Logotherapy as a Pastoral Tool

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The Nazi holocaust of a quarter century ago seemed to have as many victims as survivors. Fortunately for the world of psychology, there was, among the latter, a young Viennese psychiatrist of Jewish parentage named Viktor Frankl. In the time that has elapsed since the end of Nazism the name of Frankl has risen to the forefront among those who are attempting to provide us with some guidelines for understanding human behavior.

Frankl's work, unlike much of that of his predecessors, leaves open a door for dialogue between the behavioral sciences and theology. This means the opening of some avenues of communication between those whose daily work involves helping people to understand the meaning of their everyday behavior (the psychologist and psychiatrist) and those whose daily work involves helping people to see their everyday behavior in terms of its ultimate significance (the pastor). This communication represents a significant breakthrough in the relation between two major academic disciplines and, in the final analysis, between the practitioners of each discipline. The history of dialogue between the two has been plagued with periods of nondialogue. Practitioners in each area have, more often than not, been reluctant to engage in any significant communication. The zenith periods of Watsonian behaviorism and Adlerian individual psychology seemed to leave little open ground for those in religion to plant any seeds of dialogue. The ostensibly antireligious posture of Freudian psychoanalysis seemed to have served only to widen the gap.

However, in the early 1950s, with the publication of Viktor Frankl's works, the climate appeared to be changing. For the first time in decades, in the theories of existential analysis, or more popularly logotherapy, religionists envisioned an opportunity for meaningful interchange with those who shared with them the distinction of being part of what are traditionally termed the helping professions. Logotherapy did not violate any religious presuppositions. Unlike behaviorism, it did not assume a mechanistic posture on the subject of behavior and motivation. Unlike Adlerian psychology, it did not assume the basic drive in man to be one to power. Unlike the Freudian school, it did not consider religious experience and practice to be a type of neurotic aberration.

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What, then, is logotherapy? What are its antecedents? How can it be used by the practicing parish pastor? Why must we ultimately go beyond logotherapy in our ministry to people? These are some of the questions around which my thoughts in this article will center.

On one occasion when Frankl was asked to compare Freudian psychoanalysis (the school in which he had been trained) to his logotherapy he responded by saying, “During psychoanalysis the patient must lie down on a couch and tell you things which sometimes are disagreeable to tell. In logotherapy the patient may remain sitting erect, but he must hear things which are disagreeable to hear.” In its own intentionally humorous way, this statement comes close to a plausible explanation, since in logotherapy the person is actually confronted with and oriented toward the meaning of his life. One translation of the Greek logos is: all that denotes meaning. This is what logotherapy is all about. It is the process of emotional growth through the discovery of meaning.

For Frankl and his followers, a proper understanding of human behavior lies not in asserting that man is driven by a pleasure principle, a power principle, or even environmental stimuli, but primarily by the will to find meaning in life. The term “meaning” has become as much a part of logotherapy as stimulus-response has been of behaviorism or pleasure principle of psychoanalysis.

What are the antecedents of logotherapy? In replying to such an inquiry one needs to look in two directions. The first is the personal history of the man who gave birth to the idea and the second involves a brief perusal of the intellectual environment into which the idea was born.

Personal experience seems always to be a valid antecedent for every new idea. This is certainly true in the case of Viktor Frankl and his approach to behavior. A practicing psychiatrist at the time of his incarceration, he spent three years in various Nazi concentration camps, including the dreaded Auschwitz. Most of the time during those years he worked as a slave laborer and in a state of near starvation. His entire family, with the exception of one sister, perished in the camps. With every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold, and brutality, hourly expecting extermination, how could he find life worth preserving? Frankl observed that what was ultimately responsible for the state of the prisoner’s inner self was not so much any enumerated psychological causes as it was the result of a free decision. He observed that prisoners who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the camp and its degenerating influences. Some prisoners regarded their lives as over and done and absolutely without a future.

Those who survived emotionally were those who filled what seemed to be an existential vacuum with meaning. For even in a concentration camp there were opportunity and challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate.