

Traveling Frankl's pathways to meaning

Exploring the creative, experiential and attitudinal in meaningful experiences of everyday life

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the way Frankl's creative, experiential and attitudinal pathways to meaning emerge in everyday life. Thereto, a narrative analysis was performed on transcripts of three interviews with people about a meaningful moment and its impact on life. The study deepens insight in the self-transcendent nature of the three pathways, showing different ways in which these pathways interrelate and give rise to each other. The creative pathway was found to follow from the experiential pathway, but also the other way around, to set the stage for the experiential pathway. The experiential pathway was traveled unintentionally as well as intentionally, in settings with both positive as well as negative valence. The experiential pathway thereby relates to both wonder as awe, the latter also appearing to be central in the attitudinal pathway aimed at embracing suffering. Finally, the study shows how coaches and therapists may help clients to travel the three pathways and become conscious of the way these are implicitly woven into the fabric of their life.

KEYWORDS Victor Frankl, experiential pathway, creative pathway, attitudinal pathway, self-transcendence, meaningful moments

INTRODUCTION

Victor Frankl was among the first to recognize the 'will to meaning' as a human motive (Frankl, 1985, 1969). Since then, meaning has been widely acknowledged to be a basic need, crucial to our health and well-being. But though our will to meaning is natural, a sense of meaning in life is not self-evident. In a society that is increasingly self-centered, focused on pleasure, performance and acceleration, meaning is increasingly at stake (Jacobs, 2020, Rosa, 2013, 2016) - a warning

already given by Frankl (1985), that to this day is still topical. Frankl introduced the term 'existential vacuum' to refer to the loss of meaning in life (1985, p. 128), characterized by feelings of frustration, indifference, emptiness and depression.

How, then, to find meaning? Frankl stressed that there is no general answer to this question, as every single person has his or her own unique meaning to fulfill. He notes that meaning may take the form of a life calling, in a purpose that transcends the self, but is specifically found in our response to the here and know. He highlights the importance of this *pragmatic*

approach to meaning, as Fabry (2013) calls it, by focusing on the immediate meaning embedded in each and every situation. ‘What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment’ (Frankl, 1985 p. 171). It is by focusing on this specific meaning in the moment that, eventually, a greater life purpose may unfold.

Though Frankl was reluctant to offer solutions or prescriptions to find meaning in life, he did point to three *pathways* that lead to meaning: the *creative* pathway, aimed at creating a work or doing a deed, the *experiential* pathway that involves experiencing something or encountering someone, and the *attitudinal* pathway, that concerns the stance we take towards hardships and suffering (Frankl, 1955, 1985). It is these pathways that are the focus of this article, in which we illustrate and substantiate these pathways by means of an empirical study on manifestations of these pathways in everyday life.

THREE PATHWAYS TO MEANING

Throughout his works, Frankl referred to these pathways in different terms: as ‘main avenues on which to arrive at meaning’ (Frankl, 1985 p. 146), as ‘ways to discover meaning’ (Frankl, 1985 p. 115), and as ‘the realization of values’ (Frankl, 1955). In his work on Frankl’s logotherapy, Fabry describes them as ‘areas where meaning can be found’ (Fabry, 2013, p. 37). In this article, we have chosen to use the term *pathways* as introduced by Wong (2013), thereby putting emphasis on meaning as a continuing process in life.

The *creative pathway* is the way of achievement or accomplishment (Frankl, 1985). However, the actions are not self-directed nor aimed at self-actualization, but focus on giving, on contributing to something larger than the self: to the other, to society, or to the world (Wong, 2014). This active way of fulfilling meaning thereby relates to Frankl’s notions of both *responsibility* and *self-transcendence*, to ‘the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself’ (Frankl, 1985). As Wong (2013) summarizes, the creative pathway to meaning puts emphasis on freedom and responsibility as well as creativity and goal striving, on the opportunity to

develop our potential and contribute to something significant (Wong, 2013).

While the creative pathway is characterized by doing and giving, the *experiential pathway* is receptive by nature. It is a way of finding meaning by ‘experiencing something—such as goodness, truth and beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness;—by loving him’ (Frankl, 1985). The experiential pathway is a way of being present that focuses on accepting gifts from life, on meeting others or the other with openness and appreciation (Wong, 2013, 2014). Thereby, the experiential pathway is innately relational, and as such may be seen as the receptive side of self-transcendence, which according to Frankl not only concerns meaningful acts, but also encountering the other (Frankl, 1985).

Lastly, the *attitudinal pathway* concerns the way we deal with suffering, for ‘when we are no longer able to change a situation [] we are challenged to change ourselves’ (Frankl, 1985). This pathway is not aimed at overcoming or avoiding suffering, but at relating to suffering in a positive way (Wong, 2014). Frankl underscores the importance of accepting pain and suffering as an inherent part of life, noting that the way we face suffering can lead to a deeper and more complete sense of meaning in life (Frankl, 1985, p. 88). Wong builds on this by highlighting the self-transcendent motivation of the attitudinal pathway, stating that ‘an individual life cannot be destroyed if it is devoted to something bigger, higher, and more long-lasting than itself’ (Wong, 2013).

The way we face suffering can lead to a deeper and more complete sense of meaning in life

By discerning these three pathways, Frankl fills in the premise that there is meaning potential in any situation, but that it is up to us to disclose it (Frankl, 1969). The pathways stand central in Frankl’s logotherapy that

focuses on (re)establishing a sense of meaning in life. But while logotherapy has received and still receives a lot of attention in both academic as well as professional literature, as of yet surprisingly little attention has been given to the way the creative, experiential and attitudinal pathways manifest in everyday life. How do these pathways emerge 'in the wild'? How do they naturally come about in the flow of life, what forms do they take, and how do they relate to each other? This study aims to enrich the knowledge about the three pathways to meaning by means of an empirical illustration. It presents an exploration of these pathways as they appear in three stories from people about meaningful moments in their life.

METHOD

This study builds on a previous study on the emergence of meaning in life in which nine people were interviewed (Van de Goor et al., 2020b). Thereto, they were asked to choose a meaningful moment from their life in answer to the Wonderful Life question: *What if there is an afterlife. There, all your memories will be erased, except for one. Which memory do you choose to take with you to eternity?* This question has proven to be a powerful way to elicit moments that are evaluated to be of great value and significance, without directing to specific types of experiences (Van de Goor et al., 2020a). The interviews were performed in a narrative manner (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000) by the author of this article, who is an experienced coach and leadership trainer. Open-ended questions were asked to discover the way the participants elicit meaning from their chosen memory, focusing on the context in which the chosen memory took place, on the meaning they experienced in and through the moment, on the impact of the moment on their life and on their feelings related to the experience.

For this study, a purposeful sample of three interviews was chosen to represent the different types of meaningful moments in the dataset. To this end, a previously developed model for categorizing meaningful moments was employed, that distinguishes the dimensions of *context*, relating to the positive, negative or regular setting of the moment; and *intention*: if the moment is intentionally created to be meaningful or

unintentionally encountered (Van de Goor, 2020a). In this way, the stories of Harry, John and Anne (pseudonyms) were selected as data for this article, and treated as *case studies*. Case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or con-

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ditions, and their relationships (Zainal, 2007). In this article, case study was employed to illustrate and explore the creative, experiential and attitudinal pathways to meaning. As part of a narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), the transcripts from the interviews were read and re-read several times to let the whole stories speak, thereby focusing on each of the pathways: on the way they may be recognized, on the way they are narrated and the way they emerge throughout the story. Paragraphs and sentences were selected to illustrate these findings.

RESULTS

HARRY'S PATHWAY TO MEANING

Harry is a man in his mid-fifties. The meaningful moment he has chosen is a moment when he was in his twenties, during a trip in an overland truck through the African wildparks. 'The nature is versatile and overwhelming,' he notes. 'Every square meter is drenched with life, from small safari-ants, termites and crabs, to huge: crocodiles, giraffes and elephants. Everything is alive and moving.' Harry vividly recalls experiencing new life and the playfulness of lion cubs and baby elephants, as well as watching the animals hunting and being hunted: 'everything in this world is used to create new life.' The moment he chooses is on the last evening of the trip, sitting on a tree trunk, when he quietly mesmerizes over all these new impressions. 'Despite the moments of zest for life and death

agony, there is an all-encompassing, tangible calmness, without judgement. Everything is okay as it is,' he says, 'and I feel connection through my whole body. I turn to my girlfriend, who is standing right behind me, and I say with full conviction: 'just leave me here, this is all I need.'"

The moment clearly reflects the *experiential* pathway to meaning and its appreciative, relational nature: a moment of goodness and truth, in which Harry feels a strong connection to life:

'a feeling of, yes, a kind of greatness or something, I felt a connection to something grand. When you see all of that passing by, almost like a theater, to me that is, being connected to, yes, everything is connected.'

It is an intense and overwhelming experience, he notes, that befell him 'like: boom!', which he never felt before in that way. In the interview, Harry elaborates on the value of this experience and the way it led to 'a new path of self-discovery' in his life.

'This is about the grand, collective unconscious. [] This is not a state of mind, no, you just feel that it's just there, that undercurrent in which everything is connected to each other. And I experienced that there, and it encompasses everything.'

In this quote, Harry highlights the *self-transcendent* nature of the moment, of connecting to a larger whole. To Harry, this leads him to see his own place within this whole: 'getting to know yourself by getting to know the whole,' as he expresses it. An experience that has a *transforming* effect: 'It placed me in a larger whole. Why am I here, what am I doing here? That I can contribute something to that whole, even if it is just one little thing.'

Hence, the experiential pathway develops into a *creative pathway* of contributing to the world, to a self-transcending purpose in life:

Researcher: 'And do you see that as a piece of why you are here, to connect?'

Harry: 'Yes. To, to help people to become... to de-

velop more collective consciousness, together, that we are not all just individuals.'

This creative pathway surpasses the momentary, as Harry describes it to be his *calling* in life. He tells how he puts this purpose to practice in his work as a project leader at school, helping people to re-establish a sense of connection to each other. For ultimately, connection is what everybody longs for, he says, and it is his personal purpose to 'achieve collectively what is beneficial to the collective.'

JOHN'S PATHWAY TO MEANING

The meaningful moment that John chooses, who is also in his mid-fifties, is completely different in tone and setting. He chooses a memory from more than 25 years ago. He is in the hospital with his wife, and they are saying farewell to their baby daughter, who suddenly fell ill and is dying. He chooses the moment that he is holding her in his arms, and 'slowly, I felt life leaving her. And I felt, then, what death was.' And though it was horrible, 'a depraving experience,' at

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the same time John experienced this moment to be of great significance: it was 'very, very miserable, but at the same time you feel this is something very special and unique.' When asked about this, he says:

'Connection to yourself, [experiencing death] brings you deeply in contact with who you are []. Also because it is burdensome. And because it is burdensome, it is pure, it is real, and by experiencing, feeling it and saying it, you think yes, apparently, this is life. This is the essence, what you feel.'

Despite the horror of the moment, John's explanation reflects the *experiential pathway* to meaning and its positive valence. It is a moment of truth, in which he encounters the true nature of life and connects to life's universal forces, encompassing a self-transcendent sense

of awareness: 'clearer, sharper, more from a higher viewpoint. You just feel that you experience things in a way different from normal.' In this paradoxical mix of negative and positive emotions, John expresses the characteristics that are typical to *awe* (Schneider, 2009).

In the interview, John talks about the impact of this moment on his life: about the grief, the suffering, the feelings of doubt and failure. He elaborates on the necessity of going through the fierce emotions related to this experience, as they have continued to suddenly strike him throughout his life:

'You have to admit it [the emotion]. Of course you're afraid of it, because it is always preceded by that, that moment of loss of control, you lose control, are overwhelmed by emotion. [] But every time it feels like a liberation. If you would hide it, yes, then then then you would die. So by making room for it, it feels like a relief. [] Then everything is instantly clear. And evident. Okay, this is who I am, this is what I feel, this is what matters.'

John notes how surrendering to the emotions strengthens him, 'you do not feel any doubt anymore;' but also how, at times, the experience and the related emotions may trigger self-pity. 'But then you don't use it in the right way, I think,' he emphasizes, 'then you don't use it in its pure form, then you use it as an excuse.' In this comment, John expresses Frankl's notion of *responsibility*. The researcher articulates this in the interview, thereby raising John's awareness:

Researcher: 'So if you really surrender [to the horrible emotions], then in the end it makes you stronger. That is beautiful that it has two sides, that such an experience can go into two directions. If you surrender, that is the mechanism...'
John: 'Yes, that's true. I never saw it that way but indeed that is true. [] So first, you are overpowered by those feelings, that you have to surrender to them, and that then, well yes, that it enriches you.'

John's way of dealing with these emotions in life clearly reflects the *attitudinal pathway* to meaning: the choice to take a positive stance towards suffering. 'And through

this experience, I have learned not to avoid things. However difficult they may be, and however hard it is to express your emotions, you just have to do it,' he says. It is an essential attitude, because otherwise you 'lose contact with yourself.' Reflecting on this, John mentions that 'most of the trouble in the world is caused by that. That people experience things, don't get room to process them properly [] and because of that they get completely messed up, and cause a lot of damage...' In this quote, John expresses a self-transcendent motivation for this attitude, serving himself as well as humankind. Finally, he notes how the experience has led to a strengthened, self-transcendent belief in humanity, in 'human resilience and the power of human life.'

In sum, to John the experience of losing his daughter has been of great value, strengthening and enriching him. It is a story that is horrible and grand at the same time: awful and full of awe – or as John expressed: 'well it enriched my life, but I don't wish it on anybody. It's crazy to say yes, actually everybody should lose a child, that's absurd!'

ANNE'S PATHWAY TO MEANING

Anne is a woman in her mid-forties. She chooses the recurring ritual of having breakfast with her husband and daughters every weekend. She tells how the breakfast is prepared with care, 'setting the table with the nice dishes, baking the buns, boiling the eggs, pressing the oranges. In the winter lighting candles, cozy music playing. I like that moment, calmly busy, going about.' When everything is ready, they all sit down at the table. 'Everybody is relaxed. Sometimes all is quiet, sometimes the girls have the giggles. It is a moment without obligations. Actually the world consists only of the four of us at that moment, and that is a lovely feeling.'

The breakfast ritual may be seen as an example of the *creative pathway* to meaning; Anne purposely creating this moment as 'an island of peace in the hustle and bustle of family life,' in order to establish 'the connection between the four of us.' It relates to her childhood dream: 'I always wanted to become a mother, have a family, and this is the ultimate family moment.' In the interview, Anne emphasizes the value of what is created: 'people say, well, health, that's the most important

thing in life. But we know that that's not true, it's just this [connection], yes.' It is of value not only to herself and her family, but to everyone, Anne notes, thereby expressing self-transcendence: 'I wish it for everybody,

Maybe I can make a better connection at that moment because I'm not in the caretaker's role

that connection, and I think it is important for people to have it, in a family or otherwise.'

However, while the ritual is an intentionally created act, within the interview the characteristics of the receptive, *experiential pathway* also become apparent. Anne mentions how she feels like a 'participant' during the breakfast ritual, more than a mother. In the interview, the researcher questions her about the difference between these roles. 'Then [as a mother] I have more responsibility, more care, really,' she remarks, 'strange huh. Maybe I can make a better connection at that moment because I'm not in the caretaker's role.'

Researcher: 'So when you don't have to be a caretaker, you experience that connection?'

Anne: 'Gee, that is a confrontational observation. [] I'm always caretaking.'

Researcher: 'Yes, it was your dream!'

Anne: 'Yes, yes. But if the bottom line is that I don't really connect at those moments...'

Researcher: 'And is that right?'

Anne: 'Yes I think so. Because then... I'm more in a role, than that I am just myself. That responsibility, it has less of *me* in it, then I'm busy with what the other needs.'

Here, Anne discovers the necessity of being open and receptive to experience the connection with her family, typically characteristic of the *experiential pathway*. She notes how creating the breakfast ritual serves this experience: 'So maybe, maybe peace, calmness, attention, space, [] those are necessary for something to

emerge in that connection. That doesn't just casually happen, in passing.' Apparently, the intentional act of creating the breakfast ritual, i.e. the *creative pathway*, is conditional to the *experiential pathway* of feeling connected. She notes how this relates to the two stages within the ritual: 'Well, the breakfast itself is the most important: sitting at the table with the four of us, the table completely set.. And yes the preparation is part of it [] but it's actually all about, about having breakfast.' It is the first part of the ritual, the preparation of the breakfast, that facilitates the transition from her busy life to the valuable experience of being connected:

'Well I am thinking, it rarely happens but when we spend the night somewhere else and then have breakfast, that is different than here at home. Maybe because, when I make breakfast here at home, that I can disconnect from caretaking or something, I don't know, slowly change from caretaking to sitting down, "well now I don't have to do that anymore," something like that, yes...'

The creative pathway sets the stage for the experiential pathway. For ultimately, the essence of the ritual is in the deep connection that Anne experiences when sitting at the breakfast table.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

The creative, the experiential and the attitudinal: the stories of Harry, John and Anne illustrate the three pathways to meaning and the forms these may take in everyday life. More specifically, they show how the pathways *interrelate*, intertwine and give rise to each other. Harry's experience in the wildpark is a typical encounter of the experiential pathway, leading to the creative pathway of a life purpose. John's memory of the death of his daughter is, despite its horror, experiential by nature, developing into the attitudinal pathway of surrendering to suffering as a means to enrich life. Lastly, Anne's story is one in which creative pathway of performing the breakfast ritual sets the stage for the experiential pathway of feeling connected to her family. The three stories are unique manifestations of the three pathways and the way they may weave together in everyday life.

Throughout the stories, the self-transcendent nature attributed to the pathways (Frankl, 1985; Wong, 2013) clearly speaks. Both Harry, John and Anne articulate the way a sense of meaning in essence follows from relatedness – to others, to nature, to the forces of life, thereby giving expression to Frankl's notion that meaning is experienced in the world 'rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system' (Frankl, 1985). In addition, the stories are found to align with the *pragmatic approach* to meaning (Fabry, 2013; Frankl, 1985) that focuses on the meaning of life in the momentary. They show different ways in which meaning may be encountered in the here and now, through which, as specifically Harry narrates, a greater calling in life may emerge.

In regard to the experiential pathway, the findings articulate that this pathway may be traveled both *intentionally* as well as *unintentionally*, by chance. In the case of Harry and John, the narrated experience is new and unforeseen, leading to novel insights. In Anne's case, however, the purposely created ritual

The experiential pathway is not necessarily one of happiness and bliss

gives rise to an intentional, appreciative way of being present – through which the value of connectedness is re-experienced and reaffirmed. Thereby, the experiential pathway resonates with what is denoted as the mindset of wonder (van de Goor et al., 2020) and chironic happiness (Wong, 2011): an intentional attitude of gratitude, grounded in a sense of connectedness, through which the extraordinary becomes visible within the ordinary (Bennett, 2001; Passmore & Howell, 2014; Vasalou, 2015; Wong, 2011). Alongside this, findings show that the experiential pathway is not necessarily one of happiness and bliss, but is also related to *awe*, a disruptive emotion that has both positive as well as negative valence (Anbeek et al., 2018; Schneider, 2009). It is specifically John's story that substantiates this, as he talks about the horror he felt when his

daughter died in his arms. *Awe* however also relates to the *attitudinal* pathway, this study shows. John's choice not to fight or resist the harsh emotions encountered in his process of mourning, and surrender to awe, is typical for the attitudinal pathway. It reflects Wong's (2009, 2014) notion of the courage to face adversity and find some important lesson or positive meaning in the negative experience as part of this pathway.

At another level, it is of interest to zoom out from the stories to the *interaction* between the researcher and the participants in the interview. As the presented excerpts show, the elicited meaning is in several cases the result of co-construction between participant and the researcher, who is also an experienced coach. Here, the study displays the role that coaches, counselors and therapists may take on in helping clients to travel the three pathways; to become conscious of the manner in which the pathways are already implicitly woven into the fabric of the client's life. This appreciative way of retrospective reflection on the own life story, resembling reminiscence and life review therapies (Westerhof, 2010; Westerhof et al., 2019) may be regarded as a fourth, meta-pathway to meaning. A pathway aimed at finding the seeds of the creative, experiential and attitudinal that are planted in the client's past, as a basis to move forward and let these thrive and grow.

Finally, we address several limitations of this study. First of all, though care has been given to the presentation of results using persuasive argumentation (Perelman, 1982), narrative analysis inherently entails the risk of overinterpretation. Also, it is of interest to investigate if the self-transcendent nature of meaning is consistently present in other manifestations of the pathways. Finally, the presented stories reflect only three possible manifestations of the three pathways and their interrelations, giving merely a glimpse of the possibilities. Follow up research is of value to enrich these findings and develop a complete picture of the manifestations, which may guide and inspire people to travel each of the pathways in their own personal lives.

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