

Suffering—an Existential Challenge: Understanding, dealing and coping with suffering from an existential-analytic perspective

Alfried Längle

Abstract

The paper begins with a description of an existential-anthropological classification of different types of suffering. These classifications are then deepened through an elaboration of the essence of suffering. The structure of existence derived from the Existential Analytic model is used to elucidate this essential understanding of suffering. The Existential Analytic model is used to describe both the content of suffering and the impaired structures of existence. From this perspective, a model of coping with, and treatment of, suffering is developed. The paper closes with some logotherapeutic remarks on possible meanings of suffering.

People suffer in numerous ways. They either suffer silently, or express their pain through complaining, crying, hoping, self-sacrifice or rebellious behaviour. People suffer for countless reasons. Suffering is manifold in both form and content. It may be helpful, therefore, to provide an overview of suffering and to categorize the reasons for suffering. We will then look at suffering from an existential point of view and suggest specific activities we feel are necessary in order to cope with suffering.

FORMS OF SUFFERING—AN EXISTENTIAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION

The various domains in which we may suffer can be structured according to the three anthropological dimensions that Frankl (e.g., 1967, pp. 136ff.) has described. We can complement Frankl's three "classical" dimensions (somatic,

psychological and spiritual/personal) with a fourth "dynamic" one. This dimension emerges when we consider the dialogical reality of the person with the world, what we call the "existential dimension" (Längle, 1999):

- *Physical* suffering is pain: injuries, illnesses, functional disorders, such as problems with sleep or migraines. Just think of how much suffering can be caused by a simple toothache!
- *Psychological* suffering is experienced by the loss of something valuable or dear: feelings, such as anxiety, heaviness and strain, the absence of emotion, emptiness and psychological pain or injury.
- Suffering has an underlying pattern: an experience of *self-alienation*, of not being oneself. This particular form or type of suffering is attributed to a loss of something that is essential for a person to experience a fulfilled existence. Feelings attributed to these experiences include: insecurity, breach of trust, despair, absence of relationship, injustice, remorse or guilt.
- *Existential* suffering evokes feelings of futility, *meaninglessness*. This form of suffering emerges from a lack of orientation with a larger context, in which we can understand our life and our activities, our success or senseless fate.

All possible forms of suffering from our perspective can be attributed to one of these four categories, or a combination of any of them.

The quality or degree, to which a person suffers, depends on personality factors and maturity. Let us look at these qualitative differences in the following two examples:

Example 1

I recently met a young active man of 34 years who was at the beginning of a successful career in his firm. We met at a moment in his life when he was not well. He was anxiously awaiting a diagnosis for the cause of his walking difficulties: Was it a simple infection or was it indeed this incurable disease leading gradually to paralysis—multiple sclerosis (MS)? It soon turned out that it was indeed MS. He was so shocked by

this diagnosis that he could not work for the next two months. This neurological disease and his difficulty in walking were very real, but this young man suffered most of all from the blow of fate which he experienced as annihilating. The man experienced persistent and painful questions: "How do I continue? What is to become of my situation, what am I to expect?"

What would become of this man and his life? This diagnosis surely meant an earlier death, years in a wheelchair, dwindling capacities and increasing dependence. Would he be able to withstand that? Could he accept this fate? What was there left to do in a life marked by illness? What would one live for? Was this a life worth living?

The man's immediate and personal experience with this diagnosis leads to his questioning the perception of his disease by others: How would he respond to other people's questions? Would he be able to accept their pity and superficial comments that were meant to console him? Would he want to meet them at all in his changed state? This man was not looking for the essence of his disease. Life had not become hopeless for him, for he knew that he could live out of his personal depth. But he did not feel strong enough to accept this disease and how his life had changed at this particular point. What does it take to live with such a disease? He had never thought about this question, not even hypothetically. The very real implications of this question had now come to him with a vengeance: he could not even walk anymore! He did not feel strong enough at present to meet other people. He had to come to terms with his reactions, feelings and changed relationships. He had to recover from this shock and to clarify his position in the world for himself—before that nothing else was possible. He was personally devastated and overcome by his suffering. He experienced trembling, crying and insecurity. He retreated and did not want to be asked about his disease and his state of being. He was afraid of losing face, crying and being submerged by the pain of this incomprehensible fate.

Example 2

A few weeks ago I visited with a 70-year-old patient. He had been hospitalised for the 15th time within the past year. Metastases were in his liver, lungs, bones and back. Because of insufferable pain, one metastasis had now been surgically removed from his sacral canal.

This patient was asleep when I arrived. He had not closed his eyes all night long because of the pain that persisted in spite of the operation. Some time after he awoke I asked how he felt about his life. This man had always been an avid tennis-player and was now obliged to stay in bed. His answer was sober and in keeping with his whole attitude towards life, he stated:

I cannot change it. This is how it is. Of course, I would love to play tennis, and it is not easy to give that up. But I have always been a realist, and now I see this realistically as well. I will never be able to play again.

I was curious about the clear answer he gave me. Is he covering up and hiding his suffering? I therefore asked him more directly whether not being able to play again was not in fact terribly sad and how he could cope with that? My patient replied, "Well, this is the way it is. I am trying to cope the best I can. But this is the way it is now." How much pain had this man already suffered and how much more was in store for him? I did not know but now I understood his words. I could feel that his strength as a person and his capacity to endure were rooted in this strict matter-of-fact attitude he had adopted throughout his life.

If we look at the fate of these two people we may ask ourselves: Who is suffering more? Knowing of course that it is difficult to compare the subjective expressions and experiences of suffering, we may nonetheless ask ourselves: Who seems to be suffering more? The man who is near death and in terrible pain or the younger patient, with Multiple Sclerosis, who does not have any physical pain and has many years ahead of him? For the young man, it seems his fate is much harder to carry. From such observations, which you may have occasionally made yourself, we

would ask the following question: What is suffering?

THE ESSENCE OF SUFFERING

It might seem almost childlike to ask: Why do we actually suffer? But let us expand on this question. What is it that constitutes suffering? What do we suffer from in suffering? Do we suffer because we do not comprehend a particular sensation? Is it a conscious or an unconscious feeling of meaninglessness that turns an experience into one of suffering? Or is suffering merely the sensation of something negative, disagreeable, troubling or painful that has either a physical or psychological origin? Indeed, as a preliminary observation we can say that suffering is felt when we undergo an emotional experience of this sort. Suffering is not necessarily an encompassing experience of meaninglessness. One thing can be said with certainty: Suffering is linked to emotions. Even mental suffering goes along with unpleasant feelings. A preliminary explanation of suffering would be the "sensation of disagreeable feelings" that arise in connection with the above-mentioned categories of physical pain, troubling loss of something dear, painful self-alienation or meaninglessness.

But does this preliminary description stand up to closer examination? Is the disagreeable feeling really the decisive criterion of suffering, the effective agent that turns a specific experience into suffering instead of joy or delight? Disagreeable feelings are not always equal in their meaning and effect on our lives since they are subjectively understood and integrated in a variety of ways. An effort, trouble or an exertion may cost a lot of energy or cause unpleasant feelings, but if we know that these feelings serve a purpose or have meaning, then what constitutes suffering is blurred. Even if writing an article means painful renunciation of more pleasant activities and many hours of work at night, this activity will not necessarily be conceived of as suffering. This is precluded by the simple fact that the activity was undertaken voluntarily (cf. Frankl's concept of the "will to meaning", 1967, pp. 5-13; 1976). In general, we might suggest that the sting of suffering is broken if the unpleasant situation is

freely chosen. This is akin to one of Camus' statements when he calls Sisyphus a *happy* man. Sisyphus must roll a stone to the top of a mountain with enormous effort only to see that his effort is always in vain because the stone will not stay at the top. Camus (1955) makes Sisyphus proudly defy the punishment the gods intend for him by doing his work *voluntarily*. Thus the work acquires meaning by resisting absurdity and meaninglessness. Are the pains of labour, for example, soon forgotten in the wake of joyous feelings for a newborn child?

The feelings of the two patients described above are extremely strong but there is an enormous difference in the degree of their suffering. Whereas one patient is full of anxiety and on the brink of despair, the other copes with his suffering with what seems to be a sense of calm and equanimity.

A closer examination reveals that suffering is not completely identical to experiencing painful feelings. Suffering can be seen as a *spiritual perception of a content* based on the specific feelings of pain. These feelings cause suffering only when they are perceived as destructive. We can therefore define suffering from an existential point of view as "the felt destruction of something dear and/or vital". Or stated briefly, suffering is a feeling of loss or impairment to one's existence. This is the central understanding of suffering from an existential analytical point of view. The perception and feeling of destruction is commonly experienced with suffering. What is decisive for the experience of suffering is the subjective feeling of destruction of something vitally important, the sensation of something being torn apart or annihilated, a sensation that one's existential foundations are being split. What is decisive are the subsequent emotions elicited by this perception.

THE ENDANGERED ELEMENTS OF LIFE

What is destroyed in the experience of suffering? What is this destruction related to? What are the elements that we may regard as life-preserving or life-supporting? Existential Analysis has developed a comprehensive theory of *existential fundamental motivations* to address these questions (cf. Längle, 1992, 2003). From an

Existential Analytic perspective, an experience is experienced as suffering if it threatens *fundamental structures of existence*. These fundamental structures relate to the four fundamental realities of human existence: (a) the world and its conditions, (b) one's life and its force, (c) one's identity and relationship to others, and (d) the demands of the situation and the horizon of our lives.

What effect does the impairment of these foundations have when they are subjectively felt and lead to the experience of suffering? The impairment of the first fundamental condition leads to the feeling of not being able to be here at all, and to a feeling of being unable to overcome new conditions. This feeling undermines any integrating activity. The ability to integrate new conditions leads to an acceptance of the present reality. Without this ability, increased insecurity and anxiety are the results. Suffering in this dimension consists of an inability to accept what is here.

An impairment of the second fundamental condition engenders subjective feelings of dislike, a preference for not relating anymore, of not wishing to act, not wanting or being able to enjoy, not being moved or internally turned in the direction of experiencing or acting and not experiencing anything as worthwhile. This hinders the integrating activity of turning to whatever is dear or precious in one's life. This leads to a loss of vitality and will increase feelings of being troubled, torn, guilty, worried or sorrowful, all of which may eventually lead to depression. Suffering in this dimension means a loss of vitality, of enjoyment, a loss of something dear and the feeling of not being able to live under these conditions.

The subjectively felt impairment of the third fundamental condition is tied to the feeling of not knowing oneself anymore, to the feelings of self-alienation and, as a consequence, of not being able to engage with others or encounter others. The ability to integrate both one's own inner dialogue and a dialogue with others is blocked. This leads to an inner emptiness, to self-alienation with its specific absence of emotion. A person may feel inconsolable, accompanied by a loss of self that can further escalate into histrionic and

personality disorders. A loss of self in this dimension involves a feeling that one lacks authenticity, self-esteem, and appreciation or produces feelings of alienation and loneliness.

If the fourth fundamental condition for a fulfilling existence is impaired, a person is unable to respond to the world, to be engaged, to participate in a larger context. The future is not worth envisioning; there is no possible meaning that could provide an orientation to a person's life and render it worth living. The predominant feeling is one of futility, that nothing positive will come in the future and that one's achievements are in fact worthless. These feelings block any possibility of integration and identification with the actual situation (commitment). The result is a pervasive feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness, an experience of "existential vacuum" (Frankl, 1963, pp. 167–171; 1973, pp. 51ff.) and finally, despair. There can be tendencies toward suicide or actual suicide attempts. Suffering in this dimension consists of a feeling of loss as far as a future or a larger context is concerned, a context that might otherwise provide orientation and point to a positive development.

The question of meaning arises when one's orientation towards the future is in doubt. Although a worthwhile and meaningful future is much harder to discern when one experiences suffering, it is not completely impossible. Meaning can still be found. Meaning, for example, can be derived when a person is physically suffering or endures a night full of pain, as in the case of the 70-year-old patient. Meaning can be found in the hope and faith for a reunion with one's daughter before dying or in a final reunion with a loved one as in the case of the man who lost his daughter in a car accident (see below). In this case, spiritual or religious faith is of particular value because it may provide meaning beyond all situational demands. Faith may open horizons in the most difficult situations of life and allow for a deeper understanding of what is happening. On the other hand, and this must be considered, faith may be misplaced and used to camouflage the situation, neglect the truth, avoid the disagreeable facts or avoid suffering altogether. To avoid the process of

authentic suffering, when it occurs, is in fact a loss. To suffer authentically is necessary. It helps to integrate and overcome psychological and spiritual loss.

These fundamental dimensions form four layers, each an integration of the other. At the same time, each layer has its own distinct element, but requires the integration of each preceding dimension. For example, "to be oneself" in the third dimension is not contained in the first and second dimensions. For its full realization, however, it is necessary to comfortably be in the world (first layer) and to have a satisfying emotional life (second layer). This includes a good relation with oneself, one's own feelings and others. Therefore, in each case of suffering where there is a corresponding problem with meaning, we must ask whether the feelings of meaninglessness are due to a blockage in: (a) not being able to (loss of capacities), (b) not wanting to, a dislike (loss of vitality and inner strength), or (c) a lack of connection, relation, and dialogue with one's self.

If a person cannot endure her suffering because she does not have enough strength, she will be unable to recognize any meaning in a situation since she is unable to envisage any future for herself. The inability to recognize or discover meaning may be the case even when a person has faith and hope or imbues a situation with religious meaning. The problem of meaninglessness in suffering must be diagnosed more precisely. Meaninglessness is connected foremost with a blockage in one of the preceding fundamental conditions for a fulfilled existence. Therapy must focus on this blockage, otherwise the problem of meaninglessness may obscure the underlying problem. An example of this kind of blockage will be illustrated in the next case study.

ANALYSIS OF A FEELING OF MEANINGLESSNESS

A mother and father lose their daughter in a car accident on an icy road on the day of her 21st birthday. They have a son who is two years younger. The daughter worked in the family's firm. Her father had hoped, if not considered, his

daughter to be the future of this firm. She was gentle and always ready to help, courteous, adroit and popular with everyone. The parents were looking forward to having her close by and had prepared for this. They had anticipated a family with grandchildren who would be living in the neighbourhood. This terrible loss had annihilated the parents' hopes and devastated their lives. While the mother slowly overcame her paralysing sorrow after nine months, the father remained in a state of passive resignation. For the father, all meaning was lost. Why should he go on working or living since there was no future worth striving for? His faith, his family, his wife, his relatively young age (he had just entered his fifties), his work, the clients, his favourite pastimes and his inner life meant little to him. The loss of his daughter simply hurt too much.

In conditions such as these, where we see a person with a rich life who is nonetheless both disinterested and disengaged, it points to one of the first three fundamental conditions not being fulfilled. In this case, the father could not accept the loss of this dear and central value in his life. Without that personal acceptance, he could not get over the loss. As a consequence, the father had become depressed and did not allow for the grieving process. Although his level of activity was still sufficient to enable him to continue working, his defensive attitude made him unwilling to take medication or seek help in order to work through his loss. He held onto his depression because he felt that this was his only means to keep in touch with his daughter. His depression allowed him to maintain an illusory hope of not having to let go of his daughter completely. In this case, all the other fundamental conditions had been impaired as well.

The man experienced a feeling of not being able to bear these conditions. This had led to a fear of being annihilated and as a consequence, an attitude of massive defence. His relationship to life was disturbed and this was the central subject of his suffering, the loss of this love and the incalculable value of the relationship. The father's subsequent loss of vitality had led to depression.

As the third fundamental condition became impaired, a piece of his identity had come apart: Who was he now, having lost his daughter? Was he still the same person after the loss of this dear treasure with whom he had identified? With a blockage as severe as this, it is not surprising that he could not envisage a future anymore and perceived everything as meaningless. With the loss of his child, his connection to the future had been cut off.

Holding onto the question of meaning provided this father with a certain degree of protection. It protected him against having to accept the situation AND it provided him with a reason to hold onto his despair. His logic concluded that it was reasonable NOT to accept something that would render one's own life senseless. At the same time, however—and this seems particularly important to me—by refusing to accept a situation we make it possible to keep the destructive event at a distance, to push it away in fact. Attention that is focused solely on the meaninglessness of one's suffering and the meaninglessness of one's future is a consequence of being unable to come to terms with the reality of the situation. If a person focuses on the meaninglessness of life generally, a person extricates himself or herself from fault or responsibility if life does not go on. This is akin to heaping a sulky reproach upon life: If life is an insoluble dilemma then it is impossible to engage oneself in life. The conditions of life are considered too difficult and therefore unacceptable.

Rather than dealing with the suffering and trying to come to terms with it, a passive attitude is being reinforced and one waits for an answer to the *ontological meaning* of the suffering. The question would be: What is the meaning of this suffering, what good can come of this suffering? Such questions, in fact, cannot be answered. The question itself belongs to the realm of faith or philosophy and not to the realm of pure reason. A person who holds onto the question of ontological meaning may in fact reinforce a defensive attitude and create a distance to the problem because they are not striving, or finding the ability to accept

what has happened.

THE LOST EXISTENTIAL ABILITIES IN SUFFERING—THE STRUCTURE OF SUFFERING

In the above example, I elaborated on how the Existential-Analytic model describes what we suffer from when we suffer. We can link the characteristics of suffering and its elements with distinct approaches necessary for gradually coping with suffering. For each of the fundamental structures of existence there is a specific activity that is blocked by the suffering:

- The suffering may have its root in the fact that one's being in the world is threatened. The consequence of this is an inability to accept the facts. Such suffering can be accompanied by fear. Emphasis must be placed on re-establishing the ability to cope under the new conditions that a person is facing, such as with paralysis or cancer.
- Suffering may have its root in the fact that one's enjoyment of life, or vitality, is impaired. The consequence of this impairment is a lack of motivation to turn to what makes life dear and precious, an unwillingness to feel emotions because they are too painful. This unwillingness easily gives rise to depression. Coping involves a re-establishment of life under the new conditions, such as after the death of a loved one.
- Furthermore, suffering may be caused by a loss of self-esteem or shame. The consequence is an unwillingness to be seen, a tendency to hide and to feel that one is unable to be the person he or she is. Suffering at this level produces hysterical developments. Coping strategies aim at recapturing an authentic sense of being, to restructure and/or build up one's personality, e.g., after experiencing rape, shame or guilt.
- Finally, suffering can be caused by a loss of context that would give meaning to one's actions and one's life. Generally, development or change is seen as worthless because it is perceived as leading nowhere. The consequence

is a renunciation of adjustment to the actual situation, a renunciation of adjustment to what is waiting, or a renunciation of what is calling for a commitment. Suicide and addiction can easily result. Coping strategies are linked to re-establishing a relationship with the future and to bringing about a focus or orientation that is directed towards a larger, more encompassing and even metaphysical sphere.

HOW CAN WE SUFFER?—A STEP BY STEP MODEL OF COPING WITH SUFFERING

Coping with suffering is a process. The Existential-Analytic Model provides practical steps that can be applied to this process. These steps deal with all different forms of suffering as suffering is often composed of several dimensions.

If the inability to be under the changed conditions is the cause of suffering, the structures of one's existence should be worked on in order to re-establish an ability to be. It is helpful to begin by focusing on the ability to endure and to accept suffering in order to integrate it into one's life. A fulfilled existence is constructed on the basis of engagement with reality. Feeling "courage to be" and being able to confront reality is fundamental for existence.

Enduring pain, hurt and problems is the most basic human ability. To endure suffering is important even if the cause of suffering, fortunately, may often be altered or even eliminated. When suffering imposes itself, it has to be taken into account. The present "moment" of suffering has to be accepted. In order to do so, we have to ask ourselves whether we have the strength and sufficient support to bear it. To bear one's suffering means accepting it as part of one's existence. To bear the "moment" means withstanding the emotion through its duration, "enduring" it. This demands considerable psychological energy and the willingness to face this disagreeable emotion. One has to be sure that one can survive this suffering, that there is enough space and support to endure the suffering. Only then can suffering be accepted as a "given" of human existence, a given that can be endured. We

can ask ourselves practical questions such as:

- Am I able to stand this problem at all? How long? A day? An hour? Indefinitely?
- Am I willing to try? Or does everything in me cry out against that?
- Does this suffering leave me with the space to *be*?

If the suffering is caused by impairment in one's joy of life, the approach is to restore motivation and a *relation to life* through various small steps and personal decision making. This requires turning toward the source of suffering, toward whatever has been lost. By entering into a relationship with it, by approaching it honestly and by giving oneself time or space, grieving can arise naturally. Through grieving we are touched by life itself. By turning toward our loss, we feel our pain intensely. This moves us inwardly, makes us cry and invites us to draw empathically towards ourselves. In order to do this we need relationship and closeness. These are contingent upon our experiences of relationship and closeness in the past and/or through the attention and closeness of other people during the painful situation. We can ask ourselves concrete questions such as:

- Which feelings are caused by this suffering? Does it hurt very much?
- Can I sustain these feelings? Do I want to deal with them? Can I allow these feelings, can I live with them, because they belong to me? Can I endure the link these feelings have with the loss I have gone through?
- Can I recognize and appreciate how these feelings bring me in touch with myself and strengthen my relation to myself?

If the suffering is due to a loss of identity and of being oneself and self-alienation, the focus must be on what we regard as right and suitable for ourselves, on what is authentic and ethically responsible. This theme is the foundation of personhood, which has been impaired either through events or our own behaviour. This foundation of personhood requires encounter with other persons. Through encounter a person finds himself or herself. Through encounter a person sees, feels and grasps his/her essence. This leads to

processes of repentance, of pardon and reconciliation. Through repentance a person encounters himself or herself. There is a reconnection with one's true essence through an analysis, often with pain and shame, of what one has done wrong and what has led to the losing of oneself. In the process of mourning, the presence and sympathy of others are helpful. In these cases, respectful face-to-face encounter and the establishment of appropriate distance are asked for. Practical questions can be asked, such as:

- What is my opinion about what has happened to me or about what I have done?
- Can I stand by this opinion, can I stand to my behaviour, to my decisions? Do I respect myself or do I feel shame?
- Am I really myself, am I authentic? Can I appreciate myself?

If suffering is caused by the loss of an orientation towards the future, an orientation that has context and meaning into which one can integrate one's actions and life in a constructive way, then the focus must be on an openness to the demands and opportunities of the given situation, and the larger contexts in which the client finds himself or herself. This requires adjustment, harmonisation and a dialogical way of dealing with the circumstances. By adjusting to the circumstances on the basis of one's ability, motivation and inner consent, it will be possible for a person to become committed to the situation.

The act of committing or responding to the situation itself enables a person to find an activity that opens the door to creative and meaningful possibilities and actions. These in turn open the door to the future. To realistically see, take in, assess and adjust to the demands of the situation leads to existential meaning. The ability to see, feel or believe in a wider context provides a window to the ontological meaning (Längle, 1994a) and in turn, the threshold of faith.

From this perspective, the question of meaning is placed in a dialogical relation with the ability to accept, to relate and to be oneself. If these "personal conditions" are in place, a person will be more open to the meaning of the situation and better able to respond, cope and act. If the

situation can be seen, felt or understood within a larger context and a possible meaning for the suffering emerges, a person will be better able to accept the suffering and face it without losing a sense of self.

ABOUT THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

Frankl (1963) pointed out that suffering cannot be directly experienced as meaning. If we understand meaning as something worthwhile and precious, then suffering clearly runs contrary to this definition of meaning. To suffer suggests an experience or experiences of loss, destruction and/or pain. Suffering is therefore experienced as meaningless (this does not exclude that suffering may be considered ontologically necessary or meaningful in the larger context of faith or a particular ideology).

By activating the potential of the inner person, Frankl described a "turn" in the experience of suffering. Even if suffering itself is meaningless, there may be a possible meaning in the way we suffer. The meaning of suffering can therefore lie in the way we deal with it. But it can also be found in the attempt to integrate it into a larger context. A wider perspective may even imbue the suffering with some value. How can suffering be understood (and thereby integrated) in a greater context? Logotherapy (Frankl, 1963; 1967, pp. 15-16; 1973, pp. 105-116) is a psychological approach that offers valuable guidance on how to integrate and cope with suffering and how to discover existential meaning in suffering. The emergence of the "existential turn" enables us to be open to the possible meaning of suffering in two ways in which the person still maintains his or her freedom: in "how" we suffer; and "for whom" we suffer (cf. Längle, 1987; 1994c).

The first existential approach to suffering concerns "how" we suffer and the myriad of possible expressions. We might deal with suffering openly and publicly or silently, in an introverted manner, by seeking others out, through sacrifice or by condemning what we are suffering from. The second existential approach to suffering concerns our relationships: Do we relate to others in our suffering and therefore behave in a certain way so as to spare them further strain or burden, for

example? Can we relate to ourselves? Can we, for example, look into our eyes and relate to how we deal with suffering? Or do we relate to God for whom we are prepared to shoulder the suffering? Frankl called these two forms of coping with suffering a "main avenue to meaning." Both relate to a highly personal category of "attitudinal values" (Frankl, 1973, pp. 44) because the value or meaning of suffering lies in the attitude an individual adopts or expresses towards the suffering. Attitudinal values are, in the final analysis, an expression of a person's deepest relationship with life. They describe how a person sees life fundamentally and whether life is conceptualised positively or negatively (cf. Längle, 1994c, p. 504).

Beyond the existential approach in both coping and integration, there is a different category of meaning to suffering. There is a metaphysical meaning, a meaning which does not depend on an individual and his or her attitude. We call it "ontological meaning" (Längle, 1994a). It derives from the totality of all that exists and represents the meaning that underlies all beings. Such meaning surpasses human knowledge and understanding. Ontological meaning is a matter of faith and faith can provide us with hope and the prospect of salvation.

In one of his early works, Frankl (1975 [1946], pp. 310-333) wrote that suffering has a specific effect on the person undergoing it. If a person succeeds in enduring it and does not

despair, he or she may even grow. A person may progress or develop in the spiritual dimension and possibly gain new abilities, for example. Furthermore, it is possible to grow in maturity. A person's mental and spiritual faculties can unfold, be enlarged and reinforced. Finally, Frankl suggested that human beings are capable of surpassing themselves (i.e., transcending themselves). Human beings have the potential for actions and attitudes they would not have believed themselves capable of before. It is precisely the feelings of distress experienced in suffering that motivate people to greater human achievements.

Frankl was forced to bear witness to indescribable suffering during his two and a half years in concentration camps. At the end of *Man's Search for Meaning* (1963), Frankl summarized his experience of suffering with the following statement, "The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he needs fear any more—except his God" (p. 148). I want to conclude with another quote of Frankl's (1959, p. 709) from one of his early works: "Suffering makes man clear-sighted and the world transparent." Suffering may open our eyes to a depth and scope that surpasses everyday life. Suffering may put the events of the world into perspective thereby reducing their felt and perceived significance to a degree that makes the physical transparent for the metaphysical.

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