

# THE LOGOTHERAPY OF VIKTOR FRANKL

## An Interview with Anna-Maria Stegmaier, Director of the Logotherapy Centre in France

Petra Vogler<sup>1</sup>

*P: Dear Anna, thank you very much for taking your time this evening. It is an immense pleasure for me to be able to conduct this interview with you. For many years you are now head of the Viktor Frankl Institute for Logotherapy in Germany. As an introductory question, may I first of all ask how you came to know Viktor Frankl, when did your interest in his work start and how do you remember your the first encounter with him?*

A: That's a nice question. I like it, because it allows me to talk about the long marches I used to undertake back in 1984 while being in the United States. I took part in a so-called American Peace Pilgrimage (in German "*Friedensmarsch*") that started in Seattle and ended in Washington DC. I did not walk the whole route, but quite a long piece, beginning the journey in early summer and ending it in later autumn. We went on foot at 40 degrees in the shade... As we made a stopover in South Dakota, I met a young woman whose husband had been in the Vietnam War. Her husband when coming

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Petra Vogler is a humanist and cultural philosopher from Germany who conducted this interview in French on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2014 and translated it into English. A. M Stegmaier is the President of the Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, Germany (DGLE) and Member of the International Association of Institutes for Training and Research in Logotherapy and Existential Analysis (IATRLEA).

back from there was psychologically traumatized and therefore admitted to psychiatry. When I asked her: "How do you stand this?", she gave me as a response a book written by Viktor Frankl. The German title of the book was "Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen (still say yes to life)". Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist from Vienna, whom I did not know at the time when I received the book. On my return flight back to Europe I devoured the book in 9 hours and thought at first: oh, they have great writers, the Americans ... only then after a few pages, it became clear that he was a German-speaking author. Frankl was Austrian. At the end of the book it was clear to me that I needed to find this author and I also discovered that this book was available in small print in German language as well. When I arrived in Frankfurt, I have made myself immediately on the search. At this point of time he was still alive... I tried to find out his phone number in Vienna, but have not succeeded.

When I was at home, I continued my research, because I wanted to know more about this man and his teachings. So I wondered where can he be seen and heard, how can I find out where he lectures, read his books, etc. The more I searched, the more I found. What left me astonished though was the fact that his name didn't even appear at any of the German Universities in those days, neither in the field of psychology nor in education. He was basically hushed up and I have my own theory why that was the case ...

Definitely one reason that he was never or almost never mentioned could have been the fact that he has always denied the phenomenon of collective guilt. He says: there is no collective guilt, there is only individual guilt.

*P: Basically like Hannah Arendt said...*

A: Yes, at the time when Germany was still divided, when the Berlin Wall and the fence were still standing, arguing that "there is no collective guilt" meant that someone spoke out against the basis of a policy that was still fully in force in those years. Germany in 1984 was still occupied land, a divided country. And suddenly a Jewish Doctor, a Jewish Psychiatrist, claims that there is no collective guilt...

I then decided I would like to make a logotherapy training. I have learned that there was such a thing, e.g. in Munich there was the institute of Elisabeth Lukas, in Tübingen there was the institute of

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Kurz that I have chosen because it was close to where I live. And then I have undergone this perennial training with great enthusiasm and with joy, because I have finally discovered a therapy form that placed human humour, the ability of people to distance themselves from themselves, at the centre of its teaching. I can still well remember... I was then still a school teacher... When I did my teacher training, I had the idea to write a thesis on humour, because I thought it was crucial to human existence, but was thereupon told humour was not a topic for pedagogy and education. In fact it was so: there was no lexicon of pedagogy mentioning anything more profound about the subject, there was hardly anything about humour. I found pedagogy as taught in those days terribly humourless and always had the impression that the more humourless school, teaching, pedagogy, etc. is, the worse for the children, because they do not come into contact with the ability to distance oneself from oneself which obviously every human being possesses. This ability to distance oneself from oneself that can basically never disappear may though be spilled through education. If this ability is being spilled by pedagogy and education, by work with people, which can also be a serious approach to therapy and healing, etc., then a human being cannot discover his/her humanity. This is a very important point.

And for Frankl, it was the great concern that the human condition returns to the fields of psychotherapy, psychiatry, medicine, etc. He has written a book that is called "Doctoral Care (Ärztliche Seelsorge)," the title is very difficult to translate into other languages. For the last couple of years, I'm trying to convey his work as good as possible in French. There are often difficulties with the proper translation.

But the basic ideas can be conveyed very well, especially when trying to work with practice examples. I started later to work in a large hospital, in paediatrics, Children's Hospital, where many children were hospitalized, who have suffered from psychosomatic complaints. I can say that the application of logotherapy certainly has helped one or the other child to discover his or her mental faculties. Mentally not in the sense of being intellectual, but in terms of having the capacity to distance themselves from themselves and having the ability to be outgoing; Frankl calls this self-transcendence. Man is not a monad, man is not a closed system. It is in the world that has openings and is therefore open, which is basically a very old idea that was so important even to Hildegard of Bingen in the Middle Ages. Man is not a closed

system, it is not a mechanism. Also his being has nothing to do with a mechanism. A living person can not be a mechanism, he/she is unpredictable. You can not calculate him/her. We are faced with the fact that people can always take a decision at any time. I do not know what you're doing in the next minute. You can do anything. Just as my patients can do everything, I can not compute; I can not manipulate them by any training or program where they should go.

As main category of his teachings, Frankl emphasizes the concept of meaning: meaning can not be prescribed, he says again. Meaning can only be found in the concrete situation and it can only be done by human beings themselves. It is however clear that meaning cannot be an invention of human beings, it can not be constructed, since meaning is not an object. I can not put a label on it somewhere and claim that I'll give meaning to something by just labelling it. Either I discover meaning and usually then other people around me discover it as well, or I give you a meaning, I construct a meaning that can also be the greatest nonsense. And Frankl himself says that in certain moments we should not be too reasonable, because meaning might also be discovered in nonsense.

*P.: A very interesting thought... May I switch to another topic here and ask how important religion was for Frankl's life? How deeply was he rooted in his family tradition and therefore also religious belief system?*

A.: In Frankl's lifetime actually no one knew that he has taken his Jewish belief very seriously. At a later point of time, his wife then told that he carried out his prayers after the old rituals. In his book "The unconscious God" that he had written after his experience in the concentration camps - he used to be in 4 different camps - he reflected the traumata he had witnessed and wrote the sentence: "Man has nothing to fear except his God." Of course this topic has to be treated with caution. He does not believe that we have an innate religion. This differentiates his thinking by Carl Gustav Jung. But he assumes that there is an unconscious spirituality ("Geistigkeit"). He also believes that we sometimes unconsciously make decisions that can control our lives significantly without us being able to notice. This ("The unconscious God") is a very beautiful but also difficult book, very controversial.

To me the book means a lot. I think sometimes, we do not live with rational plans; the goals to which we aspire, that is not all invented

in our head, but sometimes we are attracted by beautiful things, valuable things that free up our energies and we do not even know where that comes from.

Whenever I have seen children who were heartbroken, and could by and by discover that they were small artists, musicians, poets, that they got attracted by valuable things, by values, then I could always only nod my head and say: "The Frankl's right!" We are not aware of it, but we just live it. That's the way we go then. And at some point it can happen that we are clear about. Ah..., I have made a decision.

A lovely example: if I love someone or if I fall in love with someone, then that has to do with an unconscious decision and not necessarily with projections or whatever one suspects to be behind it. If I feel this person means to me very much, perhaps means to me 100 times more than anybody else, that this person's nature corresponds to mine, then this is an unconscious decision that I can not explain by "reason" alone. I've seen young women, young adults, who had made a list on which they have written down what kind of positive sides and negative sides he or she might have. A young girl for example who was very unhappy, had a long list with many negative points about her boyfriend, who wanted her and also she really wanted him, but it was all so difficult that psychosomatically she lost control of her temper.

And I felt, she just could not get in touch with their unconscious decision. Besides there was another pregnant young girl whose unconscious decision that she wanted her child. Her decision by reason was "I don't want it" or "I should not want it", but the relevant question is what corresponds to her essential nature and way of being...where and how can be become essential. And how can I help her so that she meets her essential and natural decision without me influencing her, again following Frankl's motto: meaning can not be prescribed!

Even young people and children have the ability to discover meaning. And they have to try to notice the traces imparting from values. Frankl has done extensive studies on Max Scheeler and his phenomenology. The value system on which his teaching is based upon refers a lot to Scheeler's and Hartmann's ideas. One of the ideas that in the moment we want to orient ourselves, values attract us like

stars. If I want to inspire and motivate children, young people, adults, patients, I have to look closely at the values by which they are attracted. It is the value that attracts. Not to fascination for interesting things that we are chasing is being referred to, but to true values that inwardly calm us down and help us finding our way with serenity and inner security because we feel there is a value.

*P.: You have worked all your life in the fields mentoring, therapy and education. What has changed in the way you have seen yourself and your work after you have come to know Viktor Frankl and his teaching?*

A.: I have always tried to reflect. The experiences that I have made in my professional life have not remained unconsidered. There was always the question: What moves me? What drives me? What personality traits and values attract me, if I engage with young people, when I accompany them a short or longer way? As a young school teacher, I was in the beginning very disappointed with the practice in the school where children were instructed and taught. Kids are being told: so it goes, so you do that ...! And of course, it takes those elements too and it is also quite clear that children like it also. Certainly I have also enjoyed working in that style, direct the children, showed and demonstrated things to them. It was all a matter of course and I've taken part in it.

But I've also seen, especially in the art class that was my focus, that children go their ways the moment they are making art or when they go small steps towards art and artistic activity. On these ways I wanted to accompany them, which of course is hardly possible in huge classes with very limited options, financial possibilities and with limited time quota. I felt that accompanying someone in terms of therapy, because the original meaning of word is company / accompaniment, is not that easy if one needs to continually reach performance targets, work according to schedules and plans, arrive all in the same place at the same time, constantly measure what the other does, etc. All this has increasingly bothered me that was not my job.

I would say I have moved from this form of school pedagogy towards a pedagogy which I would describe as a sense-oriented one, also towards a form of therapy the way it used to be in ancient Greece. The *therapon* in ancient Greece accompanied the traveller, the soldier,

the fighter who has left home; the *therapon* was a knowledgeable companion, who would have to know the terrain well, who had to assess the weather conditions. He was never a slave, neither was he dependent on his companion, he was on the same level with him; his role was to accompany him in good and bad times. Accompaniment is in the sense of a travel companion.

*P.: But the therapon does not have the task to selectively work on something. It was rather a form of natural accompaniment?*

*A.:* Yes, a personal accompaniment. It is indeed an individual pact. Anyone who does travel, has learned that there are moments when the travel companion becomes very important. Also in human life there are those moments when it's good, when we have a companion, a travel companion, who should be little familiar with the terrain, that is then the professionalism of the therapist. Understanding the concrete situations, in which a person finds him-/herself, also means having made experiences. They need not necessarily be in exactly the same field, but they must be at least transferable. You must not have experienced the same as the person you accompany, but you have to have an overview.

*P.: If you compare how someone was able to become a therapon in the past and how someone is able to become a logo therapist today, can we see parallels in the form of training?*

*A.:* There was no training for the *therapon*, it wasn't an occupation or a job title. Since there was not yet the concept of profession the way we know it from today's world. The *iatros* was the doctor and the *therapon* was the one who accompanied the most able-bodied and strongest people. But of course, during a trip also a perfectly healthy strong man can suffer from illness or poisoning, he may become weak, he may lose courage or he can have a crisis. We know from studies in tourism research, that the third day of a group tour is very crisis-afflicted. In this respect, one can say there were these designations for specific tasks. The *iatros* was settled, and people could go to him and seek treatment. The *therapon* was more on the road, not put in a small chamber, just as in the therapeutic range it is often the case today.

The therapist is actually the one who goes to the people and with the people. Logotherapists for example go peoples' houses. I know a

lady in the Swabian Alps, who goes to the farmers and their families. She doesn't wait for them to come into a psychotherapy practice and sit down there. As a logotherapist she has an excellent reputation, because she goes to see people in their homes and talks to them in their language, in their particular situation. There are also logotherapists who work in refugee camps. I know a man who has done this for many years. I suppose that now many go back at the moment in this direction.

By doing practical things, they can meet people in their concrete situations. And right there they can become a companion, a therapist. Today, if one wants to be a logotherapist, one should have been studying, must be able to work scientifically, all that has to be proven in advance. We should have work experience in a helping or advisory profession for several years if possible. The formation is part-time and one has to be able to participate in the weekend- or half a week-courses. The training is very time-consuming, but it is worth it because there are many things learned that otherwise are rarely learned in their studies.

*P .: What is the role of logotherapy in the clinical setting?*

*A .:* We are changing the topic a little bit. I have now spoken of those therapists who really go out into the field, who do not apply logotherapy in the area of a hospital or doctor's office. Of course, the logotherapy plays a big role in the clinical field. Frankl himself has worked as a psychiatrist. In his early years in a clinic, he made the experience that in one year more than 3000 women arrived who all had suicide attempts. He has gained a lot of experience with suicidal people in those days. He tried to find out what it was that kept these people alive, what it was that gave them a good reason for continuing their lives after all that despair. He wondered what these good reasons were that they found and saw despite of adverse circumstances in their lives. Many of the people he came to know have changed the way to see and perceive life and they started asking different questions. It was not any longer that it is me who asks, that I myself ask the questions about my life: what do I have from my life, what does my life bring me, what do others bring me?

Turning it around, Frankl speaks of a Copernican Revolution, other questions can be asked instead, such as which questions does

life present/ask me, why am I here, what I'm good at, how can I answer, how can I take responsibility and so on. Already in this field, which indeed plays a major role in the clinical area today, the logotherapy is actually the method of choice. I would even say that it is crucial that a doctor, a psychotherapist, etc., is aware of the fact that he/she interacts with a human being who is basically on the search for meaning, and that he/she is unable to find and discover meaning in the moment he/she decides to take his/her own life away. At the most meaning can be found in the thought "I want peace and quietness, I want to get away." Even then a person can have a sense for meaning in mind, namely getting away. Human beings cannot really live without the question of meaning, they cannot even take their own life without asking the question of meaning. It isn't possible.

Frankl says that one fifth of all neuroses (at Frankl's time a popular term) are based on an existential vacuum, to wit that this person sees no meaning in life. I have had the experience that people who cannot see any more meaning in their lives are at risk, they have less chances to oppose illnesses they have. Often they end up in a hyper-reflection, in eternal thought circles, they worry about their symptoms, they are worried about their health and they can actually no longer get out of this monadic perspective. If the existential vacuum is extremely strong, so-called noogenic neuroses, for example diseases that have their origin in the spiritual dimension, can develop. In the spiritual dimension even man can not be ill, that's not possible ... it is the people's term used by V. Frankl. The spiritual dimension can not be detected by the criteria of disease and health, but it may just be spilled, that man thinks he could not be more human, he thinks he can decide anything, he thinks he must do everything so like the others. The man/woman who no longer believes in his/her possibilities in the future and says: Ah, the disasters come anyway, it has no value!

Frankl speaks as well of the so-called collective neuroses. He says that we have now often manoeuvred into a zeitgeist that makes us unable to act. Then it is no wonder if people end up in this existential vacuum. However, and I would stress, and that says Frankl also the existential frustration is not a disease. We can, if we experience existential frustration, just be sure that we are human beings. There will be no dog, no cat, no cow, etc. which has the feeling of existential frustration. The psychological dimension we have in common with animals. Since we are just like the animals. But the spiritual dimension

of man makes us different. For Frankl, the spiritual dimension is nothing more than the human dimension. That what makes the people that is the spiritual dimension.

Let's go back to the clinical field. Frankl has developed methods that are relatively well known; one method is called paradoxical intention. It is very effective in the treatment of phobias. One important thing about this method is that it has to do a lot with humour. Since humour can turn into irony, in sarcasm, in hurtful laughter, it is crucial to profoundly study and understand its theory and practical implications.

*P.: So Frankl used to work a lot with humour or better to say with the healing power of humour and therefore connects very well with the theme of this issue of the Journal that is "awareness exercises, health and happiness".*

A.: Yes, the method paradoxical intention has so far proved very effective. There are many empirical studies which show this method works, and it is taken up by other therapy schools as well, although Frankl might not always be quoted. He has developed it at an early stage; in the hospital I have worked with this method during the last 20 years.

*P.: Can the method be explained? What's happening when using it?*

A.: It is important that someone would resolve precisely what he/she fears most. It's like when you find a needle with which one pierced a balloon. The fear is like the balloon and is growing larger and bigger... The paradoxical intention is so sharp that the whole balloon may burst, because the patient suddenly starts to laugh about him-/herself. If someone has, for example, fear of an elevator and cannot enter one, because the claustrophobia grabs him/her, the person is really handicapped. But perhaps if that person really would like to have the opportunity back to use an elevator, and if then the defiant power of the mind and humour appear and self-distancing becomes possible, then healing can also start.

*P.: What is the difference for desensitization?*

A.: The way it is practiced, desensitization is without humour. Another field in the clinical area where logotherapy is very successful is in the treatment of addictions. If you observe people falling into

addictions, it can be said that basically they have lost things from the point of view, which are valuable and they can be wrapped in easily by emotional states. Frankl always emphasizes that there are arrows in our lives that show us where we really want to go, where something valuable is waiting for us. Life is waiting for us, we have a goal, we have something that makes sense to us, something meaningful; if that is the case the probability to be wrapped in by emotional states easily is low. The state of mind one reaches in a meaningful environment and outlook doesn't react suddenly to emotional states. In this context, empirical studies have been done and they show that logotherapy is very effective.

Even people who, for example, change their cultural context completely, might run the risk to meaning and fall into an existential vacuum. There is the danger that addictions (alcohol, drugs, etc.) originate; we have studies related to Canadian Indians. Here too logotherapy has to be applied successfully, as we can prove by empirical studies.

Then looking at the spectrum of psychosomatic diseases, logotherapy can also be very helpful. I could mention a long list. Lately is mourning can very quickly become a disease, according to the new DSM5. One can only mourn for a short time, otherwise you will be considered to be mentally ill when if one mourns a longer time. Logotherapists here contend that people are allowed to mourn.

*P.: This is closely related to the idea of man/human being. Can you comment on that?*

A.: There are two small chapters, 1. Why was the term logotherapy selected? Frankl has chosen the Greek word logos, which is indeed very complex and has many meanings; he translated the word with meaning. For him, the logotherapy is a therapy form aligned to sense/meaning aiming at the spiritual, but also coming from the spiritual. He has deliberately chosen this concept, since the Greek term allowed him to find a way to get rid of word categories usually used in the usual cultural context. When we speak of meaning, then we must look carefully what we associate with its concept.

*P.: Did he criticize it or why was it important to him?*

A.: For him, and this brings me to the second aspect, it was important that the concept of meaning is not subjective, but that it

remains objective. It assumes that meaning is actually nothing that man can invent.

*P.: So mind according to Frankl is something that is in the spiritual dimension and where something comes to a human being when it opens up...?*

A.: Human beings can look for meaning, as a thirsty person looks for something to drink. If I'm thirsty, I know there is somewhere something that can quench that thirst. When I'm on the search for meaning and somehow I have the certainty that it has to be somewhere, there is no longer any doubt. Maybe we can understand it, if one remembers that Frankl even in midst of the concentration camps, places where meaning comes close to zero, he has discovered people who have not lost access to the sources of their life meaning.

Also he wrote in his book about people who had given up and e.g. ran into the fence or ended their life in a different way, because they really saw no more sense to continue life under these circumstances. Frankl understood, he never judged. He observed how people surrender when you hem someone in an environment where finding of meaning is impossible. And that was target of the concentration camp. But in the same context he also discovered that people who still had a small glimmer of meaning in their lives, they just had a little more strength. The chance of survival was 1 to 39. In the book about the concentration camp that he had written after the war, he describes how people were still able to perceive and sees small things one normally might not appreciate in the same way in a different situation. People were still able to enjoy small moments, experiences and values.

That was something that kept him grounded; also the thought of his wife gave him energy. He was separated from her and did not even know whether she was still alive. The thought that she was waiting for him and similar things have immensely helped him still to have a spark of living will. He also speaks of attitude values, when all else fails. In situations when there is neither creation nor experience possible. Creative values are the third category.

If a human being cannot be creative, nor can he/she experience anything, then says Frankl, there is still the possibility to realize attitude values. I still have the freedom to adjust myself to what is happening

to me. Nelson Mandela is an example, a man who had lived in a prison on an island for years and years... As one may ask, what values have nourished him?

*P.: He has lived in a very small cell for more than 27 years. I've seen it with my own eyes. He created a structure for the prisoners, daily meetings and rituals dealing with singing, literature, philosophy, etc.; he has managed to keep the spirits up.*

A.: Yes, the human in man, in the human being. Mandela definitely was a great personality. I also find it important that once in a while we turn our gaze to these few exceptional individual examples that show us that a human being can be human. There are very few who can do that, but they are crucial for humanity.

The idea of man/human being Frankl can be described as follows: in front of me sits a human being, no matter what disease he/she has, no matter how bad his/her situation is, no matter how reduced his/her beauty is, no matter how disabled he/she is. If I can look through this broken instrument which is his/her body, his/her psyche, etc., if I can see this human being as a person, then I know that this man or woman as long as he or she lives (Frankl says, until the last breath) has the possibility to adapt to oneself and has the opportunity to shape oneself. That's always possible. We can make and shape us. The question is, in which direction we do that. There are these stars, these landmarks, the values that give us orientation and therefore must exist in some way; we see them lighting up again and again in all cultures around the world. If we focus on this, I believe that there are good forces in the world to come, even if there are not many people, perhaps it does not need to be the mass.

Some have to try and risk it that can be our patients. I have seen patients who have become role models for me. Although I was the therapist, I have to say today that my patients were my masters and I'm really grateful to them.

*P.: A very nice final word! Thank you Anna very much for this meaningful interview.*