



LOGOTHERAPY TODAY

Interview with Pieter Hoekstra

What does Logotherapy mean to you?

Logotherapy - and actually I should say 'Existential psychotherapy' - is first and foremost a form of psychotherapy. As a matter of fact it is too limited a definition to leave it just with that. If you only reckon Logotherapy as a form of psychotherapy it would merely have a curative focus and the only objective would be curing a patient or client. For me Logotherapy is broader in its approach.

So ... not only to recover people?

Exactly, Logotherapy needs to be seen in a wider perspective. Like any other form of psychotherapy Logotherapy focuses on solving or handling problems. You make use of the medical history and diagnosis. The DSM-IV is part of your toolbox too. And the outcome may turn into a treatment or therapy. Logotherapy -like any other approach- investigates the unused potential of the person seeking for help. Is it possible to appeal those untapped powers? You make use of psycho-education to help people develop a better understanding of themselves; you try to help them develop the skills to live and deal with themselves and others. Nowadays there's a lot of discussion on the matter of empowerment, and yes: Logotherapy also tries to equip people to take up responsibility for and control of their lives – and to progress in sometimes difficult life's situations. Just as in other forms of psychotherapy, there is a search - a quest for the matters of life. Therefore, it is an existential psychotherapy.

Listening to those words:

Don't you think that Logotherapy is regarded a philosophy rather than a therapy?

Viktor Frankl has emphatically proposed a certain *concept of man* or humanity, yes. Yet, Frankl does not have a *concept of the patient* or the 'sick'. If you want a narrow definition: Frankl actually knew of no patients. Frankl actually didn't really acknowledge the term «patients». He did not recognize patients as patients, for that would mean that illness «owns» the person. And therefore the illness would define who you are. And yes, that is often the way healthcare talks about patients. Get the 'broken leg' in. That is a *pars-pro-toto*. *Man is* what his problem is. No, Frankl is very clear that behind the disease there is an undamaged person. This also applies to severe psychopathology. Behind the psychosis is the intact human being. Frankl strives to connect with that person. And if the connection is established, then therapist and 'patient' work together from both sides to resolve healing.

That sounds a bit philosophical, and may I say, metaphysical?

Ah, that's challenging! You mention two words: 'philosophy' and 'metaphysics'. Would you allow me to introduce the name of the Greek philosopher Aristotle? Ultimately, metaphysics is the basis of science. Science in particular is based on a certain assumption about the nature of reality. According to Aristotle, science examines the visible - the sensory reality, which he calls physics. Metaphysics

searches after the *essence* of that reality and after what forms it. When Einstein launches his formula $E=mc^2$ he cannot measure it in our reality. So it is actually still metaphysics. I think one still cannot measure it, by the way. Presuming that a calculation is not the same as measuring.

But let's return to the Logotherapy of Frankl. Yes, the essential questions of philosophy come forward in Logotherapy. It is about the existence, it is about identity - who am I; it is about meaning - why and for what purpose am I here? These questions apply to a process of healing of people, but of course they apply to everyone. Therefore Logotherapy is broader than just a plain curative psychotherapy.

Can anyone then practice Logotherapy?

It would be great if everyone practiced Logotherapy! You can make use of it in health care, in education, at work, at home and I think also in politics. Well, about everywhere. And yes, anyone can use the fruits of Logotherapy. A course or training in Logotherapy is fine, but I am convinced that many people already naturally know what the right way is to act; I mean that what is good and positive in acting or thinking. But it is first and foremost about positivity. It's about hope, about perspective. It is directed at the future and at new vistas.

Can you offer me a toolbox with Logo-tricks?

There are quite a few original techniques in Logotherapy. I prefer however the term *technique* rather than a trick, as you'll understand. The paradoxical intention and dereflection are the best known. Fortunately, these techniques are so widely dispersed in the therapeutic world nowadays that they have become general tools. And, of course, that should actually be one's ambition with a good technique. Actually, from the outset Logotherapy didn't want to confine itself. There are adherents of Frankl who want to arrogate the truth and annex the right sealing off a pure doctrine - excluding others, but that demeanor fits nobody. I myself think it's wonderful that one of the great management gurus like Stephen Covey declared himself indebted to Frankl on a regular basis. And at the top level in society it should be about the existential questions: Who am I, why am I here in this world, for whom or for what purpose do I exist, what is my meaning in life? Ultimately, it is much more about you asking the right questions - to yourself or to others. The Socratic dialogue is not an invention of Frankl. No, the answer is yet in the name; this technique eventually leads back to the philosopher Socrates, living nearly a 2500 years ago.

In mental care we use various techniques, but ultimately as a therapist you are your own and most important tool. Prof. Robert Abraham (emeritus, Leiden University, ed.) taught us emphatically: Psychological tests are wonderful tools, but the clinical judgment of the therapist always precedes. Jan Derksen (Professor at the University of Nijmegen) after my recollection told us so in exactly the same words during his psycho diagnostic trainings.

Abraham and Derksen, are not both of them true Freudians?

I do understand what you mean. But first your actual question: I think both of them are psychoanalysts; but whether one is therefore a Freudian too ... They should answer this for themselves. Jan Derksen, moreover argues that every therapist should read at least 10,000 pages of Freud. It would, in his opinion, make a lot of debate in the world of mental health much more transparent. I could not agree more. And before you ask: Yes, I myself get round to 10,000 pages written by Freud, I think. I still consider *The Interpretation of Dreams* the best part. Whether I am therefore a Freudian? No, not really, despite my beard, which according to Hollywood every Freud adept probably should have. But

indirectly – yes of course. In those days Viktor Frankl was more or less launched by Sigmund Freud. At the time, Freud challenged the young Frankl to write an article for the psychoanalytic journal. When Alfred Adler started for himself, the then still young Frankl came along with the latter. And finally he went his own way.

... He started for himself ...

Yeah, you can say that. It's true. The psychotherapeutic world shows a long line of divisions and splits. Whether that has anything to do with egos and a certain degree of narcissism? Yes, I am certain. But keep in mind that modern psychology actually is still quite a young science. Freud wrote his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. Or actually it was printed in 1899, but Freud would usher in the new 20th century. With that he absolutely succeeded. I wonder if there is anything in the 20th century which has influenced people's thinking more than psychoanalysis in particular or psychology in general. There are so many terms borrowed from Freud, whether it's about resistance, the slip of the tongue, dreams, libido, the unconscious, neurosis and yes, of course, words like narcissism or borderline. And let's not forget the inferiority complex. No one had ever heard of this concept before Adler introduced it. Since then many people suffered from this disturbing complex. We are talking about developments over just an ample human lifetime. And two World Wars, and ... well, you can go on and on.

How did you end up with Frankl?

Well, now it's getting personal. Let me say that I was overwhelmed by Frankl as it were. I was a sophomore student at Utrecht University when I saw a poster in the hall of Trans 2. There must have been something on it as: prof. dr. Viktor E. Frankl, survivor of four concentration camps gives a lecture about 'the meaning of life'. Probably something was also mentioned about his Jewish background. Anyway, it instantly evoked images from my own family background and I knew that I would go there. For hours we sat there listening attentively to the convincing argument of the -up till that moment to me totally unfamiliar- professor. Furthermore, the personal encounter was sober. My name will have meant nothing to him the many years to come, but for me it was a life-changing encounter. The life-bending experience for me was - and still is – basically his approach to the apparent senselessness of suffering – of existence, and yet to discover meaning in life. Put a dash between the syllables. So dis-cover, or un-cover, take the cover away from what is actually present. Therefore it refers to the meaning, which presumably is already there. It's up to me to dis-cover that.

What then is the meaning of life?

Well, someone else cannot answer or decide for you. Another person cannot tell you what the meaning of your existence is. If I may return to Frankl - this is ultimately his theory - well, the praxis of the theory. Even before Frankl was deported to the camp, he had already written his book *Ärztliche Seelsorge* (The Doctor and the Soul). That book was taken from him. In the camp one lost everything, even one's name. Frankl knew that his wife, their unborn child, his parents and as it turned out later his entire family (except for a cousin) was killed. Killed! Ultimately, there was really only one reason for him to survive: the book that he had lost had to be re-written. It was not even 'someone' for whom he had to survive. There was only a 'something'. This book had to be written again. That was the elaboration and effect of his theories that would be known as Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. Ultimately *The doctor and the soul* did not become his most famous book. That would be *Man's*

Search for Meaning, or originally: '... trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager'.

But Logotherapy is above all intended to support people to find sense in their own lives in order to help them develop a life full of meaning; a life that comprises sufficient moments of happiness. You do not need to be happy always and all the time, but there ought to be plenty of such moments for one to conclude: "It is good being here" as an existential experience and statement.

That sounds a bit biblical...

Yes, biblical, Jewish perhaps, Christian too. I do have an illustration, indeed. When the Creator in the beginning of the Book of Genesis worked for the first five days each time, after seeing what He had created that day, He uttered: "It is good!" But on the last day, when He made man the Eternal concludes: 'It is *very* good!' That's a little more. Please, do repeat God's words here as a man: 'It is good that I am here.' Maybe when finishing your life you can conclude saying. 'It is, in retrospect, *very* good that I was there.' And if you can look around once more, still satisfied, seeing the familiar faces around you, and the faces of those who have gone before you – those faces that previously had become blurred - faces that at that very moment might start winning sharpness again - then you probably can conclude that you were 'good', I mean as people say 'I'm good', when they let you know they're satisfied. Life has been good to them. Then you have done well, I think.

That sounds almost resigned, or if you want: stoical.

No, you cannot rest until the proper time comes. As a matter of fact, eventually you can spend the balance only with that last breath. Until then your parole is to be active and involved. Be involved in life. Do not die before you pass away. Life is an assignment - for yourself and for the cause of others. You asked me about philosophy earlier. I have found wisdom and insight with many masters in psychotherapy. But the most decisive yet became Frankl and he remained. I have something similar with philosophy. It will probably not surprise you that for me the emphasis here is on existentialism. But again, it is quite specific. Already in my studies, I was gripped by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. I did not understand very much of it at the beginning. To me the initial experience was being gripped. I think most of the work of his hand you will find in my bookcase now - even in French, from which I occasionally absorb some fragments. Levinas is indeed contagious. My wife updates the Levinas bibliography on the Internet, in connection with the University for Humanist Studies (Utrecht, ed.) But Levinas seems to gain popularity again. There do appear quite a lot of new publications about him.

And what connects Levinas with Frankl?

Yes, I have often wondered why these two souls did not meet each other in their work. They have been contemporaries. They really lived almost simultaneously. They largely had similar experiences, with an emphasis on those horrible days of World War II. Their Jewish rootedness in their work has resemblances. And yet ... They must have had knowledge of each other. Their similarities are also, as I said, in their connection with existentialism. But now I would like to connect their thoughts in these linking words 'the power of vulnerability'. That last word is especially in Levinas' philosophy a basic notion. The vulnerable face of the other. The other actually should be written with an upper case first letter, but the faithful Levinas, -as a philosopher- does not refer yet to *Adonai* - the Eternal. A central idea in Levinas' mind is ethical. I have to suffice with a single paraphrase, but "the very negation of

the Other is the murder of the Other." That is outrageous. And I think it is only understandable what Levinas means when you're quite familiar with Jewish – with Talmudic thought.

Logotherapy is not Jewish?

With the latter I was focusing on Levinas, but it applies also to Frankl. You need to know a little about and have some knowledge from the world of Judaism in order to understand them correctly. That is a fact. You will then encounter more aspects of their philosophy. But for both of them the main theme is that they are universalists. However, they interpret the world from their own background. Sometimes they elucidate their background and some other aspects from their heritage. But the message is universalistic. It is about humanity. It's for a reason that there are Franklian institutes all around the world. Even in a country like Japan, a culture that is completely different than Jewish-Christian-humanistic Europe, where as a matter of fact severe storms have left behind deep traces in all of these three cores of thought, most specifically the Jewish tradition.

Actually, do you know that Freud's famous *Dream Interpretation* found its inspiration in the Book of Genesis? It was the story of Joseph, the King of Dreams, which was Freud's inspiration. Freud was also an avid amateur archaeologist. Well actually he was a collector. Psychoanalysis is archeology. But with this I would start a new topic.