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EXPERIENCES WITH A MOUNTAIN RANGE RECIPE EXERCISE

Maria Marshall & Edward Marshall

*[The following article is a shortened and edited version of a chapter that appears in *Hearth to Heart: Sparks and Flavours of Meaningful Living* by Maria and Edward Marshall, published 2017.]*

Nutrition is part of our family traditions, everyday routine, culture, and customs. It is a precious commodity enabling our lives and fueling our service to others. Its preparation is part of our everyday duties and responsibilities. To nourish ourselves properly, we require food for our bodies, our minds, and our spirit.



Physiological and multi-disciplinary research abounds in the study of taste and smell, the so-called chemical senses (Coppin, Parma, & Palese, 2016; Mennella, 2016). However, the study of the mechanisms and implications of these senses for our everyday well-being, in comparison with studies in other sensory modalities, is still an under-studied area (Lundstrom, Boesveldt, & Albrecht, 2016). Notably absent from meaning-centered research this far had been the use of olfactory and gustatory faculties.

Self-Discovery and Discerning Meaning

Uniqueness, choices, self-discovery, responsibility, response-ability, self-distancing, and self-transcendence have been suggested as main stepping stones to finding meaning in meaning-centered interventions (Fabry, 1988; Marshall, 2017). These stepping stones have been incorporated into Logotherapy's main methods and can be found as elements of existential analysis. They are also a part of further meaning-centered interventions, including: Narrative Logotherapy, Logodrama, the Life Preview and Life Review Exercise, Guided Autobiography, Guided Imagery and Visualization, the Logoanchor Technique, Guided Discovery of Meaning Potentials, the Meaningful and Purposeful Goals Exercise, Logotherapeutic Dream Analysis, the Appealing Technique, the Method of Common Denominators,

Self-Transcendent Questions for Couples, LogoArt, and the Mountain Range Exercise (Marshall & Marshall, 2012).

Logotherapeutic self-discovery is characterized by introducing a view of life that enhances basic human values (Lukas, 2000). This goal is achieved by complementing self-reflection with self-distancing and self-transcendence (Marshall & Marshall, 2016). In other words, self-discovery is not oriented toward the self, the past, and the circumstances as fixed, motionless, closed entities, but as a dynamic whole in search of meanings to notice, honor, recognize, and actualize.

Historical Sources of Meaning

Self-discovery as a way to discern meaning has been included in a self-discovery program for therapists (Ernzen, 1986, 2001). It also has been used in a guided autobiographical project designed by Elisabeth Lukas (2000), and applied in a randomized control trial of the application of meaning-centered interventions among patients with advanced cancer (Breitbart & Poppito, 2014a, 2014b). In this latter work, historical sources of meaning were examined in the context of “a legacy that has been given,” and “the legacy that one lives and will give” in addition to considering the attitudinal, experiential, and creative sources of meaning patients can rely on to find meaning in suffering.

In line with the above efforts, a phenomenological hermeneutic investigation was proposed, below, to examine and further illustrate the connection between self-discovery and historical sources of meaning to foster self-transcendence and meaningful living. In the context of this investigation, historical sources of meaning were collected through employing a form of the Mountain Range Exercise, based on Logotherapeutic principles.

The Mountain Range Exercise

The Mountain Range Exercise was first described in the *Doctor and the Soul* (1986), where Frankl invites his audience to spread our lives before us like a beautiful mountain range. The purpose of this exercise is to think about “*What we would put on the peaks?*” and “*Wouldn’t people who touched our lives, or whose life example we cherish, make all the difference in how we view our life as a whole?*”

Participants in this exercise can be invited to sketch out their range. They are given opportunity to discuss who appeared on their range; encouraged to look for recurring values, and reflect on the empowerment they received from these values. Robert Hutzell, in an article by Florence Ernzen (1990), has reported successful use of this exercise with recovering alcoholics and

psychiatric inpatients (mostly with schizophrenic diagnosis) in order to focus on values of other persons the participants may have incorporated into their own value systems, and occasionally, to help participants realize that there have been positives in their lives. It can be used in individual sessions or in group sessions to broaden clients' value bases (Ernzen, 1990).

Socratic questions to facilitate self-discovery through the Mountain Range Exercise may include the following (Marshall, 2017):

“Who appeared on the peaks?”

“Who had influence on my life?”

“Which values did these individuals represent?”

“Which of my values do I have in common with them?”

“Which of my values are different?”

“Which of my values do I cherish?”

Conscious and Unconscious Processes

The Mountain Range Exercise utilizes verbal reports of conscious contents. Non-verbal contents and unconscious processes have been linked to other meaning-centered interventions such as art therapy, drama, and music therapy, whereby *sensory information* from vision, audition, touch, and movement draw out and anchor meaning contents (i.e., da Silva Prado, 2012; Liu-Hsiu, 2016a, 2016b; Marshall & Marshall, 2017a; Zsok, 1998).

Music relies on melody, metre, tempo, dynamics, timbre, and harmony to convey the message of the whole. Visual arts rely on colors, shade, hue, and value to capture objects, forms, shapes, shades, pattern, movement, and dynamics. Our olfactory and “chemical senses” rely on the sensations of olfaction and gustation – taste and odor – to create shades, dynamics of flavors, complementing the multi-layered and multi-dimensional experience.

Question About Finding Meaning Through the “Chemical Senses”

Throughout our lives, we have a most intimate bond with food that nurtures our bodies and enables our lives. Research points to its complex role with relation to our physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being in health as well as in illness.

According to Frankl's Logotherapy, the essence of our existence is self-transcendence and our main motivation is to find meaning in life. A fundamental assertion of Logotherapy is that life offers us meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable (Frankl, 1959/1984). Notably absent is the exploration of the ways in which information from olfactory and gustatory faculties could be incorporated into meaning-centered interventions. Thus, the question arises, “*How could we foster finding*

meaning through incorporating the ‘chemical senses’ into the historical sources of meaning?”

The Mountain Range Recipe Project

A phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology was selected to examine the connection between meaningful memories with caregivers and nurturance in a meaning-centered context. The phenomenological method is derived from existentialist thought and research (Van Deurzen, 2012, 2014). It required a group of counselors to recollect and to report significant memories related to their loved ones. The hermeneutic method fits an inductive and deductive process of spiraling and evolving understanding (Ellis, 1997). It can be nestled in the humanistic-existentialist context, and can be employed to examine and to flesh out the findings (Marshall & Marshall, 2015).

Therapists who chose to participate in this project were invited to think of their “Mountain Range” and to recall a significant meaningful memory with a caregiver, parent, relative, or other significant person who influenced their lives. For confidentiality reasons, it was requested that the person would be a deceased relative, with whom the author had some contact while growing up. Participants were asked to reflect on what the experience was that emerged in front of their eyes, and then to associate this memory with a favorite family meal, or a favorite food their chosen person enjoyed preparing and sharing.

Participating Logotherapists undertook this project voluntarily as part of their self-awareness, self-discovery, self-reflection, and self-development. They were given basic general guidelines as to how to summarize their narrative and phenomenological findings, which included: (a) presenting the setting, (b) presenting the person, (c) presenting the significant meaningful experience, and (d) indicating the way this experience affects them today. Finally, participants were asked to include a favorite family recipe, which they related to the memory of their loved one. The length of the writing was limited to between 500 and 1000 words, which is approximately two to three double-spaced pages.

Findings

Eleven participants submitted their findings, each in the form of a descriptive narrative. The stories came from several countries and from five continents. There were four male and seven female counselors who participated. Six male and six female caregivers appear in the stories. Thus gender did not seem to be a factor in relation to retelling the stories and recording the recipes. It also suggests that male and female caregivers were equally significant in the lives of their families and relatives.

The essays report spontaneously unfolding events in which loved ones adopted courageous, exemplary attitudes and thereby left significant impacts. It appears that the individuals whose stories were chosen for the report by the authors did not directly intend to “significantly impact” the counselors. The memories, in this sense, were the by-products of having left meaningful legacies, and then seemed to have spontaneously unfolded in the context of a meaning-oriented question: “*Who influenced you in a positive, inspiring, meaningful way?*”

Values of openness, honesty, integrity, endurance, persistence, self-determination, gratitude, forgiveness, courage, patience, humility, attentiveness, helpfulness, kindness, benevolence, curiosity, open-mindedness, self-transcendence, love, hopefulness, loyalty, attentiveness, peacefulness, good sense of humor, authenticity, and harmony, among many others, were noted through the described examples.

The loved ones were not necessarily those who had “happy lives,” they did not come from a position of power, privilege, fame, or success. Rather, they were individuals who gave meaningful responses to challenging life situations, demonstrating and inspiring attitudinal values.

The memories captured experiential values lived together with the loved ones, such as being in their presence, interacting with them, being loved and cared for by them, feeling affection toward them, and experiencing an event together.

Creative values were reported in the form of doing things with them, and being instructed by them.

The main achievement and success of the loved ones seems to have been attitudinal: choosing a courageous attitude toward fate or emanating a loving, caring, and responsible stand and transmitting this example to the authors.

The instances that were recalled were not always “happy” memories. This observation underlines the difference between happiness and meaning: meaning can be found even in the absence of happiness. It is manifested in reported subjective feelings of increased resilience, and a more optimistic and confident stance toward the past, the present, and the future. Finding meaning may bring happiness as its by-product.

Examples from Logotherapists highlight the possibility for personal growth after experiencing challenging life situations together with one’s loved ones. Evaluating one’s response in the past and consciously choosing one’s personal response towards one’s situation, actions, and even toward oneself in the present and future, is an attitudinal value. The realization of this attitudinal value is a demonstration of the triumph of the Defiant Power of the Human Spirit over adversity.

A “change of heart” (“metanoia;” Marshall & Marshall, 2017b), is the most sublime and explicit lived example of this triumphant attitude. It helps counselors relate to the meaning of the moment by becoming increasingly “value discerning” (Frankl, 1986), developing “attentive meaning sensitivity” (Marshall & Marshall, 2016), and “celebrating the meaning of the moment” and “each meaningful encounter” (Abinya, 2015, 2016).

All of the participants in this project reported that the exercise had been an overall personally satisfying and uplifting one.

It was participants’ selfless effort and self-transcendent achievement to make this project possible, which prompted them to think, “*What aspect of my experience do I want to focus on?*” “*What aspect of this experience do I feel comfortable sharing with others?*” “*What aspect of this experience can be most helpful to others?*”

Participants reported they engaged in actualizing attitudinal values through this project, which they considered a meaningful gift to others, rather than a mere recollection of significant and personally meaningful events and recipes, or a simple writing of a nice story about their loved one. A brief recollection and recording of the legacy of their loved one was regarded as a noble and worthy cause. Beyond it, a living-loving bond could be evidenced.

Implications

The findings were interpreted to coincide with Viktor Frankl’s three-dimensional view of the person as a body, mind, and spirit entity (Frankl, 1975, 1998). In this context, one can elaborate on his three aspects of love as well, which were recorded in *The Doctor and the Soul*: Mere physical love (Philia), and Emotional attraction (Eros), are complemented by a spiritual bond (Agape) in each human person. Any reduction of these dimensions would render love meaningless. Any physical expression of love, for example through a touch, a nice meal, etc., is present in the context of an emotional and spiritual bond if it is to be experienced as mutually meaningful (Frankl, 1986).

Love requires value-discernment, seeing three-dimensionally, and with a double-vision: seeing our loved one as they are and as they can be, as they ought to be (Frankl, 1986). Responding to love is an act of free will, and the response in itself needs to have its reference not only along the coordinate of “*What makes sense,*” or “*What does this mean,*” but most importantly, “*What is the most meaningful in this situation?*”

One of the contributions of Logotherapy is to emphasize the relevance of holistic treatment through meaning-centered interactions. Such considerations can be relevant when suffering is intensified due to decreased taste sensations in a medical condition. A sense of lack of orientation, loss of

traditional values, and value-conflicts also could be clarified through the activation of the chemosensory processing pathways in addition to cognitive ones, and thereby reconnect heart and mind in finding meaning. Counselors may re-connect with, and clarify, some of their core values as guiding principles for practice. This modified version of the Mountain Range Exercise may be helpful in identifying historical sources of meaning and anchoring them through memories of flavor.

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