seeker may mention only in passing, and without recognizing the value of such memories in the search for meaning. Many peak experiences are incidents that are hardly noticed when they occur, but which are nevertheless effective in keeping the spiritual pilot light burning.

Peak experiences often occur in painful situations. A man recounted an incident he had carried as if it were a burden and had not spoken of in three years. His wife had died after a long siege of cancer. The day after her funeral, he had had to take a plane trip. During the flight, the plane broke through the clouds and reached bright sunlight. Looking out the window of the plane as the sunlight filled the sky, the widower felt a sudden burst of joy, and then immediately felt guilty for having experienced that moment of joy. Three years later, when he was going through a period of depression, the widower told a friend about that experience, citing it as proof that there was "something wrong" with him. His friend replied that, on the contrary, life might have wanted in the memorable moment to provide him with proof that "something was right" with him, to show him that the sun shines, even behind the clouds.

Another man told of an incident that occurred as he was driving down a lonely road, feeling alienated. Suddenly a fox started to cross the road and then stopped in the middle. The man stepped on the brakes, the car came to a halt ten feet from the animal, and the man and the fox looked at each other. Recounting this incident, the man recalled that at that moment he had felt in harmony with all of nature, with the whole universe.

A woman who had been blind for two years had an operation that was to restore her sight. When her eyes had healed, the bandages were taken off. Recalling that moment, the woman described the exhilaration she felt when she looked down, as the last bandage was removed, and for the first time in two years was able to see the grain in the wood of the floor.

It is extremely difficult to convince a person by intellectual arguments that life has meaning under all circumstances, that we are each part of a totality and not alone, or that there are affirmative aspects in situations of pain. The seeker who recalls such peak experiences may find unexpected and helpful insights.

A Socratic dialogue can draw attention to such incidents, which are often disregarded when they occur or are soon forgotten. The messages of such experiences, though they are buried in the spirit, need to be heard. Those messages can be evoked during a Socratic dialogue and can help the seeker turn toward positive attitudes.

### *Playback of the Positive*

The Socratic dialogue probes the unconscious spirit. It is in the spirit that you keep your repressed or ignored will to meaning, your hopes and dreams, your buried goals, your neglected self-esteem, and many positive aspects of yourself that unhappy or misunderstood experiences in your past have repressed. During the Socratic dialogue, bits of these dreams, goals, and experiences emerge. It is up to the helper to pick up those pieces and “play them back” to the seeker.

#### **Case History**

James Yoder is a logotherapist in Kansas City. Yoder tells about Fred, a gifted professional who was struggling with self deprecating attitudes, guilt, and the problems of a no-sayer. Here is a segment of their dialogue, in which Yoder picked up affirmative phrases that had emerged from Fred’s unconscious and then played those phrases back to Fred so that he became conscious of them:

*Fred:* (after telling about his life, which he described as full of failures and disappointments): I’m afraid sometimes to take another step—not sure whether it will make sense.

*Yoder:* Let’s look at your past. If your past is like a web a spider spins (Fred had used that phrase), what kind of web do you spin? Your life seems to contain jewels of achievements, experiences, relationships.

*Fred:* (weeping): Yes, I would say so.

*Yoder:* No one can take them away from you. What do you learn from looking at your past, full of such jewels?

*Fred:* I do learn, even though I really feel down and deserted. A part of me is resting up, getting ready to take another shot at life, later.

Fred tells Yoder that he read Frankl's account of his experiences in the concentration camps.

*Fred:* I've been thinking about Frankl all week, ever since I read that.

*Yoder:* What goes through your mind?

*Fred:* I must say, pessimism. I see myself as probably being one of those who would not have survived, emotionally, spiritually, and yet that's not entirely true. I have some hope for myself. I see myself as one of the 99 percent who did not remain spiritually intact . . . as one who would sell my brothers to stay alive . . . but the fact that Frankl shows that some did not compromise and they still stayed alive proves that one can survive.

*Yoder:* Talk about hope. I heard you say you still have hope.

*Fred:* Yes . . . I refused to write myself off. And yet . . . Fred slides back into stories about rejections and traps.

*Yoder:* As Frankl says, every person has his or her own concentration camp. Tell me about yours, and about your emergence, your hope. The very fact that you sit here today discussing your pain, your freedom of choice . . . your mention of hope demonstrates that you have survived.

*Fred:* (sighs and smiles): Well . . . I think that's true. How did I manage to get out? Certain people cared about me.

Fred then told about a high school teacher who took a personal interest in him, a bishop who treated him tenderly and accepted him when Fred's father brought him to the church and presented him to the bishop as a liar.

*Yoder:* Instead of criticism and judgment, you experienced acceptance.

*Fred:* (weeping) Yes. Oddly enough, some colleagues seem to like me. It warms my heart.

*Yoder:* What do you believe they like about you?

*Fred:* That I am gentle, that I have an infectious smile. That I have a light touch, a sense of humor. That there is a simplicity, or innocence about me, sometimes. I'm not the one who devours.

*Yoder:* You tell me what you are not—"I'm not the one who devours." Tell me the positive about yourself.

*Fred:* I am a person who is sensitive to other people's needs.

*Yoder:* Such people have friends.

*Fred:* I don't feel as if I have any friends . . . I fear getting support and help from others. I'm afraid I'll be told "you want too much."

*Yoder:* In spite of the negative feelings you have shared with me, there were people who listened to you, who were gentle with you and shared your pain.

During another session, Fred told about a dream in which he wanted to use an electric saw.

*Fred:* I looked at my own “power package” (puts his hand on his chest). It was all rusted and corroded inside. I was afraid to put my hand on it for fear I would be electrocuted.

*Yoder:* You have talked about people who care about you, and about accomplishments you are proud of. In spite of this dream, and even though you say the machinery is old, that your “power plant is rusty,” somehow you have energy flowing through you out to others, and you rise above your pain and past neglect.

*Fred:* (weeping) A silver wire reaches from my center out into the green woods. But I fear that I am the destroyer . . . I fear I will be the shark.

*Yoder:* Maybe the very fact that you say you fear, that you will become the devouring shark, points out how very much you value treating others with gentleness and respect. Your fear even enlightens the value of the silver wire, showing you how you want to live your life.

*Fred:* Yes. Yes. I didn’t see that so clearly before.

This was the turning point of the session. Fred had become receptive to seeing himself in a more positive light. Yoder commented on this dialogue: “Always the clients are affirmed for their positive and courageous stands amidst all their suffering. From this session alone, I knew that Fred was well along the road to recovery, transcending his feeling of meaningless and depression.

### *The Buried Decision*

The helper in a Socratic dialogue has to really listen, so that each logohint—even if it is buried in a flood of seemingly irrelevant statements—is heard and used.

#### **Case History**

Here is part of a dialogue between Margaret and her helper. Margaret arrived for the session in an agitated state, disturbed because the woman with whom she was sharing an apartment had given Margaret notice that she was to move out.

*Margaret:* I’ve moved three times this past year. It’s so hard to find a place where I feel happy. Now I’ve finally found a place, but Ann doesn’t like me. And she has the lease. I’m trapped.

*Helper:* What makes you think she doesn’t like you?

*Margaret:* Nothing I do suits her.

*Helper:* Be specific. [General statements should be challenged.]

*Margaret:* She says I leave the kitchen in a mess. She doesn’t like me to smoke. She says Blackie [Margaret’s cat] scratches up her furniture. I play my stereo too loud for her. And she doesn’t want me to use the kitchen when her boyfriend is there.

*Helper:* Do those things mean that she doesn't like *you*?

*Margaret:* I know she doesn't. I clean up the kitchen, even her mess, I go outside to smoke, but no matter what I do, she finds something wrong. She knows I love this house more than anything but she wants me out. I have no choice.

*Helper:* You have already made your choice.

*Margaret:* (startled) Huh?

*Helper:* Listen to what you said: "It's hard to find a place where I feel happy... Now I've finally found a place... I love this house more than anything..."

*Margaret:* That's true but now I have to leave.

*Helper:* No, you just have to pay a price to stay.

*Margaret:* It's not a matter of money.

*Helper:* I don't mean money. You told me in our first session that you ran away with a boyfriend and to get out of your parents' home. Then you left your boyfriend because he became rough when he drank. Then you moved from one place to another because you didn't like each one. You didn't make all these moves because you had no choice. It was your choice, each time.

*Margaret:* And now I'm trapped.

*Helper:* You're trapped in your own behavior pattern. But you do have a choice. To change this pattern or to go on with it.

*Margaret:* Of course I don't want to spend my life moving. What can I do?

The helper had the right to suggest a solution because she had heard Margaret say, without realizing that she was saying it, that she wanted to stay in this house—that she was ready to pay the price, ready to change her pattern. Under the guidance of the helper, Margaret made a list of things that she could do that might persuade her housemate to let her stay. By the end of the session Margaret had a list of eight alternatives.

"Your price list," the helper said. "Which of these do you choose?"

One of the alternatives was a strict schedule that gave Margaret and her housemate the run of the house every second day. Each one, on her day, had to do the cleaning, but she could also have her boyfriend over on that day. The "contract" for this schedule contained agreements about smoking, noise levels, and other sources of conflict.

"She'll never agree," Margaret said as she left the session.

"Try it," the helper advised. "And when you show this to your housemate, tell her: 'I made up these suggestions because I love this house and *you*.'"

At the next session Margaret reported that her housemate had made a few changes but then had accepted the proposal. They had celebrated their contract by having a party on Sunday with both of their boyfriends, and afterward they had cleaned up the kitchen together.

The Socratic dialogue is often used in connection with two logotherapeutic methods that are discussed in the next two chapters: dereflection, and modification of attitudes.