Session 19 – November 24

In the last session I said we would move on to explore Victor Frankl's ideas about how we make meaning – because I thought this would help to tie together several of the themes running through this course – in particular the idea that feelings and emotions are an integral part of the meaning-making process.

Victor Frankl's best-known book was *Man's Search for Meaning,* but he also wrote *The Doctor and the Soul* and many other major works (32 books in all). The school of psychology he founded is called logotherapy or the 'will to meaning' or the third Viennese school (after Freud and Adler). He brought existentialism into psychotherapy, but unlike other European existentialists, he was not at all pessimistic or anti-religious.

He was an Austrian Jew who became a brain surgeon and a psychiatrist specialising in suicide prevention before the second world war, during which he spent three years in the concentration camps – at first as a doctor, then as a slave-labourer. His wife was killed and his parents and brother also died in the camps. He said he learned that you can find meaning even in the midst of the most extreme suffering and it is the only thing that can keep you alive.

On the one hand, this is an extreme example of that ability of the human mind to go to another place when it needs to do that – the distraction or avoidance we were talking about in the last session. On the other hand, this was not really avoidance at all because it demonstrated to Victor Frankl the absolute necessity of an authentic meaning-making process. He was able to use his experience as a teacher and leader in the field of psychotherapy.

He described the concentration camp as 'an invaluable opportunity to dwell in the spiritual domain, the one that the SS were unable to destroy.' Later he wrote: 'I am convinced that . . . there is no situation that does not contain within it the seed of a meaning.' And a little later again: 'What threatens contemporary man is the alleged meaninglessness of life.'

When we take our mind away from what is happening in the immediate situation and imagine some different place and time we can easily get lost in a fantasy that becomes a meaningless prison – as in the case of the addicts I mentioned before. Frankl did not do this because he gave priority to what he calls 'the will to meaning' and was able to maintain an emotional state that kept on making meaning for him, no matter what happened. In a biological sense, I think these are two very different ways of connecting.

What I have been saying in this course is that it is a biological necessity to make meaning – and our autonomy and our connectedness are what makes this possible. Connectedness arises from our emotions and feelings – love draws us closer to others. To make meaning of something is to connect its parts together into a meaningful whole, which is what our mind naturally does. It's like joining up the dots in a picture book we might give to our children. And we get the ability to connect things together in our own mind from connecting with people and things outside of ourselves.

It is a biological necessity to make meaning – autonomy and connectedness make this possible

Connectedness arises from our emotions and feelings – love draws us closer together

Hope and confidence are the natural companions of love (and also fear)

Seven core principles for integrating feeling and thinking to make meaning of your life

In the remaining two sessions of our course, I will try to outline seven core principles that have been derived from Victor Frankl's work by Alex Pattakos in his book *Prisoner of our Thoughts*.

These are reasonably practical guides for integrating feeling and thinking and reminding us to make meaning.

We'll also consider two other feelings or emotions that were on our list, but haven't been covered yet. One of these is an extraordinarily powerful and poignant emotional state that we call hope. For the people trapped by addictions and others in mental prisons or dark places, nothing is more important than hope. It is only when they find some hope that human beings can find their way out of the 'dark night of the soul.'

Hope is linked to optimism, which we will also discuss, and before we finish up the year I wanted to speak about another related emotional state that I call confidence. I think hope and confidence are the natural companions of our deepest feelings of love – and also of fear.

Hope

One of the most famous places for hope to be felt and expressed is Lourdes in France. People emerge from the cave where St Bernadette had a vision of the Virgin Mary, having touched and stroked the sacred rock inside, their faces filled with a distinct thrill of hope. To what extent is this emotional state a futile fantasy – or, on the other hand, how does it play such a vital, even critical, role in our lives. Alexander Pope said it 'springs eternal in the human breast.' Nietzsche referred to hope as 'the worst of all evils, for it protracts the torment of man.'

Hope is a tricky feeling to pin down. Some would argue that it's not really a basic emotion because there is no distinct facial expression associated with it. It's a quiet sort of emotion that is often overlooked, but it's a feeling we all recognise. I've had times when my life did seem hopeless for a while, but I have never really doubted that my mind was capable of hope. Sometimes people do remain in hopeless states for long periods, but I don't think anyone is ever very far away from knowing that hope exists – sometimes they still can't quite reach it even though it's near at hand – if they can't connect with something else outside themselves.

We all know that hope changes the way you think – and psychologists have found plenty of evidence of this. People who are hopeful evaluate themselves more positively and generously. They have much more positive expectations for the future, of course, and in many cases this is a self-fulfilling prophesy. Although hope seems to lack physical manifestations – it doesn't raise heart rate like fear or make you blush like guilt – by changing the way you think about something, it does radically affect your body, even to the point of significantly prolonging life or postponing death.

There was a famous 'nun study' by David Snowdon looking at the origins of Alzheimer's Disease. A group of 678 nuns from a single religious order (Sisters of Notre Dame) donated their brains for posthumous study – their very simple (and similar) life styles and their extensive autobiographical writing made them an excellent research group. One sidelight of this study was that those whose early letters (average age 22) contained many hopeful and positive phrases lived nearly 10 years longer than those with few of these phrases in their early writing.

The presence of hope often prolongs life for a while as many of us have seen when a dying person does not die until after the relatives they wanted to see have been to visit them. It was recorded that surprisingly few people died just before the new millennium dawned, but a higher death rate than normal occurred shortly after it.

Nursing home residents who were given more control over their lives and their situation became more hopeful and lived longer – even a little feeling of control had a big effect. Hope has been shown to affect the course of breast cancer when it was not in the form of denial, but was a realistic kind of 'fighting spirit' that was not accompanied by hopelessness. Optimists recovered from surgery or burns quicker than pessimists in one study and this was attributed to differences they found in their immune systems.

An absence of hope can certainly shorten life – as portrayed in many famous stories. The ‘Slough of Despond’ is a deep bog in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in which the character, Christian, sinks under the weight of his sins and his sense of guilt about them. In the third book of the Harry Potter series, J.K. Rowling describes the Azkaban prison where the jailers – the dementors – sucked the hope out of their prisoners, leaving total despair in its place. It’s hard to imagine anything more debilitating, but Harry was spared this fate at the last minute by a special charm he believed to have come from his father, but later found had come from himself.

Hope helps people cope with stress of all kinds. When you are doing something that is hard or painful (strenuous exercises or holding your hand in an ice bucket) you can keep going for longer if you know there is an endpoint. When the trainer says: only six to go, you can summon more energy to get through those last few.

I’ve said before that love and fear are the two contrasting ways of relating to the unknown – and dealing with the unknown is the constant business of our mind. Hope is an attitude you take regarding the unknown – the anticipation of a possible outcome. Seneca wrote ‘you will cease to fear if you cease to hope.’ Both belong to a mind that is in suspense. Both fear and hope deal with uncertainty. You cannot hope for something without generating some fear that it might not happen. With any uncertainty you can choose how much emphasis you put on the fear of a bad outcome or the hope for a good one – the well-known metaphor of the glass being either half full or half empty.

Hope forms the basis for much of what we do. Without the hope that another person will treat us well we would never start any relationship. We hope and trust that the other person will be nice to us. We bring children into the world, hoping they will turn out well. Hope motivates us to plan our future and strive for the things we think will make our life satisfying and worthwhile.

Studies have shown that people, on average, thought there was a 58% chance of their hopes being realised – across a wide variety of different subjects such as getting good grades, winning competitions, finding a partner, recovering from illness, etc – there are so many different things we hope for. This led to a definition of hope as something that is marginally more likely to happen than not.

People who consider themselves to be lucky are more hopeful about the future, which often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When asked to count all the photographs in a book, they were more likely to spot the note on page two that told you the answer. The researcher, whose name was Richard Wiseman, said that lucky people make their own luck because they are better at noticing opportunities. And when they try something and it doesn’t work, they see that as an exception. He trained people in England to feel lucky and showed that it did actually change their future. He concluded that hope is not just a way of looking at your future – it’s a way of changing it as well.

But, of course, there are bound to be limits to that. You can’t change all those things that are obviously beyond your control. You hope that the miners haven’t died when you hear of an explosion in a mine, but the circumstances underground are completely beyond your control. This does not mean the hope is futile, though, because it motivates you to do everything possible to try to get the men out.

Your hope affects other people because it determines the relational space in which you live. The feeling of hopelessness can spread very easily – which was the reason for the sedition laws during wartime when it was an offence to suggest that your country might lose the war. Feelings of hope can be such powerful shapers of meaning, but they can equally lead to those empty holes in our mind that come from unfulfilled resolutions, broken promises and shattered dreams.

It’s hard to say at what age hope becomes a recognisable emotion. We probably need to understand an outcome or goal to have a clear sense of hope. Rick Snyder in Kansas – apparently a world authority on hope – said that there are three parts to being hopeful. Firstly, you have to recognise a goal – hope has to be specific, though the focus can be very broad such as having a happy life. Secondly, you have to see a possible route to achieving this and, thirdly, you must believe that you have the potential to do that.

Hopeful people don't necessarily have fewer bad things happen to them – but they don't blame themselves so much for what has happened. They are more likely to look on the bright side – they tend to show gratitude for the enjoyment they have experienced and the good times they have had after a loved one has gone or a joyful event is over.

There is a long list of ways in which hopeful people have been found to benefit. They have better health, are more popular and more likely to succeed at work, sport, academia and politics. They are better at persevering with a task and solving problems – more motivated and harder working. By setting higher goals they are buffered against disappointment – it is less likely to depress them. In one study, feelings of hope were a better predictor of college results that the entrance exam levels – especially when it came to predicting drop-outs.

So hope is a good thing – yet it can be abused if it lacks authentic meaning. In the Pollyanna story by Eleanor Porter, she infuriated everybody by insisting they be always happy – you were never allowed to be unhappy – and most people feel pleased when she finally gets run over by a car – but, of course, she bounces back.

We know that hope is necessary and can be very helpful, yet we are unsure about how to incorporate it into the meaning-making process of our lives. I think this difficulty is suggested in the story of Pandora's box in Greek mythology. She was sent down to earth by the gods with a large jar (not a box) full of human ills which she was told never to open. This happened after Prometheus had stolen the fire and Zeus wasn't a 'happy chappy' at the time. She is sometimes referred to as the first woman to come to earth and she was possessed by curiosity, so she did open the jar and the evils all poured out (plague, gout, rheumatism, colic, spite, envy and revenge). There is also a feminist mythology around her goddess qualities as well. As she tried to slam the lid shut, hope got stuck inside or, in some versions, under the edge of the lid, from where it could possibly have slipped out to help humans cope with all these difficulties. The strange thing to me is: why was hope in the jar in the first place? As Ky explained in our course, hope is always there at the very bottom of everything, if you take the trouble to look for it.

Next session we will explore this further with the psychology around learned optimism and learned helplessness, but for now, let's see if we can learn anything from Victor Frankl's approach as it is outlined by Alex Pattakos in the book, *Prisoners of our Thoughts*. I would not recommend this book to course participants too highly because it is very business-orientated, but I can pass on its principles in a more general context for you.

We are dealing here with that tricky aspect of the human mind we call free will – the ability to choose and to make decisions with our mind that will have consequences for the future – even though we have far less control over the future than we often think we do.

Frankl said he became convinced of two fundamental ideas at a very early age – firstly, that we must make our own meaning of life and take responsibility for doing that and, secondly, that ultimate meaning is beyond our comprehension and must remain so and yet we must have faith in it.

Pattakos uses a nice metaphor for the process of our mind making meaning – the experience of being in a labyrinth. There used to be many famous labyrinths in Europe – some well-known cathedrals are built on top of labyrinths because they had a spiritual significance – and the labyrinth at Knossos on the island of Crete was where the mythical Theseus was supposed to have entered to fight the Minotaur in Greek mythology.

A labyrinth has one entrance and one exit, but many internal routes to take – circular and convoluted, but there are no dead ends. We are never really lost, but sometimes we feel we know where we are going and we're on the right path, while at other times we seem to be going around in circles. Sometimes we are deep within the heart of our experience, at other times we could be skipping around playful turnings right at the edge of our mental world. At all times it is our emotional state that will shape the meanings we will make. At those times we feel afraid, lonely and lost, we will make different meanings from those times we feel optimistic and carefree about the whole labyrinth experience.

These are the seven core principles that Pattakos adapted from the writing of Victor Frankl which he said can 'lead us to meaning, to freedom and to deep connection to our own lives and to the lives of others . . .'

1. We are free to choose our attitude toward everything that happens to us.
2. We can realise our will to meaning by making a conscious, authentic commitment to meaningful values and goals.
3. We can find meaning in all life's moments.
4. We can learn to see how we work against ourselves and can learn to avoid thwarting our intentions.
5. We can look at ourselves from a distance to gain insight and perspective as well as laugh at ourselves.
6. We can shift our focus of attention when we are coping with difficult situations.
7. We can reach beyond ourselves and make a difference in the world.

We will deal with each of these in turn.

1. Exercise the freedom to choose your attitude

We are creatures of habit – we follow a routine and use thinking patterns we have learned in this repetitive process and, after a time, we come to believe that these patterns are now beyond our control. We tend to rationalise our lives as if everything just happens to us, anyway, and we don't seem to have much say in it.

What happens then is that our will to meaning manifests itself to a large extent in complaining about our situation. This seems to be satisfying our need to form meaning, but, of course, it has the effect of disempowering us. What Frankl called 'the last of the human freedoms' – the one that no one else or nothing else can take away – is the ability we have to choose our attitude to any given set of circumstances.

This is an authentic form of optimism. When we choose an attitude we are not judging or describing the situation we are in – we are looking for a positive starting point that supports the creative use of our imagination (our vision) and generates some passion and enthusiasm for whatever action could possily bring this vision to fruition.

This is similar to Snyder's three aspects of optimism that I mentioned before. It's more than just positive thinking or saying affirmations. It's an attitude – a way of looking at the possibilities without judging them or even knowing the outcome.

2. Realise your will to meaning

The three Viennese schools of psychotherapy can be distinguished (somewhat simplistically) as the will to pleasure (Freud), the will to power (Adler) and the will to meaning (Frankl). Searching for pleasure or power seems appealing at first until you find out that it doesn't really work. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of psychology theory that is built around these recognisable human drives. Both are characterised mainly by looking outside yourself whereas in the will to meaning you take responsibility within yourself and you have to go within to find what you are looking for.

Many aspects of our culture and society tend to produce an existential vacuum and feelings of inner emptiness. Frankl's point was that it is our will to meaning, not our will to pleasure or our will to power, that illuminates our lives with true freedom. He said that mankind's main concern is forming and fulfilling meaning and actualising values, rather than the mere gratification of drives and instincts.

The search for meaning is the primary motivation in our lives, not a secondary rationalisation of other instinctual drives. We don't find meaning because we have been driven to seek pleasure or power – we need to find the meaning first.

Again, you're not focussing so much on the situation that you're in – you're giving priority to considering your own values, your own significance and your deeper goals in life.

3. Detect the meaning of life's moments

We make meaning by finding it when we have created some connection – you can't create it without making any connection. It won't arrive in your lap, passed on by someone else – you have to look for it yourself. It is our life itself that invites us to form meaning – everything that is happening to us is an invitation to form meaning.

Sometimes it comes suddenly and clearly – more often it does not take form immediately but needs to be gradually pieced together, bit by bit. There are as many shades of meaning as there are colours.

Hence the importance of awareness – to be aware is to know the importance of meaning. Being aware is what makes meaning possible and so it is our personal responsibility. This harks back to the importance of being in the present moment that we talked about in earlier sessions – being able to stop and make time for a reflective experience that is not dominated by thoughts of the future and the past – to just be, with an open mind – and thus to have genuine free will. Pattakos writes about taking time back from technology – because our preoccupation with our own technology is a great thief of our time, in its true biological sense.

It is paradoxical that, in the midst of a very bad experience, when your mind needs to go elsewhere rather than suffer the present hurt, you can actually find some meaning for your own existence that is independent of what is actually happening. Again, it is a different focus – on a bigger picture, rather than one's own immediate predicament in isolation. The 'seed of meaning' that he said was always there is sometimes very hard to see.

The emotion of fear is a sort of fog when it comes to seeing any bigger picture – you need the emotional state of unconditional love to really see clearly. Frankl wrote that 'love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.' He saw it as the attribute of most value – therefore the source of most meaning.

4. Don't work against yourself

This is an interesting one. Sometimes it seems the harder you try to achieve something the more elusive that goal becomes. Trying too hard can be a serious impediment to progress because it distorts the meaning-making process. What happens is to do with expectation. You pre-empt in your mind what is going to happen because you already know how to do it.

If you haven't observed the previous core principle you have forgotten that the task is to be aware and make meaning of each moment, not simply your constructed fantasy of what the outcome will be. You sidestep genuine meaning if you move away from the moment.

The other thing that happens when you are sure you know how to do it yourself is that you neglect relationships by thinking you are pursuing this goal in isolation, which is never the case, of course. You put your effort into trying harder yourself – rather than sharing the work with others.

Frankl called this *hyperintention* and he had an antidote for it which he called paradoxical intention. When your good intention has become the cause of your failure and you are working against yourself, you need to try the opposite intention for a while in order to free things up.

Trying to do the opposite of what you wish for takes the wind out of the sails of your anxiety by replacing the fear with a paradoxical wish or intention – for example, trying to stutter more, not less; trying to sweat more in your palms, trying to scribble worse than ever instead of write clearly – which are all examples of Frankl's therapeutic work in which he completely cured people from stuttering, from having sweaty palms and from a serious 'writer's block.'

There is great value in failure, of course, because it helps us to keep things I perspective, deflates the ego, and moves us away from ourselves into partnership with the rest of the human race.

5. Look at yourself from a distance

This refers to the ability to put a distance between yourself and some situation that is blocking you – probably because you are too close to it to see it clearly. It is a standing back – seeing yourself and your situation in a broader context.

There are often opportunities for humour in doing this, which is one of the very best ways to avoid the trap of taking yourself too seriously – as we have discussed. The Dalai Lama is a man of great humour and wisdom, which belies that fact that he has witnessed much suffering for himself and his people and it is still going on. But he takes a more global and spiritual perspective on everything that is happening, even as he attends to the detail of the death of a friend in his homeland.

It's important to distinguish between self-detachment and denial. When we detach we do so consciously and with an orientation towards action. We understand the predicament and do not pretend it isn't there, but we realise we don't have to let it dictate the meaning that we make.

If we deny our own experience, we deny the experience of everyone else as well, so denial leads to disconnection – whereas proper self-detachment is meant to lead to a better connection. We can better utilise our relationships with others when we do this – discussing things with friends is a very valuable way of getting a better perspective on the situation.

6. Shift your focus of attention

In particular this refers to the shift from complaining about a situation to owning one's own right to exist in it, anyway, which means we can look for a creative kind of distraction – use our imagination in a constructive way – and focus our attentions on solutions rather than problems.

What Frankl called de-reflection leads away from self-absorption and undue absorption in the problem itself, both of which are obstacles to finding positive meaning that could lead to creative solutions.

7. Extend beyond yourself

Logotherapy invoked the word, logos, because it denoted spirit as well as meaning in its derivation from the Greek. Frankl called it the ultimate meaning. He emphasised the unattainable nature of this kind of meaning.

What Frankl called called self-transcendence in the jargon of logotherapy was seen as an essentially human attribute – the ability to focus on and relate to something other than ourselves.

The ability to forgive, thereby letting go of one's own suffering, and opening space for a new attitude, new meanings and new relationships is something that he emphasised.

Unlike purpose, meaning is not a destination to be reached – in fact it doesn't ever stand still for us to say we've got it at last – it always has an unfinished and indefinable aspect to it.

We will continue with these principles next time and consider how they might all be combined – they are not really separate and unrelated.