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## **THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

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The search for meaning is a primary need in life. This search usually begins when we are in a crisis of some sort, when familiar life horizons have been outgrown, when old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer work well. At these turning points we must take the time to disengage from all our activities. We must relax, focus inward, face our fear, clarify our values and goals, and engage in a process to develop new human resources and a new sense of purpose. The search for meaning, then, initiates a process of self-exploration, growth and transformation.

"He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how." Nietzsche

## SIGNS OF THE TIME

B.S. was a young man 18 years old. He was an honor student in his senior year of High School, and was in excellent physical condition, regularly winning awards in gymnastics and wrestling. Fluent in French, he was invited to participate in a cross-cultural student exchange program and, upon graduation, spent three months in France.

M.L. was a man of 34 years. He was an executive at IBM, and traveled throughout the United States representing this corporation. He earned a top salary, drove a Mercedes, and was respected and liked by everyone he met.

J.R. was a woman of 42 years. She was a prominent psychiatrist in her town and head of the department in the hospital where she worked. She was married to a successful engineer, was the mother of a beautiful son, and spent weekends and holidays with her family in their mountain chalet.

What did these people have in common? They were all highly successful. They were meaningfully enmeshed in society. They achieved what they wanted to accomplish, but they were unhappy with their lives. They lacked a sense of purpose or meaningful direction and felt as if they were playing in an absurd drama not their own. In their own unique ways, they felt like unskilled amateur actors and they came to me for therapy to deal with this dichotomy.<sup>1</sup>

We in modern culture are predominantly outer oriented, and seem to be hooked on personal competitiveness, conspicuous consumption, status climbing, and the like. More important, and related to this, is the fact that our primary modes of looking at reality are sensory and materialistic.<sup>2</sup>

A lack of meaning permeates our society today. We are the pawns of advertising executives, bombarded by the media and image makers, tantalized by a culture which promises to give (or sell) us everything we need, and which we can only really find in the depths of our inner selves. We are so one-sided in our approach to reality, so out of touch with our own internal processes, that existential crises are inevitable. "Long before the actual catastrophe, the signs of error announce themselves as absence of instinct, nervousness, disorientation, and entanglement in impossible situations and problems."<sup>3</sup>

## THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

"Man's search for meaning is a primary force in his life."<sup>4</sup> Each of us must struggle with the question of meaning to achieve self-understanding, and any real happiness in life. The search for meaning is like a combine which separates wheat from the chaff. It can help us process and make sense of our experiences in life. It can help us access inner wisdom, and learn life's important lessons. But it is easy to live an unexamined life. We need only respond to the pressures, demands, and advice of the people with whom we live.

I am reminded of the story of the man who went to buy a suit. He went to the tailor's shop to have his measurements taken, and returned a few weeks later for the fitting. Trying on the pants, he found them just a bit too short. "Well sir," said the tailor, "that is the style today. To be smartly dressed, a man needs to bend his knees a little and not stand too erect." Trying this, the man found the pants fit just right. The

tailor gave him the jacket, and the arms were just a bit too short. "Well sir," said the tailor, "that is the style today. A man does not let his arms just dangle freely. He must keep his elbows bent a little." In doing this the man found the sleeves just right, but the collar rode a bit too high on his neck. "Well sir," said the tailor, "that is so, but it is because you wear the jacket poorly. You must stick your chest out." The man complied, and, looking in the mirror, found the suit was perfect. Paying the tailor, the man thanked him for the good advice on contemporary styles and left. When he stepped out into the street two ladies passed by. "What a lovely suit!" said the first one. "Ah yes," said the other, "but on such a cripple!"

It is up to each of us to decide whether we will take on society's suit or create our own. Each of us possess innate talents. Each of us are keepers of vast, untapped potential waiting to be discovered, developed and put to good use. As we live our lives day by day, if we are committed to the search for meaning, we will discover who we are and what we truly have to give.

We discover the meaning of our lives one experience or stitch at a time. An arm is formed as we learn to reach out to others. A leg is formed as we learn to stand up for what we truly think and feel. We are warmed by the coat of our success, and must learn to repair the holes that result from our failures and mistakes. In time, a complete suit is fashioned and we take our place in society proudly, freely, and with confidence.

What we value determines what we do, how we process our experiences, and what we learn, and our values impact the way we relate to trouble and adversity, too. Each of us must endure, learn to live with, and find the meaning of life's many cycles, and "suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete."<sup>5</sup>

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity--even under the most difficult circumstances--to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forego the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.<sup>6</sup>

Within everyone there is a fundamental need to question the meaning of life because we know, deep inside, that all too soon our lives will end. The challenge of finding answers to this essential question places us squarely in the middle of life, and only from here is a response possible.<sup>7</sup>

In accepting this challenge . . . life has a meaning up to the last moment, and it retains this meaning literally to the end. In other words, life's meaning is an unconditional one, for it even includes the potential meaning of suffering.<sup>8</sup>

## FEAR OF KNOWING

The matrix of personality is embedded in the deepest levels of the unconscious, and our primary programs get reflected out a thousand different ways in daily living. Our actions are a function of, and flow from our primary programs, and we interpret people, experiences and events in ways that resonate with and reinforce them. The search for meaning requires us to look behind our masks and beneath the roles and

patterns through which we operate, to discover the truth--what really drives us and what is really going on in the world around us--a formidable challenge!

We must explore the hidden, the miraculous, the unknown, and the dangerous elements within us in our search for meaning, but few of us possess the necessary discipline or skills to do so. Most of us choose to remain secure in the suits we have been given to wear, however crippled they require us to be. We successfully avoid hearing the cries and whispers that faintly echo from the depths within us because these depths seem strange and threatening.

We fear what we do not know, generally, and our inner depths are the most frightening terra incognita of all. We choose not to look within because we are afraid we will despise the person we discover there, and "feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful."<sup>9</sup> "This kind of fear is defensive, in the sense that it is a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves."<sup>10</sup>

Most of our negative patterns result from having been at the effect of people who were abusive with their authority or power at one time or another, usually in childhood. We become identified with the unconscious patterns laid into our psyche at an early age, believing these patterns represent who we really are. Furthermore, we seldom clearly see these patterns (though others see them readily enough). Automatic behavior, responses and reactions sabotage our potential to realize cherished hopes and dreams, prevent us from being powerfully in the present, and cause us great trouble.

We are unable to develop our latent talents and potentials as long as they remain buried beneath unresolved conflict or pain, and we are often unable to express our true selves for fear of doing to others what was done to us. As a result, that which is most noble in us becomes inaccessible. If we avoid the difficult work of personal growth and self-discovery, we will not be able to unfold our latent talents and potentials. These exist within us as gifts to be shared with others, a rich currency of exchange, if only we would pay the price to develop them. "In brief, this is the struggle against our own greatness, the fear of hubris."<sup>11</sup>

The normal adjustment of the average, common sense, well adjusted man implies a continued successful rejection of much of the depths of human nature . . . To adjust well to the world of reality . . . means that the person turns his back on much in himself because it is dangerous. But it is now clear that by so doing, he loses a great deal too, for these depths are also the source of all his joys, his ability to play, to love, to laugh, and . . . to be creative. By protecting himself against the hell within himself, he also cuts himself off from the heaven within.<sup>12</sup>

But there is also an abiding curiosity and urge in us that impels us to know the truth about ourselves, each other, and the world. This urge brings us frequently to our growing edge almost, it often seems, against our conscious will.

This motive, or impulse, so imperious sometimes as to be irresistible, has been personified by Homer in the figure Ulysses. The whole of the Odyssey is an elaboration of this theme, whose modern manifestation takes the form of a search for out-of-the-way experience, and is prepared to employ any and all means for the purpose, including drugs.<sup>13</sup>

This "call to adventure," as Joseph Campbell terms it, has been one of the motivating principles behind many great discoveries about the human psyche and the laws of nature. <sup>14</sup>

The call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration--a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand.<sup>15</sup>

## INITIATION

Assagioli writes: "We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify ourselves."<sup>16</sup> Only a radical change can reverse the unconsciousness with which so many of us live, and help us see life clearly. Such a radical change usually takes the form of some kind of initiation. Initiation is a process whereby old patterns (old suits...) are discarded and new ways of thinking and behaving, new motivating visions and/or goals are assumed. "The standard part of the . . . adventure . . . is a magnification of the formula represented in rites of passage: separation-initiation-return."<sup>17</sup>

Initiation lies at the core of any genuine human life. And this is true for two reasons. The first is that any genuine human life implies profound crises, ordeals, suffering, loss and reconquest of self, "death and resurrection." The second is that, whatever degree of fulfillment it may have brought him, at a certain moment every man sees his life as a failure. This vision does not arise from a moral judgment made on his past, but from an obscure feeling that he has missed his vocation; that he has betrayed the best that was in him. In such moments of total crisis, only one hope seems to offer any issue--the hope of beginning life over again. This means, in short, that the man undergoing such a crisis dreams of new, renewed life, fully realized and significant . . . . The hope and dream of these moments of total crisis are to obtain a definitive and total renovatio, a renewal capable of transmuting life.<sup>18</sup>

When we move into deeper levels of consciousness with a willingness to explore and change, we encounter tremendous resistance, both within us and from those with whom we live. Few among our family or friends will understand the process of transformation we must endure unless they, themselves, have undergone it. Many will have trouble standing by us as we shuck old patterns and struggle to develop new, more effective ones. Few will easily support us as we reconstruct our lives. Our patterns are tight and they hold us in the past. But it is the struggle with resistance that releases and creates new energy in the psyche, much as a weight lifter must struggle with his weights to build strong muscles.

Our struggles on the inner plane are projected out and experienced in the world in the strange way that inner and outer realities reflect one another and converge. Transference issues, where we despise about others what is unwell within us, or become dependent on and desire to associate with people who project qualities we ourselves wish to possess, exemplify this.

But as we find the roots of our dependencies and manipulations we begin to untie our knotted interactions. This can be threatening to our families, colleagues and friends who are accustomed to relating to us through contracts of denial or mutual avoidance. When the renovatio is complete, the healing is done and new potentials are made

available, and as we return to a world "where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete," we must confront society with our discoveries and changes, "and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend."<sup>19</sup>

The step to higher consciousness leads us out and away from all rear-guard cover and from all safety measures. The individual must give himself to the new way completely, for it is only by means of his (own) integrity that he can go further, and only his integrity can guarantee that his way does not turn out to be an absurd adventure.<sup>20</sup>

## DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

In recent times it has become increasingly clear that, in spite of our seemingly blind faith in science, our desperate need for material possessions, and our affluence, we are no happier as a species than we ever were. As a reaction to a culture which is focused too much in the world, the "counter culture" has emerged. In general, this can be characterized as a widening interest in the dimension of depth and in higher states of awareness.

A large number of people, ranging from those in ordinary walks of life to bright young intellectuals and professionals, are being attracted to this movement in a hope of finding the "true," of discovering the "self," of experiencing the ecstatic "mystical union," of feeling the other "dimension," of achieving psychological peace beyond time-and-space transcendence, and of attaining "real knowledge."<sup>21</sup>

The interest in unusual and profound inner experiences is not a new phenomenon, born of affluence and existential boredom. It is a basic human need that can only be repressed at great cost. The high rate of suicide, disease, divorce; the crumbling authority of organized religion; the unreasoned desire for power, pleasure or money are all indications that we have lost connection with some of the basic truths of existence and have not discovered the essential values which unite us all.

How do we become whole again? We must first recognize and acknowledge the signs of trouble within our lives. This demands that we withdraw our attention from the external world and begin to observe what goes on within us. We need to turn our energies, more and more, toward the acquisition of self-knowledge. This "willed introversion . . . drives the psychic energies into depth and activates the lost continent of unconscious infantile and archetypal images."<sup>22</sup> There we can discover the origin and roots of our troubles and liberate the necessary energy, through a transformative process, to amend the situation.

We have to reach the recognition of our psychological multiplicity, of the various sub-personalities co-existing within us . . . The first step consists, therefore, in becoming aware of all that exists and stirs restlessly within us; the second, in discovering what we really are: a center of self-awareness, the Self, the spectator of the human tragi-comedy.<sup>23</sup>

In the new, emergent approach, depth psychology becomes a discipline that works toward the development of the personality as a whole. Its primary goal. . . is the evoking of larger realizations of meaning in the individual's existence.<sup>24</sup>

## LOVE

It takes an act of love to lift off the masks behind which we hide. Only through love will our defenses fall away, to reveal the fragile, sensitive, and truly powerful people we really are inside. Awareness alone cannot unite the points of separation within or between us any more than simply knowing the name of a disease can cure an illness. We must turn inward with a sense of love for everything we may find within us for only in the light of love can the corners be illuminated, can the hidden be found, and can we become whole.

Love . . . is the capacity to reach beneath the surface . . . to feel and touch the seed of life that is hidden there. And love becomes a power when it is capable of evoking that seed and drawing it forth from its hiding place.<sup>25</sup>

As we begin to explore the depths within us, we find that a new level of sensitivity is demanded. Our experiences are multi-dimensional--far more rich and meaningful than we are accustomed to dealing with. We must learn how to open new channels of awareness if we would explore our inner worlds. And, "it requires a direct encounter with the symbolic dimension of reality to awaken the capacity for open perception at the depth level of the psyche."<sup>26</sup>

As we develop the capacity to love ourselves, we are able to recognize, accept and integrate our many conscious and unconscious elements. We find the courage to confront our fears and the necessary strength to change. New possibilities open before us, and we actualize our hidden talents. As this happens, the search for meaning reveals its secrets and we are gradually transformed.

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