

CHAPTER 7

TO FIND MEANING AGAIN

The focus in this chapter is on the search to find new meaning after your world has tumbled in – how can a person motivate someone who is discouraged and despondent to lift up his/her head and move on?

- **To find meaning in the midst of our pain**

There is more and more recognition that the only way an individual can succeed in conquering tragic events and crises, is that there should be some sense or meaning in what this person experiences. To be able to survive in a meaningful way, implies that there must be some meaning in the pain that is suffered – therefore the search for meaning is one of the most fundamental reactions during the post-traumatic phase (Hicks, 1996:107; Frankl, 1984:9).

Firstly, it is very important that this search for meaning is connected in some sense to a ‘temporary’ meaning that can help the person to survive. If the person is able to find meaning in even the most tragic events, then it serves as a huge corroboration for this person’s ability to survive. The number of survivors who for example dug the graves in which their loved ones would be buried during the concentration camps in Nazi-Germany, were much higher than in cases where prisoners were forced to dig graves, which simply had to be filled up again the next day. There is, therefore, more sense to dig a hole in which your loved ones will be buried, how painful that may be, as to perform the senseless action of just digging holes today that need to be filled up tomorrow again.

The handling of the question regarding meaning is consequently a very important component in the grieving phase directly after the death of a loved-one or after any significant trauma - eventually it also determines the direction that your life will go afterwards. Whenever we connect pain to some meaning, then it becomes bearable and manageable. Many of the survivors of abovementioned concentration camps clung in this regard to the ‘*mental portraits*’ of their spouses or family members – it

was the only motivation for them to survive in the most appalling times. However, what is tragic is that when the war was over, many discovered that these people were no more there. During the trauma this motivation was however enough to eventually get them through this ordeal.

Secondly it is true that all of us eventually also need ultimate meaning in order to resolve and survive pain and trauma – especially when all the temporary and short-term meanings collapsed.

- **Diagram of the adapted square root**

[See Appendix 3]

The diagram of the adapted square root suggests at the left-hand side the level on which the person is before the impact of the crisis. Then a crisis happens and the line descends to a complete low point before it begins to move upwards again. If a proper support system is in place, then the upward movement will take place much faster and the line will eventually move upwards up to a level higher than where the person had been originally before the trauma took place. In a sense this pattern will repeat itself for the rest of this person's life however on a smaller scale because they don't have to descend again so deep into the dark pit of discouragement and hopelessness than the first time providing the lessons learnt were properly applied. In the long-term an upward line can also be detected regarding this person's spiritual deepening and quality of life. We could say that this represents something of the Biblical model of trauma handling, connected to spiritual growth and holiness.

However, if the person doesn't receive the necessary counselling, the turning point will eventually take place and the line will move upwards somewhat again, even if it might be after a few years. The level on which the person will function will however be much lower than what it was before the crisis (view the dotted lines on the diagram). This person usually struggles with the question of meaning and each next crisis leads eventually to functioning on a lower spiritual and emotional level in life, until such a person reaches the point where they ask themselves if everything is worth it. If drastic measures are not taken on time, this could even lead to suicide.

The poet, David Longfellow, wrote a poem of which the first two lines are as follows (as quoted by McMillen & Stern, 2000:171):

“Two men look out through the same prison bars: one sees the mud, and one the stars.”

These two people find themselves in exactly the same situation. During the night, both of them look through the bars of their prison cell. One of them is very frustrated by what he sees while the other one is inspired. The one look downwards and only sees bars, mud and sewer pipes – the other one looks up and see amidst the darkness the bright lights of the stars and it communicates to him a message of hope.

During every traumatic experience we have both these alternatives and eventually it is about an inner choice the traumatised person has to make after each traumatic experience. The choice would imply be something like the following:

“With the help of God, within six months or a year from now, I want to be on a higher spiritual and emotional level than what I was before the trauma.”

Compare again in this regard the diagram of the customized square root. This type of choice is also contained in the double meaning of the Chinese phrase for the word ‘crisis’, namely that of *danger or opportunity*. The traumatized person can look at the crisis that came their way, either as such a huge danger that they feel to rather give up, or they can see it as a situation that would eventually, despite the pain, create new opportunities for growth and development.

The same is applicable to the Latin phrase ‘*finis*’ with the double meaning of *end or goal*. The victim might either feel so overwhelmed by the injustice and the trauma that it might seem to be the end of the road – or, by grace from above, they could in the process identify new goals, and with the necessary support ultimately pick up their head and start moving forward.

- **Appropriate Scriptures**

The following Scriptures are especially applicable to the handling of trauma and crises. It also describes the quality and characteristics of that higher level towards

which the graph is moving after the trauma (cf. adapted square root):

- **James 1:2-4 (NIV)**

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

- **Romans 5:3-4 (NKJV)**

“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

- **Hebrews 12:11 (CEB)**

“No discipline is fun while it lasts, but it seems painful at the time. Later, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness for those who have been trained by.”

- **2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)**

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God”

- **1 Peter 1:6-7 (ESV)**

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ“

- **Lamentations 3:31-33**

“For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

Usually we don't get answers while the storm is still raging because our emotions are still too mixed up to hear the voice of God. In our counselling of the traumatized

person we only pray for calmness and peace at this stage and we encourage the counselee to live only one day at a time – in as much as healing moves in, the person will slowly but surely lift their vision higher regarding the future. Eventually, with the help of the Lord they will be able to look back and realize that everything wasn't merely a senseless event. Through such a process the person gradually discovers more meaning amidst the pain that they had to go through.

Aspects that often arise from traumatic experiences and that are also reflected in the abovementioned Scriptures are typically the following:

- Spiritual perseverance.
- Spiritual maturity.
- Genuineness of faith (fine gold).
- The ability to encourage other people.
- True hope/faith.

Aspects such as these also become part of the ultimate meaning when all the temporary meaning and values have collapsed. This strengthens the emotional and spiritual foundation of the person so much more, also in terms of possible future trauma.

A person who was able to see the stars amidst the darkness around him, was Dr David Tsutada. When Japan joined the Second World War, the Japanese government sent him to a concentration camp together with other prisoners due to them preaching the Second Coming and sovereignty of Jesus Christ. His ministry on the street-corners has attracted thousands of people shortly before the war and this caused the authorities to become nervous. During his captivity he received so little food that his weight went down to 40 kg. He was placed in a dark, dirty, cold hole underground and most of the time he didn't know whether it was day or night. Over time he began to wonder if this was the way in which God would eventually come to take him home. If he had not been able to make peace with his situation and make the best of it, the stress of agony, self-pity as well as malnutrition would definitely have caused his death. However, while he was spending his days in that dark hole, God, through His Spirit began to reveal to him His plans for establishing a Bible School. David Tsutada gradually planned all the detail of this planned

project in his mind amidst the permanent darkness and unpleasant stench that he had to bear all the time. By the end of the war, this man was rescued from this dark hole by the Allied Forces, together with all the other prisoners. Shortly after this he began to activate the plans regarding the establishing of the Bible School. By the grace of God, he could eventually establish one of the largest post-war Bible School projects in Japan because he didn't look down at the mud, but upwards to the stars, and he stayed focused on the end goal.

In Ephesians 5:16 it is said: “...making the most of every opportunity...” (NIV). With regard to the story of David Tsutada we may add to this: even if it is a crisis or traumatic event!

- **It is important to see the bigger picture**

The trials and tribulations that God allows on our way don't necessarily always make sense to us. One problem is that we often look at it from a short-term perspective and then it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture. However, when God comes at some stage and He pulls the curtain away a little bit, then we can only realize the limitedness of our vision.

A very important aspect in this respect, is the fact that God is busy, through everything that happens to us (also our physical suffering), to prepare us for the actual big and long-term task that He has for us. Important Scriptures in this regard are the following:

1 Corinthians 6:2: “ *Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world?*” (NIV)

The Message Translation: “*If someday you are going to rule on the world's fate... Why, we're even going to judge angels!*”

Living Bible: “*Don't you know that someday we Christians are going to judge and govern the world?...*”

Luke 22:29,30: “*And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (NIV)

Revelations 2:26: “*To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations*” (NIV)

The Message Translation: *“Here’s the reward I have for every conqueror, everyone who keeps at it, refusing to give up: You’ll rule the nations....”*

Therefore, a huge task awaits the child of God and to ultimately fulfil this role, there is a process necessary that implies refining, schooling, equipment, and preparation. Being able to judge over nations and angels will require divine characteristics, integrity and godly discernment. Indeed, the refining process through all our trials and our failures is part of this equipment and preparation.

We tend to only focus on this short-lived life – that which is actually only a speck of dust in God’s eternity. God says that 1000 years is to him like one day – a life of 80 years therefore is only a ‘few minutes’ on God’s calendar. If He sees it fit to allow pain and suffering during these ‘few minutes’ in my life so that the fine gold could emerge that He needs for the eternal task that lies ahead, then He will allow it. The Living Bible puts this in a striking way in 2 Thessalonians 1:5: *“God is using your sufferings to make you ready for His Kingdom.”* A part of the necessity to be able to see the bigger picture, is also described in Ecclesiastes 11:7-8:

“It is a wonderful thing to be alive! If a person lives to be very old, let him rejoice in every day of life, but let him also remember that eternity is far longer and that everything down here is futile in comparison”
(Living Bible).

- **The role of pain**

I conclude this part regarding ultimate mean by quoting a few comments by Patrick Morley (1995:161) with regards to the role of pain.

He says that pain is the grace of God through which people are touched by our lives, hopefully eventually for the glory of God. In other words, our suffering touch the lives of other people, and our witness amidst our suffering also have an influence on some of these people to help them to turn to God. Pain has a purpose – pain is the greatest teacher – pain causes growth – pain helps us to focus sharper. God also uses pain to make us more sensitive to other people and to encourage them – He uses pain to remind us not to rely on ourselves, and this always sends us back to the foot of the cross.

*“Pain is the grace of God that shows me **who** I am, **whose** I am, **what** is the purpose of my life, and **who** is the purpose of my life.”*

Morley also says that he learnt that we shouldn't be too hasty to get rid of what he calls *leftover pain* – on the contrary we have to look for the message behind it. What does God want to teach me through this? Who else is this message probably meant for?

The meaning of pain and suffering is described from a different angle by Prof Charles Kraft in his book, *Deep wounds, deep healing*, (1993:38,40) as follows:

“Actually, human brokenness often serves as the launching pad for two very important dimensions of Jesus' desire to bring freedom to his people. First of all, pain – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – is often what God uses to alert people to their need for ministry. When people are in pain, they are usually much more willing to let the Lord come close and help. Most of those who come to us for deep-level healing come with a sense of desperation.

Another benefit that can come out of the healing of brokenness is that the recipient often develops a heart for such ministry to others. Many of the ministry team members with whom I work have moved from experiencing healing themselves to a compassionate ministry for others... Those who have themselves been healed of deep hurts are amazingly effective in ministry, even when their own healing is still incomplete. Out of our pain and the healing we are receiving, we can offer hope to others that their struggle will be worth it.”

If God took you through a difficult crisis and you eventually received healing and victory, then it often appears as if you received a double blessing, equipment and calling to serve other people in the same area. Two books that are particularly applicable in this regard, are the following:

- Henri Nouwen: *The wounded Healer*
- Philip Yancey: *Where is God when it hurts?*

- **Darling's graphic representation of spiritual growth and development**

[See Appendix 4]

According to the theory of Darling (1969: *Man in triumph*, as discussed by Meier *et al.*, 2000:256) there is a parallel between spiritual growth and natural development. On the way to spiritual growth are also the phases of birth, childhood years, adolescence and adulthood. Although the day-to-day changes are not very noticeable, the individual will be able to look back after a few years as Christian and see the definite progression which could be described as follows:

- The starting point of the model is redemption and rebirth. Often a clear and dramatic change in direction could be experienced here – “... *old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*” (2 Cor 5:17, NKJV.)
- After this follows the phase of spiritual childhood years that is characterized by both security and immaturity. New Christians usually have a limited view, and trust upon other people to think on behalf of them. Due to their immature spiritual understanding they still need to learn about discipleship.
- Subsequently the Christian moves into the phase of adolescence characterized by insecurity and conflict:
 - The tempestuousness of this phase often leads to re-evaluation of the person's spiritual life as well as considering various alternatives.
 - For example, the individual could choose to become neurotic and experience anxiety and worry that they might lose their faith.
 - Spiritual psychosis could also happen which actually comes down to the choice of an escape-religion that stands totally separate from reality. The person doesn't see it fit to look the real problems in the eyes but rather uses escape-religion as a route to escape.
 - Another alternative could also imply a re-addiction to sin and a life characterized by spiritual defeat and possibly also spiritual rebellion.
 - The person could also make a choice for spiritual defeat where they return to the immature phase in their faith that is typical of the child-phase.

- Spiritual fixation is another alternative. This implies ongoing rebellion, confusion and uncertainty regarding spiritual adolescence as a life-style. Thus, what was supposed to be only a gateway-phase, now becomes a way of living.
- However, there is another option namely a total surrendering to Christ. This results in a mature faith that is characterized by spiritual abundance, serving and repeated confirmations. In Biblical terms this person moved from a baby in Christ to spiritual maturity; from milk to the solid food of the Word; from a slave to a son or daughter of God.

Along this road there are '*loops*' as part of the progression – they actually serve as stepping stones that ensure ongoing progress regarding the process of spiritual growth.

Such '*loops*' imply:

- An evaluation of weaknesses and inadequacies.
- Confession of sin or failures.
- Confirmation of God's love and forgiveness.
- Appropriation of God's resources.
- Investment of those resources in the lives of others.

Regarding abovementioned scheme it is very important to keep in mind that trauma could at any stage derail the whole process, cause it to come to a halt, fixate or even cause regression. The sooner trauma is dealt with and processed while the necessary support systems are in place, the smoother the process will be.