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Anthony J. Marsella

Department of Psychology University of Hawai'i

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In Search of Meaning

Some Thoughts on Belief, Doubt, and Wellbeing

Anthony J. Marsella
Department of Psychology
University of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA

The relationship between personal meaning, belief systems, and health and wellbeing is discussed. It is argued that our conceptions of health and wellbeing must incorporate a concern for spirituality. As information is processed via our senses in the course of human development, we gradually construct complex belief systems, including worldviews, life-philosophies, religions, mythologies, and spiritual paths. Though differing in content, these complex belief systems guide our behavior and provide us with a sense of personal meaning. However, meaning-making is not the end point of the process. Rather, meaning-making must be accompanied by the willingness to doubt. It is the dialectical tension between belief and doubt that gives rise to a spiritual sense of being—characterized by awe, reverence, and meaning—that has salutogenic consequences.

Not non-existent was it, nor existent was it at that time; there was not atmosphere nor the heavens which are beyond. What existed? Where? In whose care? Water was it? An abyss unfathomable?...

Who after all knows? Who here will declare from whence it arose, whence this world? Subsequent are the gods to the creation of this world. Who then, knows when it came into being?

This world—whence it came into being, whether it was made or whether not—He who is its overseer in the highest heavens surely knows—or perhaps he knows not.

> —Creation Hymn: X. 129
> *Selections from the Rgveda*
> (In Maurer, 1986, p. 285)

❧ Introduction ❧

Meaning: The Endless Dance of Belief and Doubt

THE INSPIRING words from the Rgveda's Creation Hymn X. 129, composed more than 3500 years ago, document and affirm the age-old human quest for personal meaning. For me, the special enchantment of the Creation Hymn resides in its delicate juxtaposition of the human impulse to know (i.e., to make sense of the world) and to doubt (i.e., to question that which is known and accepted)—"He who is its overseer in the highest heavens surely knows—or perhaps he knows not."

The process of "asserting" yet "refuting" that is expressed in the Creation Hymn captures the essential force behind human progress through the ages. It is an adaptive dialectic that enriches and extends our human possibilities and potential. Even as we reach a hard-won conclusion, doubt emerges to move us toward yet other possibilities. Unlike other beings whose behavior is fixed by reliance upon instinct and reflex, human beings have the capacity for reflective thought. We can reach a conclusion in one moment and modify it a moment later. The human impulse to know and to doubt provides an insight into the origins and nature of our religious, philosophical, and mythological belief systems. These too, spring from our impulse to know and to doubt.

There is within our nature an imperative to question, and to order our answers in increasingly complex systems of beliefs designed to reduce our uncertainties and to increase our sense of control and mastery of the world. This is a reflexive and automatic response. So too is our inclination to doubt. But, because of the discomfort associated with doubt, it often requires greater effort to question the very beliefs we hold with comfort and contentment.

The human mind—that experienced sense of intention and agency that emerges from the simultaneous interaction of organism and environment—establishes order, coherence, and meaning from the vast array of stimuli flooding the senses. At some point, within a cultural context, it constructs elaborate and ritualized beliefs and/or practices regarding human meaning that provide us with a sense of certainty, comfort, and significance from the vicissitudes of life's experiences. But it is at this point that we must doubt the very beliefs we hold so dearly. The process of meaning-making and doubting has important implications for our health and wellbeing.

Meaning, Doubt, and Belief Systems

1. Renewed Interest in Human Meaning

The pursuit of meaning is, in many respects, the most human of behaviors—the defining characteristic of our species homo sapiens. Within the past few decades, there has been a renewed interest in the study of human meaning among clinicians and scientists (e.g., Richards & Bergin, 1997; Thoresen, 1998; Wong & Fry, 1998). Wong and Fry (1998), in the introduction to *The Human Quest for Meaning*, write:

> After a hundred years in the wilderness of philosophical and religious discourse, the concept of personal meaning has emerged as a serious candidate for scientific research and clinical study…There is now a critical mass of empirical evidence and a convergence of expert opinions that personal meaning is important not only for survival but also for health and wellbeing. (p. xvii)

Contemporary theorists are in agreement that the pursuit of meaning is critical for our adaptation and adjustment (e.g., Klinger, 1998; Maddi, 1998). These theorists have built upon the contributions of previous theorists in psychology such as Allport (1955), Frankl (1946/1959), Fromm (1947/1990), Kelly (1956), Maslow (1968), and May (1967). Viktor Frankl (1905-1998) is perhaps the most notable figure in our century to call attention to the human quest and need for meaning.

Frankl, a Nazi concentration camp survivor and the developer of Logotherapy (Frankl, 1973), argues in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1959) that meaning is the central motive of human life. He suggests that above all else, our capacity to ask *why* with regard to our existence indicates that "meaning" is at the core of our health and wellbeing. For Frankl, human survival depends on finding and preserving "meaning" amidst the madness of our world, and on filling the "existential vacuum." But, more importantly for Frankl, "meaning" is not something that occurs reflexively within the human mind, but rather something that demands an active pursuit—the "will to meaning"—in which we actively seek a meaning in life.

In Frankl's opinion, the "will to meaning" is a primary human motive that supersedes the pursuit of pleasure and power. Wong (1998) points out that Frankl's life epitomizes Nietzsche's dictum, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost anything," and human history is certainly replete with examples affirming Nietzsche's dictum. Frankl's views have often been considered more of a "secular religion" (see Wong, 1998, p. 400) than a science, and for this reason they have not always been popular among behavioral scientists. Today, however, data are accumulating in support of Frankl's views. For example, the recent book by Wong and Fry (1998) provides data from numerous studies of personal meaning based on quantitative (e.g., Personal Meaning Profile; Life Regard Index) and qualitative measures (e.g., personal narratives) that affirm Frankl's assumptions.

2. Brain and Meaning

Klinger (1998) argues that the human quest for meaning is rooted within the brain itself and that goal-striving is a biological imperative of all zoological organisms. He notes that it is humankind's cognitive and symbolic capacity that

elevates this biological drive to the transcendent experience of higher purpose and meaning (Klinger, 1998). Indeed, Klinger (1998) concludes that the failure to make meaning may have pathological consequences.

The highest calling of the brain, aside from its basic reflexive survival functions, is its efforts to generate meaning and purpose from the vast array of sensory-coded experiences our billions of brain cells accumulate. This accumulation process—this storage of lived experience—both supports our survival and drives us forward in search of higher principles for organizing and connecting our acquired experience. Through memory and learning, continuities are established with our individual, collective, and cosmic past and imagined future.

Thus, the brain is more than a simple sensate mechanism for reflexively recording external and internal stimulation in organized substrates. The undamaged human brain not only responds to stimuli, it also organizes, symbolizes, and connects stimuli, and in the process, it generates an emergent pattern of meaning that facilitates our survival, growth, and development. These higher-order functions of the brain push us toward the pursuit of meaning and with this, a felt sense of understanding, predictability, and transcendence.

Recent developments in the neurosciences support the existence of intimate relationships between brain structures and processes and cognitive behavior. Each day new discoveries seem to appear regarding the neurological basis of consciousness, sensation, emotion, memory, and learning. It is estimated that our brain possesses more than 15 billion neurons that work in organized units through trillions of complex vertical and horizontal connections. The structure of these cells, the cytoarchitectonics, and their myriad connections constitute an essential element of human psychology (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Marshall & Magoun, 1998).

3. The Inherent Impulse After Meaning

Efforts after meaning begin with the human brain's inherent impulse to order, organize, and structure sensory data. This impulse, acted out within a cultural context, leads to the construction of higher-order cognitive beliefs, schemata, and information patterns that we associate with worldviews and various philosophies, religions, and mythologies. We move from simple information processing of sensory inputs to complex belief systems that guide and frame our lives—belief systems associated with existential concerns—purpose, hope, identity, life, death, self, choice, and morality. We cannot separate these existential concerns from human health and wellbeing.

The importance of establishing organized and systematic belief systems for our health and wellbeing cannot be denied, and although these vary considerably across individuals and cultures, they seem to be universal in their function of bringing comfort, purpose, direction, predictability, and control to our lives (e.g., Frankl, 1959; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994). Taggart (1994) states:

> ...our belief systems are...the basis for our existence; they are symbol systems that enable us to derive meaning from a chaos of stimuli and instincts and to decode the mystery of our existence. Our separate core beliefs, whether secular or religious, anchor us in the dizzying vastness of the great unknown we call reality. (p. 20)

Throughout history, humans have advanced numerous atheistic and theistic belief systems (see Sheinkin, 1986) replete with rituals, rites, ceremonies, and dogmas. At a personal and cultural level, these belief systems help position and root us within the mysteries of the cosmos. They order chaos, reduce complexity, and give purpose (e.g., Allport, 1950; Brown, 1994; Frankl, 1946/1959; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994).

Wong (1998) suggests that personal meaning has three components: cognitive (beliefs, schemas, making sense), emotional (feeling good, feeling fulfilled), and motivational (goal-striving, purpose, incentive value). Referring to his model, Wong (1998) notes:

> Thus, the structural definition of personal meaning is that it is an individually constructed, culturally-based cognitive system that influences an individual's choice of activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth, and fulfillment. This definition identifies the key elements of meaningful existence, and indicates their interrelations. (p. 407)

The Importance of Doubt

EVEN AS we seek to confirm and sustain core beliefs, there is, I believe, a simultaneous disposition to ponder, to question, and to doubt whether the "truths" we prize are in fact more relative than absolute, more questionable than certain, more temporal than enduring. Humans seek meaning, but they dislike doubt. The American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914) noted that human beings will tolerate many things—but not doubt. When faced with doubt, he claimed, they will often resolve the tensions by deferring to authority or simply maintaining their beliefs with renewed tenacity (Peirce, 1997). Obviously, we must guard against this tendency. As Andre Gide reminds us: "Believe those who seek truth, doubt those who find it."

Here, I also think of the words of the Danish existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who was concerned with the question of human choice and responsibility, and especially of our "fear of nothingness." In one of his later books, *A Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1849/1954) writes:

> ...the good is the opening toward a new possibility and choice, the ability to face into anxiety; the closed is the evil, that which turns away from newness and broader perceptions and experiences; the closed shuts out revelation, obtrudes a veil between the person and his own situation in the world. (p. 124)

Within the traditions of academic psychology, George Kelly (1956) advanced a theory that supports Kierkegaard's observations about the consequences of closed and open minds. According to Kelly (1956), the impulse to establish a set of organized beliefs about the world and our role in it flows from our natural inclination to process information from the world about us for the purposes of describing, understanding, predicting, and controlling our lives. We do this, he contends, by establishing a system of superordinate and subordinate cognitive constructs (i.e., templates) that emerge from our personal experience and that serve to mediate our reality. Our perceptions of our world and our responses to it are dictated by our "constructs." And most importantly for Kelly, it is through lived experience that our personal construct system is continually revised, adjusted, and reorganized. Thus, he notes, experience serves to modify the subordinate-superordinate relationships of our personal construct system, yielding new perceptions of reality and alternative behavior patterns that keep us open to new possibilities.

❧ Meaning, World Views, and Culture ❧

EVEN AS we speak of personal meaning at an individual level, it is essential to understand that all individuals are embedded within cultural contexts. These contexts constitute the basis for socializing and for promoting ways of life across generations particular to a group of people. Culture is the context in which mind is acquired, and thus, mind reflects culturally constructed realities.

Defining Culture

CULTURE CAN be defined as shared learned experience that is transmitted across generations. Culture is externally represented in such forms as artifacts (e.g., clothing, foods, technologies), roles (e.g., parents, mother, occupations), and institutions (e.g., family, religious, educational, economic). It is represented internally in such forms as worldviews, values, beliefs, attitudes, consciousness patterns, epistemologies, and cognitive styles. Behavior cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it develops and is sustained. Culture influences all aspects of our lives, including our:

1. Values, attitudes, beliefs, and standards of normality/abnormality, and morality.

2. Notions of time, space, and causality (i.e., epistemology, ontology, praxiology).

3. Patterns of human communications and social interaction (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal communications).

4. Expressive styles and preferences in clothing, food, art, and recreation; a sense of aesthetics.

5. Familial, marital, and child rearing practices and preferences.

6. Preferred cognitive styles, and coping and problem-solving styles.

7. Interpersonal relationship patterns, especially regarding authority, gender, the elderly (i.e., social structure).

8. The structure and dynamics of institutions such as the family, schools, government, religion, and the workplace.

9. Personal and social identities.

10. Our biological nature, including our brain structures and processes.

Cultural systems are generally constructed around an ethos or set of core assumptions. These assumptions eventually find themselves represented in institutions (e.g., political systems, economic systems), activity settings (e.g., family activities, work activities), and personal behavior patterns. Figure 1 provides a schematic of a prototypical cultural system using dominant group American core values as the ethos. An ethos of individualism, materialism, and competition will result in macrosocial and microsocial institutions that encourage these qualities and that promote them in socialization. But an ethos that values an unindividuated (collective) self, spirituality, and cooperation will produce another socialization context, and lead to a different sense of self and personhood.

Figure 1

Cultural Socialization Structure
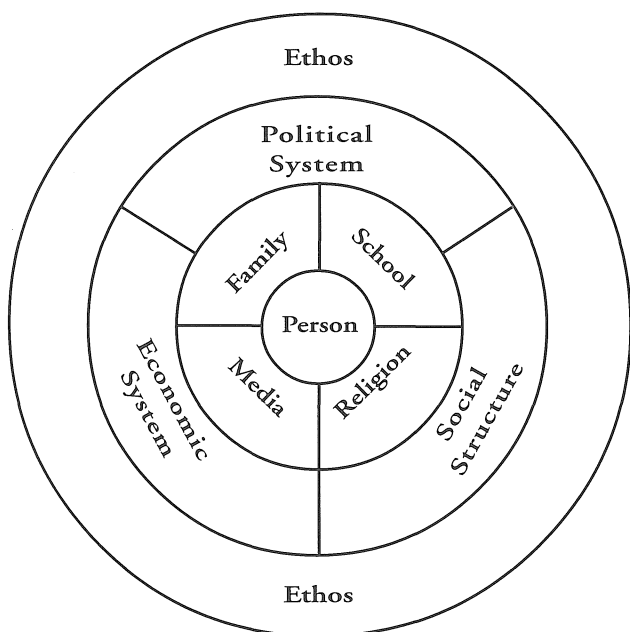
Cultures vary in their concepts of selfhood or personhood (e.g., Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985). Within the United States, the dominant cultural emphasis is placed on socializing an individual who is autonomous, detached, and independent. Health, wellbeing, and maturity are often equated with self-sufficiency and independence. But in many Asian cultures, a collective or unindividuated self is preferred. This self is considered to be inseparable from the group, and individual happiness and wellbeing are derived from meeting one's social roles and expectations. There is a strong Confucian orientation in these thoughts. Confucius (c. 551–479 B.C.E.) advocated meeting one's social obligations and responsibilities as a basic virtue. In meeting these obligations and responsibilities, one helps promote social harmony, civility, and conformity to virtuous standards (e.g., kindness, faithfulness, decorum, wisdom, and uprightness). The worth and purpose of individuals are often assessed against their group and/or societal contribution.

These differences in preferred views of selfhood help demonstrate the consequences of the cultural construction of reality. Table 1 outlines the process of the cultural construction of reality. Religions, life-philosophies, and mythological belief systems reflect the essentials of our many and varied culturally constructed cosmological, epistemological, ontological, and praxiological orientations. Culturally, these orientation systems are embedded in our worldviews—the broader set of assumptions regarding our relations to god(s), nature, and one another. According to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who fought against the domination of learning by the physical and natural sciences and their methods, our "world view" is a subjective, experientially derived set of beliefs developed "to resolve the enigma of life" (see Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957, p. 25).

Table 1
The Cultural Construction of "Reality"

1. There is an inherent human impulse to describe, understand, predict, and control the world about us through the ordering of stimuli into complex belief systems that can guide behavior.

2. The undamaged human brain not only responds to stimuli, it also organizes, connects, and symbolizes them,

and in this process, it generates patterns of explicit and implicit meanings and purposes that promote survival, growth, and development.

3. The process and product of this activity are to a large extent culturally generated and shaped through linguistic, behavioral, and interpersonal practices that are part of the socialization process.

4. This storage of accumulated life experience, in both representational and symbolic forms, generates complex shared cognitive and affective organizational and process systems that create continuity across time (i.e., past, present, and future) for both the person and the group.

5. Through the process of socialization, individual and group preferences and priorities are rewarded through chance and choice, thus promoting and/or modifying the cultural constructions of reality (i.e., epistemologies, cosmologies, ethos, values, and behavior patterns).

6. Reality is culturally constructed.

Worldviews (Weltanschauungen): The Need for Meaning

WITHOUT A sense of purpose and meaning, as reflected in our philosophical, religious, and mythological belief systems, we would find ourselves confused, disoriented, and dislocated, an organism compelled to respond to each situation without a reason or rationale beyond immediate adaptation and adjustment. Societal life would be impossible, for it is the shared beliefs that enable us to live together with some degree of mutual concern and intent. It is out of our impulse to know and doubt that arise our capacity and motivation to address questions about the nature of human life and existence, and to develop a world view or Weltanschauung (e.g., Dilthey, in Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957; Kearney, 1984; Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Cultural variations in worldviews have long been a topic of interest (see Kearney, 1984). The social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) wrote:

> What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his Weltanschauung, the breath of life and reality that breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life. In the roamings over human history, and over the surface of the earth, it is the possibility of seeing life and the world from the various angles, peculiar to each culture, that has always charmed me most, and inspired me with real desire to penetrate other cultures, to understand other types of life. (In Kearney, 1984, p. 37)

Richards and Bergin (1997) note that our world view, our Weltanschauung, is about the nature of reality and our existence:

> For example, how did the universe and the Earth come to exist? How did life, particularly human life, come to exist? Is there a Supreme Being or creator? What is the purpose of life? How should people live their lives in order to find happiness, peace, and wisdom? What is good, moral, and ethical? What is undesirable, evil, and immoral? How do people live with the realities of suffering, grief, pain, and death? Is there a life after death, and if so, what is the nature of the afterlife? (p. 50)

Kearney (1984), who wrote a popular text on the topic of worldviews, states:

> Worldview studies seek to discover, at much greater levels of abstraction, underlying assumptions about the nature of reality, assumptions that can then be stated by the anthropologist as formal propositions. The theoretical bias here is that these assumptions are systematically interrelated, and that they form a basis for culturally patterned decision making (influenced by values which also derive from these existential assumptions), and for other culturally specific cognitive activity. (p. 36)

Both implicitly and explicitly, the thoughts of great religious leaders reflect particular worldviews (e.g., Bahaullah, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Jina, Lao-tzu, Moses, Muhammad, Nanak, Zoroaster). These worldviews emerged from the leaders' personal encounters with the mysteries of life and from the historical and cultural context of their lives. Much as we do today, these religious leaders struggled with the search for meaning— "Who after all knows? Who here will declare from whence it arose, whence this world?"

In Pursuit of Meaning: Examples of Prototypical Cultural Systems

THE COURSE of human history is replete with examples of efforts after meaning-making through the construction of worldviews and their related religions, life-philosophies, and

mythologies seeking to make sense of the life cycle (Smith, 1993, 1994; Wulff, 1997). Dilthey (see Richards & Bergin, 1997; Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957) suggested worldviews can be divided into three major types: (a) naturalistic (e.g., rationalism, positivism, Marxism, existentialism, humanism); (b) subjective idealistic (e.g., monotheistic world religions); and (c) subjective subjectivistic (e.g., Eastern world religions). The following examples represent some prototypical systems.

1. Naturalistic (Science) Systems

For some, the life cycle is merely an infinitesimally small part of a larger cosmic process of evolution in matter and energy that may have no beginning nor end, an unfolding or recycling of forces within the matter-energy unit that explodes with infinite force, expands with infinite speed, and contracts and collapses into an infinite number of dark holes in space-time that serve as the cosmic crucibles of endless cycles of creation and death. This view assumes that the universe is real. What exists is matter and energy and various forces (e.g., gravity) that we can eventually understand through science. There is lawfulness and predictability in the universe. Richards and Bergin (1997) suggest this form can be characterized as naturalistic, rationalistic, atomistic, deterministic, reductionistic, universalistic, materialistic, mechanistic, positivistic, and empiricalistic.

2. Theistic Systems

For others, the life cycle has been elaborated and extended into a complex array of ascribed and/or revealed meanings, purposes, and goals in which the life cycle is intimately linked to an omnipresent and omniscient god who sits in judgment and evaluation of individual human destiny, based upon the quality of adherence to a moral code revealed to chosen prophets and messiahs. This view assumes a Supreme Being created the world and is involved in daily human life. In contrast to naturalistic forms rooted in science, theistic forms assume there are spiritual and transcendental experiences that have no material counterpart. According to Richards and Bergin (1997), knowledge in these approaches can be obtained through revelation, inspiration, enlightenment, and mystical experience (see pp.

29-31). Humans, rather than being strictly biological machines, are considered to have a spirit or soul, and are supposed to live according to moral and ethical codes that are universal. In contrast to the naturalistic forms, these forms are theistic, holistic, and absolutistic; and they are often intuitively validated and sustained by faith (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism).

3. Eastern Philosophy Systems

For Eastern philosophy systems, the human life cycle is understood as a complex pursuit of meaning related to human consciousness. An individual's birth-life-death is often seen as part of an eternal creation process involving a long but not infinite evolution of states of being that proceed from constricted ignorance to boundless wisdom, and, in some cases, to nothingness. The insight and awareness attained through meditation, reflection, and study may result in an eternal spiritual release that is considered an optimal end point: salvation and enlightenment. There is much variation among Eastern philosophic systems in their commitment to theistic (e.g., supreme being/force) views; however, in most, the spiritual realm of functioning is endorsed. Consciousness, levels of selfhood, and unity and harmony with undefined cosmic forces are often part of these forms (e.g., Buddhism, Taoism). In some instances, there is a commitment to an eternal spiritual reality or cosmic consciousness. It is interesting that this concept is also found among some Western thinkers. For example, Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), the British historian who believed that civilizations collapse when they fail to respond to moral challenges, believed in an eternal spiritual reality: "Like a wave or bubble, a human person is ephemeral in himself…The person who lives and dies as a psychosomatic organism on this planet may be the manifestation of an Eternal Spiritual Reality" (1968, p. 184).

4. Existential-Humanistic Systems

For still other systems, promises of life after death and of participation in a larger consciousness of creation are simply unnecessary myths that dull our efforts to make sense of a world in which there may or may not be an inherent and

apprehensible meaning. These systems have been adopted by existentialists and humanists as the basis for consciously choosing to serve others and to promote human welfare and wellbeing, not out of a fear of punishment or retribution, but because they offer a sense of fulfillment that may well be rooted in our social evolution and nature. They are often characterized as relativistic, contextual, and intuitive—a complex patterning of naturalistic and Eastern forms. For these forms, individual choice and decision-making play key roles and social motivations (e.g., social justice, equality, harmony) are often considered the goals or basic purposes. Their discourse community includes terms such as identity, choice, will, self, actualization, harmony, peace, and transpersonal.

5. Nativistic/Indigenous Systems

For still other systems, known as the indigenous or nativistic systems, we have polytheistic and "pagan" practices in which the forces of nature are considered to embody gods and spirits who must be reckoned with in daily life— gods and spirits of the earth, sea, and heavens, gods of the fields and mountains—a panorama of gods and spirits found throughout nature and human life who can be influenced by individuals through prayer, propitiation, and violation of taboo. In these forms, humans are embedded in life contexts that link individuals, society, nature, and spiritual forces and entities in complex patterns of interdependency and harmony and disharmony. Nativistic "pagan" forms often advocate pantheism (all reality is divine or spiritual), polytheism (belief in many gods), or animism (nature is filled with spirits and gods).

Each of these prototypical systems evidences the human quest for meaning and the complexities involved in resolving the doubts associated with existential questions regarding supreme beings, death, social relations, and selfhood. These questions and their answers have profound implications for health and wellbeing.

⊱ Meaning, Health, and Wellbeing ⊰

1. D-Words

Typically, mental health professionals have used the presence or absence of symptoms (e.g.,

depression, anxiety, tension) as an index of human health and wellbeing. Diagnostic interviews and symptom checklists are often used to determine whether a person can be considered mentally "diseased" or "disordered." But this approach is limited, for it often fails to address other "d" words that are important: distress, demoralization, disability, and deviancy—all of which can be present without symptom manifestations.

2. S-Words

But, for present purposes, there are more important words than the "d" words. These words go beyond reductionistic biological and social levels to those levels of functioning that concern "meaning," including: self, serenity, sanctuary, sacred, soul, and spirituality. These words refer to different aspects of our functioning: they deal with our sense of being and purpose; they deal with our sense of relationship to the cosmos (e.g., Thoresen, 1998).

3. Defining Health

Health, according to the World Health Organization, is: "A state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1975, p. 17). I think WHO is correct in pursuing a "holistic" rather than "deficit" model; however, what is missing in the WHO definition is the spiritual dimension. This, too, is important, as noted previously. We can have struggles of the spirit. For Viktor Frankl, living without a sense of meaning, without meaningful values, spirituality, or responsibility results in a "noogenic neurosis"—a life characterized by aimlessness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness.

4. Disorders of Meaning-Seeking and Meaning-Making

When our efforts after meaning-making are thwarted or denied, and when our efforts to engage doubt are halted or restrained, we are faced with life situations that may place our health and wellbeing in jeopardy. Meaning-seeking and meaning-making are essential. This is the process by which we order, prioritize, and prize our beliefs with respect to our culturally constructed realities. It is the process that permits us to assert: "This is meaningful. This is not

meaningful. This is right. This is wrong. This is good. This is bad."

No matter what the formal source of our beliefs may be (e.g., religion, life-philosophy), without meaning-seeking and meaning-making, we are left devoid of guideposts for life's journey. It seems to me that many discomforts, disorders, and diseases of our time are related to an absence of meaning-seeking and meaning-making. At the individual level these include despair, angst, boredom, alienation, psychosis and suicide. At the cultural level these include cultural disintegration, societal decay, and national collapse.

5. Problems of Blind Belief

The quest for meaning can result in blind commitment to a belief system that demands unconditional acceptance. While this may bring a respite from pangs and perils of uncertainty, it cannot provide the basis for spiritual health and wellbeing. Belief must be combined with doubt to be meaningful. Doubt is an essential part of human growth and becoming. While the mind of the "true believer" (see Eric Hoffer, 1968/1989) may find comfort in the certainty associated with uncontested belief, a closed mind will prevent one from evolving toward new levels of knowledge and possibility. Total and complete adherence to "religious" systems often has proven useful in dealing with many psychological and social problems (e.g., alcoholism, substance abuse, criminal behavior), but it needs to be regarded as a temporary station rather than a final destination.

There is considerable research (see Richards & Bergin, 1997; Taggart, 1994; Thoresen, 1998) suggesting human health is better and happiness is greater among those individuals who have meaningful belief systems regardless of whether the system is a formal religious system or an anti-religious system. But, unless doubt is present and the relativity of beliefs is acknowledged, we will remain in a static state rather than a state of becoming. To have meaningful outcome in the quest for meaning, a continual dialectic between belief and doubt must occur. For meaningful meaning-making to occur, beliefs must be doubted and accepted and then doubted again in an endless cycle of inquiry, reflection, and contemplation. This, I think, is a life of the spirit, and a life that honors spirituality.

6. Pursuing Meaning in Therapy

While the present paper is not the forum for a detailed discussion of the need to include meaning-related matters within the therapeutic encounter, it is clear to me that therapists must increasingly address this topic. Some therapies (e.g., Existential Therapy, Logotherapy) are specifically concerned with the patient's quest for meaning and make it the focus of the therapeutic encounter; for others, however, it is only incidental. For many problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) and many groups (e.g., refugees, alcoholics), personal meaning is at the core of the difficulties they experience. Having a sense of personal meaning is essential, and mental health professions must do more to introduce it into assessment and therapy activities (see Wong & Fry, 1998).

❧ Some Guideposts for a Spiritual Life ❧

The Ecology of the Spirit

I HAVE come to believe that there is an ecology of the spirit that can be understood and nurtured to assist us in our quest for meaning. This ecology involves the following assumptions:

1. There is a real but chaotic world.

2. Our sensate brain interacts (i.e., seeks, organizes, and assigns meaning) with information from this world and constructs smaller units of information into complex systems of ordered beliefs that help generate a broader sense of meaning.

3. This effort after meaning-making by the ordering of beliefs occurs within a cultural context resulting in a cultural construction of reality.

4. A sense of "mind" emerges from the "interaction" of the organism's perceived meanings and the demands/presses of the environmental milieu.

5. From this process a conscious awareness of the experience develops, adding yet another dimension of "self" or "person" to the interactive forces.

6. Beliefs and belief systems emerge from the interactive forces in response to the impulse and effort after meaning-making.

7. These beliefs and belief systems are challenged by the impulse to doubt. The continuous cycle of meaning-making that emerges from the dynamics of belief and doubt produces a sense of spirituality that has salutogenic consequences.

Thus, ultimately a sense of spirituality emerges from the joust between belief and doubt. Just as character is built through positive responses to adversity and life's ordeals, evolving higher order values and systems of meaning emerge from the dialectic between belief and doubt. Erich Fromm (1947/1990) acknowledged the power and importance of doubt for meaning-making when he stated: "The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers."

The Experience of Spirituality

THE TERM spirituality has so much "religious" overlay that it is frequently disregarded by many scientists and professionals as soon as it is used. My use of the term is unrelated to the traditional religious views of the term "spirit" as an immaterial substance associated with divine forces. For me, spirituality is a construct that can be used to explain certain behaviors characterized by a sense of wonder, awe, mystery, enhanced acuity, reverence, humility, and oneness or unity.

More than 30 years ago, Deikman (1966) noted that certain states of consciousness result in the "discovery of mind," including: (a) feelings of intense realness; (b) unusual modes of perception; (c) feelings of being at one with something or someone (often described as an oceanic, aesthetic, or a mystical moment); (d) an inability to put the experience into words (i.e., ineffable); and (e) an encounter in which all of these may occur simultaneously. These qualities are also associated with spiritual experiences.

Spirituality emerges from our efforts after personal meaning-making. But it is the interaction of belief and doubt that is the essential key to spirituality. As noted previously, the dialectic between belief and doubt encourages a willingness to explore and to push the boundaries of our perceptions and experiences to new limits. It seems to me this is the essence of spirituality— and also the basis of good health and wellbeing.

❧ Conclusions ❧

IN THIS paper a spectrum of topics related to the relations of meaning, belief, doubt, mind, culture, and spirituality have been discussed. In addition, I have argued that human health and wellbeing involve spirituality. The discussion of these topics suggests the following conclusions:

1. The real world presents itself as chaos to which the sensate brain responds by assigning order, coherence, and meaning as part of an inherent impulse to describe, understand, predict, and control the world about it. The brain builds upon the data that are sensed and stored, and manages to create higher order systems of beliefs that are imbued with personal and cultural meaning.

2. Each belief system is rooted within a cultural context and is culturally constructed. This shapes the content of our beliefs and the process by which we seek, affirm, and doubt them. Belief systems take the forms of worldviews, life-philosophies, religions, and mythologies.

3. Worldviews are concerned with essential existential questions of life including answers to questions about the nature of god(s), life after death, nature and the cosmos, human relations, and moral patterns of behavior—all of which are critical for our sense of personal meaning.

4. Yet, even as we pursue meaning, in both its reflexive and conscious dimensions, we are challenged by the need to doubt the very belief systems we have constructed. It is through the dialectical process of belief and doubting that meaning-making assumes its most potent possibilities as spirituality. Doubt requires giving up the certainty, control, and sense of mastery that often accompanies commitment to a belief system. Yet, it is doubt that moves us to new possibilities and choices and doubt that affords us the chance to affirm old beliefs.

5. Spirituality is a subjectively experienced sense of self that is accompanied by awe, reverence, mystery, and unity. The spiritual sense of self opens us to new levels of experience and new perceptions of meaning, enabling us to develop and grow with an even greater sense of mastery and transcendence.

6. Optimal health and wellbeing require this state of spirituality. Thus, it is crucial that we

reconsider previous notions about health and wellbeing associated with deficit models and that we include spiritual health and wellbeing as a necessary criterion of health.

Notes

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Appendix

Guidelines for Living a Spiritual Life

1. Awareness

I resolve to be more aware and responsive to the spiritual dimensions of my being and nature. I intend to accept and to embrace the self-evident truth that the very life force that is within me is the same life force that moves, propels, and governs the universe itself, and because of this, I must approach life with a new sense of awe, humbled by the mystery of this truth, yet elated and confident by its consequences. I am alive! I am part of life! And, because of this, I must act in ways that encourage and support this fact, and I must act in ways that are responsive to its requirements and demands.

2. Cultivation of the Spirit

Because I am both an individual and a collective part of the life force that moves, propels, and governs the universe, I have serious responsibilities, including acting and behaving in ways that sustain life in all its forms. I have an individual responsibility to do this. To this end, *I resolve to perfect the spiritual dimension of my being because it is in this pursuit that I can discover and fulfill my unique destiny in the larger cosmic plan whose details remain unknown, but whose intent seems clear—the promotion of an evolutionary harmony, balance, and synergy among all life forms.* To this end, I intend to do all I can to fulfill and actualize my potential as a human being conscious of the power of choice and conscious of the virtue of cultivating the enduring life values of peace, beauty, truth, justice, and civility.

3. Living Within the Passions of the Time

Because spiritual maturity and perfection must be pursued through behavior, *I resolve to actively participate in the world in which I live and to be a force for life through the conscious support of those people, ideas, and institutions that serve life through humanistic action.* To this end, I intend to live within the passions of my time, and not to be a passive bystander. I intend to make a difference in solving those life problems and challenges I can, whether they be big or small,

using whenever possible the very energies generated by these challenges to derive my strength and determination.

4. Promoting Life

Because humanistic action is a pathway to spiritual perfection, and because the pursuit of spiritual perfection is the pathway revealing my place and role in the larger cosmic destiny and order, *I resolve to commit myself to those beliefs and actions that will illuminate, affirm, and promote the value and power of life*, including: (a) a recognition of the interdependency of all things; (b) a recognition of the importance of the process or way we do things rather than simply the product, or outcome; (c) a recognition of the importance of promoting inner and outer peace as a means of promoting and preserving life; (d) an appreciation of beauty in all its manifestations and forms; and (e) a fostering of the impulse to penetrate into the nature of things for the sheer delight of inquiry, without any need to conquer or to subdue that which is learned.

5. Constant Renewal

Because the spiritual dimension of life is at once the most self-evident dimension of our being, and simultaneously the most hidden and mysterious, *I resolve to constantly acknowledge my spiritual nature, to revel in it, to preserve it, and to renew it*, so that all my thoughts and behaviors will reflect and appreciate the simple yet profound joy of this truth.