

RUNNING HEAD: MEANING AS THE BRIDGE

**Meaning as the bridge from crumbling traditions to a future of freedom:**

**Frankl's contribution to peace and purpose**

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## Abstract

Humanity faces an unprecedented number of crumbling traditions and values, such that we are on a dangerous precipice of noëtic tension. Whereas the animal can rely on instincts, in the past humanity was able to rely on traditions, values, and customs to serve as guideposts for living. Such historical authority is largely being lost.

Viktor Frankl rightly envisioned the crumbling and loss of traditions, and demonstrated that this provides the opportunity for meaning and responsibility through the identification, alignment, and development of the noëtic capacity of *conscience*. Thus does meaning serve as a bridge to carry us from authority and tradition to a freedom and responsibility that includes the greater good of all concerned. Examples are given from the civil rights movement to show the progression of this path from tradition to purpose and peace.

What is most important to remember is that traditions *must* crumble in order for humanity to move beyond external authority and develop conscience. We cannot develop responsibility without the emergence of a commensurate freedom to discern and choose between our animal and spiritual natures.

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Everywhere we turn, it is easy to see crumbling values and traditions. Some of these have been the standards of our societies and cultures for decades, even centuries. Mass murders at schools and theatres and churches result in citizens arming themselves. Religious authority has been threatened with a so-called “militant atheist” movement, which argues that intellect is the paramount criterion of truth. The pursuit of meaning is threatened by relativists, who postulate that meaning can be self-created. Our traditions no longer seem capable of telling us what is true and good, to know meaning for our lives.

Viktor Frankl (1969, 1985, 2000) correctly foresaw these trends in human history and provided us a roadmap of meaning through this dangerous path. If we examine the definition of *mean* as the root of “meaning,” we will find that the *meaning* of logotherapy is exactly what is needed to move from the rigid rules and traditions of the past to the freedom and responsibility of the future.

We are living through the most turbulent—and the most exciting—period in human history. If we see only the crumbling, the loss, the existential vacuum, we can be filled with despair. It is ever a delicate balance: The crumbling of traditions always represents an opportunity, a choice in the present for the freedom of the future. Consider the alternative: If we hold on to our traditions, preserving them exactly, we cannot discover our freedom and responsibility.

In March, 2015, I returned to Selma, Alabama, where I grew up in the 1960s, for the observance of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In 1965, 600

marchers, who were fed up by the manner in which they were denied the right to vote, crossed the bridge and knelt to pray. They were attacked by state troopers, local police, and sheriff's deputies; over 50 people were hospitalized from the injuries. The world witnessed the event, and, as a result, the Voting Rights Act became law later that year. It was an example of *the defiant power of the human spirit*.

Let us return to the definition of the root of *meaning*, which is found in the word *mean*. The *meaning of a word* connects an object or idea with a phonic representation—the word “chair” and the object on which you are sitting right now. A *numerical mean* (an average) is a way of representing a group of numbers as a whole. One of the old definitions of “mean” according to the Oxford Dictionary, is “a bridge between two sides.” The Pettus Bridge became a connector between two sides—between Selma, a small, sleepy rural town known for its aggressive suppression of African Americans, and Montgomery, the state capital, the seat of change and legislation for Alabama. The crossing of Pettus Bridge also became a link between the hidden practices used to control African-Americans in the South (through threats of violence and restrictions on voting) and the awakening conscience of America.

These two sides of the bridge represent two sets of values. We have traditional authority and police enforcement on one side, and on the other we have the values of freedom, of the right to express grievances, and the right to vote and to be a full citizen. The value of our police protection, as well as law and order, is beyond question, essential to a civilized society. But another value sought to coexist, the value of each person to be free, to be heard, to have a vote in government. As a young boy living in Selma at the time, I remember the emphasis placed on authority: The current way of doing things (the law of the land) was paramount and it was not uncommon to hear someone say “they had it coming to them.”

The day after the ceremony in Selma last March, the former UN Ambassador Andrew Young spoke at a church service (C-SPAN, 2015):

This was a spiritual movement, as much as anything else. My role with Martin Luther King was always to be different. The only time he got mad with me and cussed me out was when I agreed with everybody. And he said that the diversity of opinion and perspective is absolutely necessary. (02:28:00-02:28:30)

This is an important observation, and it is consistent with Frankl's vision. Frankl (2010) noted that we are heading toward an understanding of the unity of mankind, one which exists only when the uniquely human (noëtic) dimension is included:

Only in the human dimension lies the *unitas multiplex* as man has been defined by Thomas Aquinas. And this unity now turns out to be not really a "unity in diversity" but rather a unity *in spite of diversity*. (p.158, emphasis in original)

It is interesting that Andrew Young (C-SPAN, 2015) would begin his remarks with such a statement. But it was needed as a preface to what followed, as he quietly confronted a traditional, separative, stance among those who fight for civil rights:

So I want to say that we're talking a lot of black and white. I don't believe in that any more. I didn't believe in that back then. More than black and white, our problems are green and global. Now, if you look at Atlanta we didn't talk black and white; we did talk green, and we did talk global. And in the process of getting people out of their emotionalism we focused on the real problems.... I don't see black and white in Ferguson; I see green. It's unemployed and underemployed

taking their frustrations out on each other.... And so I want to remind you that we have come a long, long way. (02:28:30-02:30:45)

Andrew Young has lived this idea of “unity in spite of diversity,” and is challenging others to do the same.

But from a logotherapeutic standpoint, there is a more important point: Andrew Young (C-SPAN, 2015) is centered on *meaning*. He begins with stepping back from the seeming polarity of black vs. white, to address the meaning-vacuum facing our youth today: unemployment and underemployment. It is a problem Frankl addressed in the wake of the Great Depression, when both youth and adults had no jobs and found themselves in an existential vacuum. It was not the *lack of money* but the *lack of meaning* that was the problem (in Fabry, 2013, p. 8). Ambassador Young later added:

I think we’ve got to focus on ourselves, not as problems, but as visionaries. As people who see things, as Robert Kennedy says, as they should be and ask “Why not?” rather than see things as they are and ask “Why?”

Young (and Kennedy) invoked the logotherapeutic principle of *noëtic temporality* developed by Popielski (cited in Lukas, 1995, p. 133). Of the calls I take at the Suicide Helpline/Crisis Center in Birmingham, most of the callers are fixated on their past, whether because of abuse, neglect, violence or assault, or... because of boredom and lack of meaning.

For me, it is always a turning point when we can begin to talk about the present and near future and, more importantly, to focus on what is possible and meaningful *now*, on choices and decisions, on possibilities rather than the finality of the past. This brings us—working together—closer to a meaning orientation, toward the noëtic. As Lukas (2014) noted, it is not necessary to

dredge up the past over and over, giving weight to every slight and incident, in order to gain a new perspective on our choices in the present.

But how do we deal with crumbling traditions and values? First we must differentiate *traditions* from *meanings*; Frankl (2000) noted:

Traditions and values are crumbling. But meanings are not—cannot be—transmitted by traditions because in contrast to values, which are universal, meanings are unique. And as such they are transmitted, mediated to one's consciousness, by personal conscience. (pp. 118-119)

To Frankl, education plays a key role in developing individual conscience, the only way meanings can be found in the face of declining traditions. He continued:

In other words, the crumbling of universal values can be counteracted only by finding the unique meanings.... Man must be equipped with the capacity to listen to and obey the ten thousand demands and commandments hidden in the ten thousand situations with which life is confronting him. And it is these demands that are revealed to him by an alert conscience. Only then, by virtue of an alert conscience, can he also resist... conformism and totalitarianism. (p. 119)

Our task, as logotherapists working toward peace and purpose, is to increase our own awareness and discernment of the conscience, to develop what I call "the noëtic mind." Frankl acknowledged that the conscience is not perfect, as it is a human quality. Indeed, it should be noted that the noëtic dimension is the uniquely human dimension, and as such is *not perfect*. Nonetheless, the attempt to align with conscience, to discern conscience, and to act on conscience is our unique responsibility and opportunity. Such efforts make us more human, lead

us into greater self-transcendence, and (as a byproduct) increase our meaning capability; moreover, they give us a greater ability to help others to do the same.

This relates directly to the uniqueness of each person, an idea that is central to logotherapy. Frankl (1986, p. 69) noted that, if each person were perfect, then we would be replaceable by anyone else. If we look at this from a slightly different perspective: *In our imperfection lies the secret to our indispensability!* So our diversity is *required* in order to find unity, whether termed “diversity in unity” or “diversity in spite of unity.” Either way, it is in embracing our diversity that we discover an essential element that unites us all.

When he was imprisoned in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King (1963) wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

So let’s return to the Pettus Bridge, 1965. As a child, I saw “traditions” and “values” crumbling right before my eyes with the marchers at the bridge, though I scarcely understood it. Just a few years earlier, waiting for my grandmother at the bus station, I had excused myself from my family and dashed to the nearest bathroom. In so doing, I caused a panic for my parents. I didn’t know there were separate bathroom facilities for blacks and whites, as I couldn’t read the sign that said “colored.” And so I learned a tradition that day, one that, in retrospect, should never have existed.

We have many traditions and values handed down through the generations, some dating back millennia. We have rituals and procedures that have stood the test of time and may even represent the wisdom of our forbearers. But in the past 150 years we have learned to fly like birds, to split—and fuse—the atom like alchemists, to see and hear frequencies of light and



sound not imagined, to gather and transmit the knowledge of all recorded history instantly to everyone in the world. In the past 50 years, we have become faced with unprecedented freedom: access to groups advocating chaos and destruction in the Middle East vs groups promoting peace and purpose, access to drugs vs access to mindfulness and meditation techniques, and access to ideas of every stripe, both good and evil. We have entered a period of change and growth unlike any in human history. And we are just beginning to develop the ability to discern and detect the meaning possibilities that are available to us.

There is no turning back. Too much has crumbled, too little of the past is available to us in the way it was. We, as humanity, have begun crossing the bridge, facing what lies ahead, not knowing what is there.

Herein lies Frankl's bridge of meaning. Our path lies in an unfolding intuitive conscience, in responsibility. It involves becoming aware... in seeking the "meaning of the moment." And each of us must find this intuitive conscience for ourselves. Meaning is the connector, the bridge, between time and eternity, between where we are and where we are headed. It is this tension, the very tension of Being, that makes us who we are becoming.

Though Frankl noted that the conscience is imperfect, perhaps we can also appeal to the unseen supportiveness of a teleological universe, if we are so inclined. Others have noted the possibility of direction or leading from above, from the saints of history to the sages of the present. But here we reach the far end of the bridge; logotherapy leads us to the door of religion, but no further. But I am not speaking about the religion of the past; Frankl (2000) was careful to describe his idea of "religion" as profoundly personalized, indeed, he suggested that we would speak in our own individual language to "the ultimate being" (p. 149) by whatever name or idea

we envision such a concept. And it is at exactly this point that *meaning itself becomes a bridge* from the person to that which is our ultimate responsibility—the object of our most intimate conversations.

And this is the bridge of meaning, from the crumbling traditions of the past, which are no longer useful or available, to the noëtic present and future—the reality that uniquely faces each of us. It is only through the development and alignment of the conscience with the highest that we can know that we can cross the bridge of meaning to ultimate values: truth, beauty, goodness... the greatest good for the greatest number.

Let us consider the contrary—that we hold fast to traditional values, perhaps even to an authority, whether a temporal ruler or a religious authority. How could we develop conscience, without a commensurate freedom to choose? It is a necessary but dangerous passage for humanity, and Viktor Frankl helped to tear down old traditions by making each of us responsible for a freedom we scarcely knew we had a century ago. Peace results from a healthy tension, a dynamic stress that we embrace. Is meaning not the “path between the opposites” espoused by the Buddha?

Here we stand, midway on the bridge of meaning, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Together we cross into an age of service and responsibility, exercising our freedom in the light of conscience. Our diversity allows us to find unity of purpose: ultimate peace.

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