Self-Transcendence: A Paradoxical Way to Become Your Best[1]

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Introduction

I propose that the way to become your best self is, paradoxically, to become more selfless. I want to make the case that, in a world of cut-throat competition, the best strategy to survive and prosper for individuals and societies is to give our best in serving each other. In psychological terms, this way of life is called self- transcendence (ST).

ST sounds paradoxical and counter-intuitive and may not make sense at first glance because in this individualistic consumer society, self-interest always seems front and centre in our consciousness. From parenting to education, we are ingrained with the idea of "looking out for number one." Most self-help books and success seminars focus on how to develop skills and strategies to be winners.

May I suggest that you entertain the following ideas, which represent an alternative way for personal growth:

- You need to lose yourself in order to find yourself.
- It is more blessed to give than to receive.
- Do not ask what you can get *from* life, but ask what you can give *to* life.
- You must be willing to deny yourself in order to serve something greater than yourself.

Here are two well-known quotes from Dr. Viktor Frankl (1984) that convey the same idea regarding ST:

> Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. (p. 131)

> The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (p. 133)

I hope that at the end of my presentation, you may discover that ST is not only an inevitable part of all of us, but also an essential condition for survival and flourishing as individuals and as a species.

A Dramatic Example of Self-Transcendence

A Korean drama began with the main character complaining to his best friend in prison on the day of their release:

> My old man beat the hell out of me when I was only a little kid. My mom only knows how to scold me. I was bullied at school. I was then framed for a crime I did not commit and sent to jail for 16 years. Now, I have terminal cancer with only a few months left to

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live. Why me? Why am I so unlucky? Why is the world so unfair and so cruel? Life has no meaning. I am dying to die, because life sucks!

If you were a counsellor, what would you say to help this angry man who is down on his luck and has no will to live? You may be surprised by how his best friend replied to his self-pity and self-destructive tendencies. In short, his best friend challenged him with the following questions:

What kind of son are you? Your mother has suffered for 16 years while you were in jail. Now that you are out of jail, don't you think that you should make it up to her by taking care of her and making her life easier? Besides, what kind of man are you? Are you going to let the murderer who framed you go free and hurt more innocent people? Don't you have the responsibility to gather evidence to bring the murderer to justice? Finally, your years in jail were not all bad; it has changed your life and kept you away from trouble; you have earned all kinds of technical certificates and become a model prisoner.

Basically, his friend was telling him, "Yes, it is going to be tough, but you need to rise to the challenge and fulfill your responsibility in order to make your remaining life worthwhile."

Before you condemn his friend as a miserable counsellor who lacks empathy, I want to tell you that in that drama, he was actually a guardian angel with the task of guiding and protecting the protagonist. At the end of the drama, his friend was able to rescue him from self-destruction and empower him to live happily and productively by carrying out his responsibilities in the last few months of his life. He did not find a miraculous cure for his cancer, but he learned that every day was a miracle.

This guardian angel must have been trained by Dr. Viktor Frankl, because Frankl would have said exactly the same thing to this angry protagonist by confronting him and appealing to his sense of responsibility towards his mother and society.

The Importance of Responsibility

At the heart of Frankl's (1985) logotherapy is personal and social responsibility. His greatest insight—the key to becoming your best self is to assume the responsibility for one's own well-being and future; to discover, develop, and use one's gifts to serve others; and to do the right thing as demanded by each situation.

I believe that John F. Kennedy might have been influenced by Frankl when he famously said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—as what you can do for your country." Another iconic figure, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"

In sum, when you accept responsibility for your life and stop blaming others for your problems, you are on your way to recovering from your brokenness. When you accept responsibility toward life and start caring for others, you are on your way to becoming a fully functioning human being.

Frankl challenges you to change your mindset from being a taker to becoming a giver. The takers ask, "What can I get from life? What is there for me?" while the givers ask, "What can I give to life? What does life expect from me?" You are responsible to give back to society what you have been given. The more that is given, the more that is expected.

When your overall orientation is to give your best to the world, you are more likely to avoid the traps of success and become your best. Paradoxically, the more you serve others, the more likely you become a fully functioning human being. In addition, the intrinsic motivation of

ST is more enduring than the contingent extrinsic rewards, and is, thus, more likely to lead to the highest level of personal development.

Self-Transcendence: The Crowning Achievement of Evolution (Haidt, 2012)

From the perspective of evolutionary theory, Dr. Jonathan Haidt (2012) comes to the same conclusion. He argues that ST is a result of group selection, because religiosity or spirituality has adaptive advantages. In other words, trusting God and sticking together offer us the best chance of survival. Thus, the potential for ST or spirituality is in every human being.

Similarly, Joseph Pearce (2004) has also built a case for the biological basis of transcendence and Dean Hamer (2005) has provided evidence that religion or spirituality is found in our genes. In other words, there is some scientific evidence that ST is a part of our genetic heritage

More importantly, Haidt (2012) also argues that ST provides the path of experiencing ecstasy and awe. He employs the metaphor of a staircase to ST (Figure 1), in which one accidentally opens a door and soon loses oneself in the wonders of a transcendental encounter that are powerfully different from the mundanity of everyday living. Haidt also vividly describes such a transcendental experience in terms of religious

Figure 1. Staircase to self-transcendence.

conversion. A stairway to ST provides an overwhelming emotional experience in which one loses oneself in the presence of something sacred and awe-inspiring.

Self-Transcendence: The Highest Stage of Personal Development (Maslow, 1971)

In his old age, Dr. Abraham Maslow was puzzled by two questions: What motivates individuals who have already actualized? Why do some successful and self-actualized persons still behave badly? His answer to these questions was to propose ST as the highest stage of personal growth (Figure 2). In this stage, people will continue to be motivated to become fully functioning human beings by helping others to self-actualize.

This stage is associated with peak experience and characterized by feelings of awe and ecstasy. According to Maslow (1971), ST represents the most holistic level of higher consciousness, relating to oneself, significant others, human beings in general, nature, and the cosmos.

Figure 2. Maslow's revised hierarchy of human needs (Maslow's hierarchy, 2016).

It is a transpersonal or spiritual dimension defined by connectiveness and sacredness.

Self-Transcendence: A Personality Trait (Cloninger et al., 1993)

Even though all people have the potential for ST, some may be born with a stronger predisposition to serve God and others. Cloninger, Svrakic, and Pryzbeck (1993) developed the Temperament and Character Inventory and provided evidence that ST was an independent personality factor in addition to the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1989).

Cloninger et al. (1993) defined ST as "the extent to which a person identifies the self as…an integral part of the universe as a whole" (p. 975). Thus, a person high on ST is keenly aware of being part of a larger whole—of being in a spiritual union with God or nature.

Self-Transcendence: A Developmental Process (Tornstam, 1994)

ST has also been used to describe the developmental process of moving beyond one's physical self-boundaries towards a greater sense of interiority and connectiveness (Tornstam, 1994). This process is supposed to happen naturally. Tornstam has identified two factors in gero-transcendence: Cosmic-transcendence and ego-transcendence. The former refers to an increasing feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, while the latter refers to a decrease of interest in self-centeredness and material things and an increase in meditation.

Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, and Shiraishi (2005), drawing upon Tornstam's construct of gero-transcendence, developed the Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory. The 18 self-report items include statements like "I feel that my individual life is part of a greater whole" and "I feel a greater state of belonging with both earlier and future generations." There is increasing empirical support that ST occurs naturally as we advance to old age.

Self-Transcendence: Spiritual Care for Dying Patients (Reed, 1991)

ST represents the reality of individuals who enter the end-of-life stage, when the physical world fades away and the transcendental spiritual reality looms large for dying patients. In the nursing literature, ST is defined as an "inherent, gradual, non-linear developmental process, resulting in increased awareness of dimensions greater than the self and expansions of personal boundaries within intrapersonal, interpersonal, transpersonal, and temporal domains" (McCarthy, Ling, & Carini, 2013, p. 179).

Reed (1991) theorized that when individuals face life-threatening situations, they may expand their awareness of the self through accepting death as part of life, developing an interest in helping others, and finding spiritual meaning in life. Reed's research demonstrates that patients with a high level of ST as measured by her Self-Transcendence Scale also enjoyed a high level of well-being.

Self-Transcendence: A Value Orientation (Schwartz, 1992, 1994)

Through his extensive cross-cultural research, Schwartz (1992, 1994) discovered that there are ten types of universal values: benevolence, universalism, tradition, conformity, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction. These ten values can be organized into four broader value categories according to two bi-polar dimensions (openness to change vs. conservation, and self-enhancement vs. ST) (Figure 3).

According to Schwartz (1992, 1994), ST serves as a value orientation that guides people's decisions and activities towards benevolence and universalism. Benevolence means being kind towards others or loving those close to you. Universalism means having a global perspective or seeing oneself as being connected with the universe or nature. Research has shown that the value orientation of ST, as measured by Schwartz's value scale, is positively associated with agreeableness (Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012) and social responsibility (Shafer, Fukukawa, & Lee, 2007).
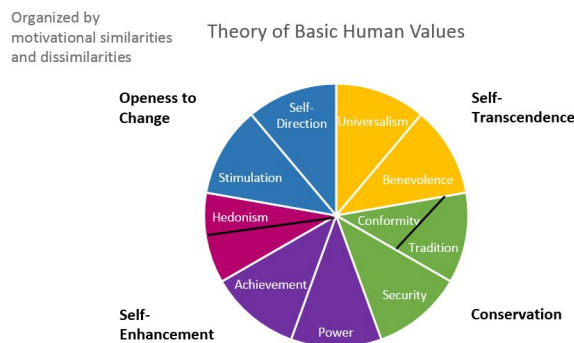
Figure 3. Schwartz's (2007) Basic Human Values

Self-Transcendence: A Primary Motivation (Frankl, 1985)

Frankl (1985) conceptualizes ST as a primary spiritual motivation that stems from our spiritual nature; it seeks to express itself through our striving towards something greater than ourselves. ST represents our spiritual need to be connected with others and with a higher power. It represents our "better angels" to caring for others or serving a cause greater than oneself. The pursuit and attainment of transcendental values leads to deepest satisfaction because it fulfills the deepest yearning of our spiritual nature. When we lose ourselves in embracing our sacred responsibility of serving others, we become fully human. That is why, according to Frankl, ST is the ultimate end in life and the main purpose for human existence; therefore, it ought to be our end value if we want to fulfill our ultimate destiny or highest calling.

Interestingly, Frankl's (1985) motivational view of ST incorporates all the above views. The reason why many people are not interested in ST is that they are preoccupied by lower desires for pleasure, power, and material gains. However, when these desires decline with advanced age, the motivation for ST will emerge. The pursuit of ST will liberate us from self-absorption and the limits of the physical self. ST involves active engagement with what really matters in a purposeful way.

I have translated Frankl's will to meaning into a testable psychological model (Wong, 2014, 2016a), and identified three levels of ST—the search for ultimate meaning, the pursuit of meaning in life as a whole, and discovery of situational meaning. At all three levels, successful pursuit ends in losing oneself in the experiencing of meaning. Recently, my colleagues and I have developed a Self-Transcendence Measure (Wong, Ivtzan, Lomas, & Kjell, in progress) to facilitate ST research.

Self-Transcendence: A Worldview or Mindset (Wong, 2014)

Frankl actually has a two-factor theory of ST as cognitive and motivational (Wong, 2016b). The cognitive factor refers to the global belief or worldview that life has inherent meaning and that there is potential meaning in every situation, no matter how absurd and undesirable. Such affirmation has the adaptive function as an anchor in stormy days. It also enables us to reframe our suffering in a meaningful context. A case in point is Frankl's (1985) epiphany that his suffering in the Nazi concentration camp would prepare him to teach others how to find meaning

in suffering; such reframing a bad situation into a larger context of meaning makes suffering more bearable and meaningful.

     William James, in his Harvard address said, "Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact" (as quoted in Bridges, 1916, p. 425). Wong's (2012) Meaning-Mindset Measure was designed to measure this new perspective of seeing the world in terms of meaning. A perspective change can make all the difference in how we perceive things (Figure 4). Future research will reveal the power of global beliefs and perspective change in shaping our perceptions and behaviours.
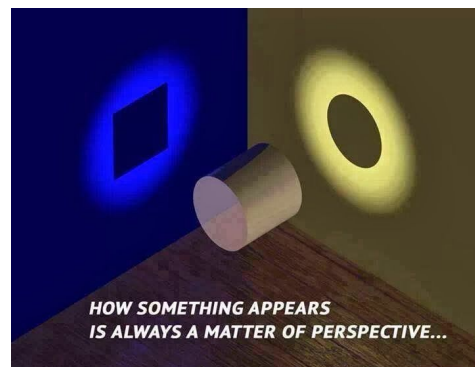

Figure 4. Perspective matters (Worldly Minds, 2014).

Concluding Discussion

The above brief review provides empirical support for the adaptive advantages of ST and, at the same time, challenges the misconception of the self as an isolated entity closed in skin. The Buddhist teaching has long questioned the illusion of the self as a substantial, permanent entity and advocated the state of nonself (Shiah, 2016). The mental state of selflessness—as experienced in mindful meditation—is not only associated with well-being (Siegel, 2007), but may also reduce the perils of the self-centered pursuit of happiness and material success (Whippman, 2016; Wong, 2007).

     The adaptive advantage of ST stems from the fact that it is rooted in the relational nature of being human. Thus, the self does not exist as an "island unto itself" but is embedded in a vast web of relationships. Metaphorically, we are but one drop of water in an ocean of relationships. We will naturally pursue and practice ST when we realize that we are all related horizontally and vertically—i.e., we are connected with a Higher Power and with other people. We find our "home" when we become fully aware of our connectiveness.

     In other words, we are hardwired to love God and love people; in serving God and others, we meet our spiritual needs for ST. Thus, love is at the heart of ST; the practice of ST is also consistent with the Christian teaching of loving God and loving your neighbour.

     When we step out of self-interest to serve something greater than ourselves, we are practicing ST. We become our best self only when we are become selfless or egoless and oriented to caring for others. Thus, regardless of our religious beliefs, or lack of them, ST represents a spiritual way of life, a way that will meet our deepest spiritual needs for connectiveness and transcendence.

     Interestingly, some of the best examples of people who lived a life of selflessness for the common good were also known for their deep religiosity. Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all dedicated their lives to serving a worthy cause and were willing to risk their own lives for the greater good. I believe that the world will be a better place when more people practice ST rather than the egotistic pursuit of material success.

     Here is a general portrait of ST personified: A person's greatest ambition and satisfaction is to fully develop his potential so that he can make a significant contribution to the world. In his daily interactions, he consistently places his concern for others above self-interest. He is willing to forfeit his rights for the common good. He works tirelessly and cheerfully because he loves

what he does and believes that his work is consistent with his end-value and life purpose. By having a servant's heart, his impact on others is actually enhanced because his selfless devotion is inspirational.

I admit that ST is a hard sell in an individualistic society. How many ambitious people would enroll in a seminar on "Self-Transcendence for Sustainable Success"? But the intensive competition to achieve the American Dream can take a toll for individuals and society (Whippman, 2016), and the alternative path of ST may result in better mental health for individuals and a more sustainable development for society.

It is gratifying that the practice of ST has been incorporated in Taiwan's national life education. According to Chang (2016), in her invited paper on Meaning-Centered Positive Education, "The purpose of life education is to encourage students to discover their unique meaning/value of life in order to achieve a state of communal connectedness, personal fulfillment and flourishing, and social responsibility to others, the society, nature, and the universe." I believe that all children from other school systems can also benefit from this meaning-centered positive education that focuses on responsibility and ST.

I challenge researchers to systematically investigate the adaptive benefits of ST. Meanwhile, I want to leave these thoughts with you for your reflection:

- The paradoxical way of ST offers the best chance to survive and prosper as an individual and society.
- Take care good care of yourself and develop your potential for the common good.
- The toughest mind is equipped with a meaning mindset because it can remain positive and hopeful even when everything seems bleak.
- The strongest motivation is the intrinsic one of becoming one's best in order to give one's best to the world.
- There is no failure or defeat when you are willing to lose everything in order to achieve a worthy life calling.

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