

## Research Article

# Counselling the Zeitgeist: Reflections of a Counsellor on Values and Attitudes to Life

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Received: March 05, 2022; Accepted: March 11, 2022; Published: March 29, 2022

"I'm not strange, weird, off, nor crazy, my reality is just different than yours." – The Cheshire Cat (Alice in Wonderland)

"Could it be", Frankl (2004, p. 157) [1,2] asks "that this illness of the age (the zeitgeist) is identical to that with which all psychotherapy is concerned, that is, with neurosis [3]. Frankl proposed four characteristics of what he termed "the collective neurosis", the spirit of the age. This paper suggests that in different ways these characteristics persist and have been identified in different ways by various authors. It suggests that an important task of therapy is to address the zeitgeist rather than to immediately address the presenting symptoms.

As a counsellor dealing with life issues I often find that the most important step is to work gently with the client to help them overcome their "should's" of life. Life "should" somehow be different and that attitude has caused the stress in the relationship, or the personal anxiety or the depression that has brought the client here today.

However, what the client believes about how life "should" be can be heavily influenced by the general beliefs of society about life. Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy and survivor of the concentration camps wrote extensively about what he terms the "collective neurosis" [4-6]. For Frankl there are four manifestations of societal beliefs in his time (the zeitgeist):

- Provisional existential attitude. The person believes life itself has little meaning apart from personal satisfaction and hence it is not necessary to do anything particular except live for the moment.
- Fatalism. A person who succumbs to a provisional existential attitude may go one step further and convince themselves not only that it's not necessary to change anything but it's not actually not possible to do so. The feeling of personal powerlessness against whatever life brings is a constant issue in counselling.
- Collectivism. The person who believes it's not possible to change can go further and simply desire just to sink into the crowd and "go with the flow".
- Fanaticism. As one is swept up in the prevailing belief of the age it is also possible to become totally convinced of the correctness of a particular direction in life. In that case only one opinion counts and that is my own and that of the,

now supportive, collective crowd I have joined as I seek for certainty and support.

Such certainties about the reality of life for a client can also lead to counselling difficulties as the individual's belief structure can obstruct personal progress.

This short paper will maintain that the topic of the "collective neurosis" continues to be a focus of critical analysis in sociology. Although the language used may differ, the frameworks are remarkably similar [7,8]. I will suggest both that the collective neurosis is alive and well in our time and that source of this life today is an over-emphasis on individuality and personal happiness. This is at the expense of attitudes: gratitude for what life gives to each of us, generosity in what I give back to others and acceptance of the inevitable suffering that life brings.

Brooks (pp. xi to xxxiii) suggests that the (western) world encourages us to pursue our own self-interest: career wins, high status and personal happiness. While these are the goals of what he terms the first mountain he suggests that at some point individuals will find they are no longer interested in these goals. They begin to desire goals that are truly worth pursuing and that is the second mountain. These are goals that require a personal commitment, to a cause or to a person. The Logotherapy approach runs parallel. It has a focus is on the future, and meanings to be fulfilled in the future. It is about helping clients to be prepared to climb that second mountain or at least to see it on the horizon as a challenge to be accepted.

At some stage in life, Brooks (pp. 14ff.) suggests we lose the incentive to climb that first mountain. Perhaps it becomes impossible to scale, or having scaled it, we realise it was not worth it. In both cases we descend to the valley. He suggests there are four social crises typical of the valley:

- Loneliness: an increasing number of people live alone or as single parents.
- Distrust: living alone and not knowing who potentially lives even next door can lead to alienation and lack of trust in others.
- Crises of meaning: as I exist in the valley is it possible to find a place where I can find a cause to which to devote myself or even a person to whom I can devote myself?

- Tribalism: this can become the way forward because I now join in a common cause which has a community (perhaps a virtual one) and which shares common hatred for some group or other or a common rejection of particular ideas.

Are these the collective neurosis described in a new way? [9]. How did we get here? If a disease of western society is a crowded valley, the collective neurosis rebranded, how did we succumb to the neurosis?

Brooks (pp.26ff.) goes on to suggest that the valley has intergenerational roots. He suggests young people in a western society are presented with what he terms “empty boxes” as ideals. As an example of this he recounts the ritual of graduation from University. The invited inspirational speaker is a famous and successful person who urges the graduands “don’t be afraid to fail”. Good advice but hard to accept without some clear pathways of what life goals are really important. What is the benchmark for “pass” or “fail”? However, the graduation speech can go further to suggest real empty boxes:

- Freedom: The purpose of life is to be free and personal freedom is equivalent to happiness
- Set your own path: You can be anything you want. Your future is limitless you can be whatever you want to be. Is this true? It may be hard to accept if I am unsure just what life is about and who I might become.
- Authenticity: Be yourself and follow your own dreams and passion. Define your own mountain? That may be good, as long as it is really worth the climb.
- Autonomy: create your own values. They belong to you alone. So the climb is up to each person? That is good as far as it goes, but no serious climber would attempt a difficult ascent without proper equipment. What values do I need to define the self?

Metaphorically, these are akin to looking around and refining the car’s interior without concentrating on the road ahead and the second mountain in the far distance.

Brooks sees all of these as simply “empty boxes”. So what happens when young people, having opened the gift of education and the “boxes” that have been presented to them throughout, find they are empty? Somehow they have been told lies? It may take some time and not all may realise that what has been presented to them is not the full truth about life.

It can take one of the “d’s” of life: a death, a divorce, a disaster, a difficult event, a personal rock on the path, to bring this home. I then realise that life is tough, it can be hard, there will be suffering, and I decide to come to counselling. If the counselling is helpful, I may be able discern the second mountain, and even begin that climb. I am convinced now that my life has meaning (the Logotherapy message), and I can find it.

However, what happens if I stay in the valley, realise the first mountain had poor foundations and was composed of empty boxes but cannot see the second mountain, that of meaning in life.

Inayatullah (p.22) believes there are four pathways many young

people take:

- Go with the flow. Develop your career and join the BMW set, perhaps putting off the crisis until mid-life.
- Seek certainty. In an uncertain world this can be found in political and religious fanaticism.
- Surrender. Youth suicide is on the rise.
- Violence. Violence and youth crime are major factors of life in some cities and districts.

This is the collective neurosis in action, perhaps not only for the young [10].

Where does this leave the counsellor, with a client who has come because of one of the “d’s” of life? The interior of the metaphorical car has been badly compromised, the windscreen needs to be cleaned so that that second mountain can be seen clearly. Questions such as: “who does your family need you to be now?”; “what do you hope your children will say at your eulogy?”; “what courageous decision does life demand now?” are at the core of logotherapy. Once the therapeutic relationship has been established, they must be confronted. Not to do so is to simply re-arrange empty boxes.

Brooks (pp.87 ff.) sees climbing the second mountain as a next step in life. This “second journey” (see O’Collins p.14) is usually triggered by some life event, in the same way as a life event triggers the client to seek counselling support. The classic “second journey” for O’Collins is undertaken in mid-life. It is characterised first by an outer component - a restlessness that keeps a person travelling in the hope that “if I relocate, I will find the solution’. Then there is a feelings component, it feels like being lost in a forest. The journey takes the form of a search for new meanings, fresh values and different goals. It is also characterised by a deep sense of loneliness.

O’Collins suggests the journey ends gently. “We come to ourselves in a self-discovery and final self-identification, which allows us to reach out to others and be more productive, “to give something back”, as the saying goes.”

Our clients are not all ready to climb that second mountain. They may be too young for a mid-life crisis. They have come because of one of the “d’s” of life. However, “almost every problem that’s brought into therapy is implicitly about the meaning of life [11].” To address this implicit issue will frequently, according to Lukas [12] either reduce the presenting symptoms or at least make them manageable. It is a prime task of therapy and this paper contends it can only be achieved by addressing the implicit beliefs of the zeitgeist.

Metaphorically the therapist must of course help the client clean the interior of the car, perhaps even providing new seat covers, a better sound system and other changes to layout and systems. However, the real task is to clean the windscreen, to enable to client to look outwards to causes and people beyond the self that can be embraced now and towards that second mountain, whether imminent or in the distance.

## References

1. Zeitgeist - the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time.
2. Frankl, V (2004) On the theory and therapy of mental disorders. (Introduction and translation James du Bois). *New York, NY. Brunner-Routledge*.
3. Neurosis – a relatively mild mental illness, involving symptoms of stress (depression, anxiety, obsessive behaviour, hypochondria) but not a radical loss of touch with reality.
4. See Frankl V (1987) *Man's search for meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*. London, UK., Hodder and Stoughton.
5. Frankl V (1988). *The will to meaning*. *New York, NY. Meridian*.
6. Frankl V (2004) On the theory and therapy of mental disorders. (Introduction and translation James du Bois). *New York, NY. Brunner-Routledge*.
7. See Brooks, D (2019). *The second mountain: The quest for a moral life*. London, Random House UK. Inayatullah, S. *Youth Dissent: Multiple perspectives on youth futures in Youth Futures: Comparative research and transformative visions*, (Gidley, J. and Inaatullah S. Eds.) Westport, CT. Praeger publishers. 2002:19-30.
8. Mackay, H (2013). *The good life: What makes a life worth living?* Sydney, Aust. McMillan
9. O'Collins, G. (2021) *Second Journeys in The Tablet* June 5 2021. London, UK.
10. Comparisons in language and concept: Loneliness --- provisional existential attitude; Distrust – fatalism; Crises of meaning – collectivism; Tribalism – Fanaticism
11. Inayatullah's categories can be linked to Frankl's collective neurosis (not perfect as there is a cross-fertilisation perhaps: Go with the flow --- provisional existential attitude; Seek certainty – collectivism; Surrender – fatalism; violence – fanaticism.
12. Hill, C. E. (2018). *Meaning in life: A therapist's guide*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000083-000>
13. Lukas, E. (1986/2020) *Meaningful Living: Introduction to Logotherapy Theory and Practice*. (pp. 153-183).

## Citation:

McQuillan P (2022) Counselling the Zeitgeist: Reflections of a Counsellor on Values and Attitudes to Life. *Ageing Sci Ment Health Stud* Volume 6(2): 1-3.