

Toronto Meaningful Living Group Meetings: Lesson Two

Sunday, July 3, 2011; 3:00 – 5:00 PM

Brief summary of the third Meetup meeting – by Jessica

In attendance were: Julia, Katherine, Rob, Melissa, KC, Andrea, Daniel, Li, Michelle, Emily, Jessica, Richard, John, Paul, Lilian, Joy, Dana, Simone, John. For Tuesday: Paul, Lilian, Jennifer, Sandra, Lynn, Richard, and Stephen.

Announcements – Lilian

- Lilian welcomed seven new participants and mentioned that these Meetup meetings are sponsored by The International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM; www.meaning.ca). We would appreciate it if they would become members of INPM.
- She also reminded the participants that personal issues shared during Meetup meetings must be regarded as confidential.
- Copies of previous handouts are available upon request. Notes, exercises and Powerpoint presentations can be found on the INPM website (www.meaning.ca and www.inpm.org/).
- Video recordings will be used for a future online version of this course. Recordings of individual group members will not be used publicly without permission. If you already know that you would not like to be included in any materials, please let one of the organizers know.
- If you would prefer to be contacted by e-mail, rather than through the Meetup site, please add your information to the contact list on the side table.
- Snacks this week were generously provided by Julia and Lilian.

LESSON THREE: The Human Quest for Meaning: When We Ask “Why” Questions Led by Dr. Paul Wong

- **Introduction:** Paul introduces the lesson by referring to a quotation by King Solomon (found in the book of Ecclesiastes) that points out how there is a time for everything.
- **Quest for Meaning Scale:** The Quest for Meaning Scale (found on meaning.ca) consists of various questions related to the existential quest. Paul explained that those who score in the middle range (2-5) are in different stages of search for meaning, whereas those who score on the extreme ends of the scale are not but for different reasons. The

low-scorers (0-1) are “existentially indifferent” while the high scorers (6-7) have stopped searching because they have found answers to these existential questions.

- **Luck and Fate Intervene:** As an illustration, Paul shows a picture of a group of small fish swimming with a much larger fish. The unsuspecting small fish don’t know they’re swimming with the enemy and can be swallowed up anytime. The big fish is not safe from the fisher men. Bottom line: No one is completely safe and no one can predict their time of death.
- **Free Will and Human Agency:** Fate dictates what happens, but our happiness depends on how we react to what happens. We are in control of how we related to people, to fate, to God, and to our own destiny. Paul also states that when bad things happen (e.g., when he was diagnosed with cancer), people try to make sense of the event they’re facing. This sense-making is an important part of moving forward. Without making sense of who you are and what you care for most, you will be going in circles or get stuck. The exercise of free will and human agency is essential for flourishing.
- **UCLA Study:** He shares a study that he conducted while at UCLA (Wong & Weiner, 1981). His finding shows that people do engage in spontaneous attribution search, usually when something unexpected or bad happens to them. Everyone is both a lay scientist (exploring causality and trying to predict, explain, and control the world) and a lay philosopher (asking questions about the purpose of and reason for things, and seeking answers, through reflection, to things that science cannot answer). Asking the right attribution questions is important to finding the right answers.
- **Self-Awareness:** Paul describes the “mirror test,” a test which tests infants’ (or primates’) ability to recognize themselves in the mirror. For this test, the experimenter places a dot on the child’s face. When children are aware of their own existence, they will try to remove the dot by touching their own face. When they are too young to possess this self-awareness, they will try to remove the dot from the mirror. Paul talks about how self-awareness (awareness of one’s own existence) is the first step toward the development of self-consciousness (awareness of one’s own personality).
- **Self-Consciousness:** He says self-consciousness has to do with asking “who am I” and “what am I” questions. He says that though children develop a sense of autonomy early on (i.e., learning to say “no” during the terrible twos), it takes years to learn to say “yes” to the positive choices in their lives. Self-consciousness leads to self-determination. A group member asks a question about why she is only asking these questions now, in her fifties. Paul responds that these questions are often asked more during transition times (e.g., leaving home, middle age) or during times of difficulties.

- **Four Dimensions of Self:** Paul outlines the four dimensions of self (Spiritual, Psychological, Social, and Physical) and asks the group which is the most important. Most participants express the opinion that the spiritual core is most important, because it represents their core values, ultimate concerns, worldviews and belief systems. He talks about how Mother Teresa is beautiful because of the love in her heart, not because of her physical appearance. He also asks group members what matters most to them in choosing a partner (e.g., someone who cares, has a good heart, and lives with integrity).
- **Self-Inquiry and the Spiritual Self:** Paul talks about how people's life experiences (positive or negative) will affect their sense of self. There are differences in how much people feel their lives are controlled internally (i.e., by themselves) vs. externally (i.e., by others, circumstances). People also differ in their capacity to confront their real self and live authentically.
- **Loss of Innocence:** Paul refers back to the story of Adam and Eve from last week, talks about the consequences of taking the forbidden fruit. He states that before the violating God's spiritual law, Adam and Eve experienced oneness with themselves, with each other, and with God and nature. After the violation, however, they began to experientially "know" evil and its consequences, including alienation, shame, guilt, fear which lead to hiding from God and from each other. He goes on to say that the cure to these consequences begins with self knowledge, i.e., making sense of who we are and what has happened to us. This self-knowledge includes confronting the dark side of ourselves. Paul believes that good counselling involves learning to see the inner demons that are holding us back (e.g., lack of courage, hostility toward self, resentment toward parents) as well as our potentials for development. He states that if we don't get rid of these demons, they will follow us around everywhere (e.g., into our marriage relationships, etc.). We cannot escape from our shadows. He also says that, in addition to confronting our dark sides, we need to reconcile the positive and negative parts of ourselves.
- **Self-Knowledge:** Paul quotes Socrates in saying that we must know ourselves and that the unexamined life is not worth living. He says that self-reflection separates us from the animals. It elevates us so that we can live a richer, more meaningful life.
- **Reflection Questions:** Paul points out the Reflection Questions (see slide) as something to think about and suggests that we go through them on our own.
- **Discussion Time:** In response to a question, Paul describes self-reflection as a tool to determine how we are doing and what we really want in life. He articulates some useful

questions for self-reflection: “Is that [relationship, job, etc.] meaningful to me?” “Is it consistent with my values and the purpose of my life?” “What do I want?” “What do I need to do to create it?” Lilian asks the group to remember the first time they started asking “who am I” questions and as various group members share their stories she highlights what was going on in their lives at the time (e.g., under stress, life becoming mundane).

We concluded the formal part of the meeting and members stayed around to chat and enjoy refreshments. The next meeting will be on Sunday, July 17 at 3pm.