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Faith, Loss and Meaning: Frameworks of Meaning as a Practical Approach to Spirituality in the Therapy Room

Lauren Price¹

The idea of meaning making as an inherently spiritual process² is central to the therapeutic encounter.³ Although stages or layers of faith have been explored as a theory of human development,⁴ a culturally competent and spiritually or religiously inclusive method of addressing meaning making is yet to be fully articulated. For example, in an article detailing the meaning-making process, Park notes that it is desirable to “propose an integrative theory of human meaning”⁵ so that a common space of understanding, dialogue and communication may be opened up for exploration and interaction. An integrative theory of human meaning, then, must take into consideration both the individual and their context (that includes religious/spiritual and social factors), based on the recognition that there are a multitude of manners of making meaning. Meaning making is relational in nature – it is the individual’s integration of their own context and relationships to self, family, and larger society that helps to shape and form their own unique framework of meaning.

The concept of frameworks of meaning, then, is an inclusive theory and practical approach to understanding clients' psycho-spiritual worldview and to providing effective use of self in psychotherapy that is culturally competent and spiritually/religiously inclusive. A framework of meaning can include religious or spiritual components, but does not need to be overtly religious or spiritual. Indeed, ultimate meaning frameworks may take a variety of forms – they can be nihilistic in nature, or fully theistic. Frameworks of meaning are not exclusive but inclusive, a way of understanding and putting into order the things around us, and understanding our own life story and current life (social, familial economic, religious) context.

Stages of Faith, Developmental Theory, and Frameworks of Meaning

The concept of frameworks of meaning is built upon James Fowler's concept of stages of faith.⁶ Fowler's stages are partnered with developmental phases, in that there is a hierarchical sense of passing or growing through stages of faith - from infancy and

¹ TH668 (independent study) – Faith and Spirituality in Psychological Perspective.

² James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

³ Tori DeAngelis, "In search of meaning," *American Psychological Association* 49, no. 9 (October 2018): 38; Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1946); Paul T. Wong, "Meaning therapy: An integrative and positive existential psychotherapy," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 40, no. 2 (2010): 85-93.

⁴ Fowler, 1981; Heinz Streib, "Faith development theory revisited: The religious styles perspective," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001): 143-158.

⁵ Crystal Park, "Distinctions to promote an integrated perspective on meaning: Global meaning and meaning-making processes," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2017): 14.

⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

undifferentiated faith⁷ to the final stage, conjunctive and universalizing faith.⁸ In a similar fashion to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson,⁹ Fowler charts a developmental process of the person in terms of faith – where different backgrounds, experiences and understandings can lead to different outcomes for the individual at different ages. Fowler defines what he means by faith, prior to charting it across the life span.¹⁰

For Fowler,¹¹ faith is imagination as well as a verb, can be overtly religious or not, and is intimately connected to frameworks of meaning which are, in turn, connected to relationships of trust and the world. To break these concepts down further, faith, for Fowler,¹² is inherent to every human being – it is a part of how one sees and imagines the world, and how one sees and imagines their place in the world. This is not necessarily monotheistic in nature, but rather our faith is our way of making meaning – a way of understanding and putting into order the things around us, and understanding our own life story and our current 'place' in life.

Faith, then, is each human's way of ascribing and understanding ultimate meaning, and is a relationship of trust between the individual and the world around them. This fundamentally constitutive relationship of trust is based upon the relationship of basic trust experienced in our earliest relationships where the infant cannot care for itself and is dependent wholly upon others to keep it alive and thriving. The type of relationship one experiences at this time, for Fowler,¹³ is intimately linked to the type of trust experience one then later has with the world. This type of trust relationship colours the faith of that individual – it colours their way of making ultimate meaning of the world and their place within it.

It is interesting, then, that Fowler states, “the opposite of faith is nihilism.”¹⁴ Is it? Is nihilism in itself not a position of ultimate meaning making that ascribes to a particular relationship between oneself and the world around them, as well as their own place and role within that world? In other words, I would argue that nihilism in and of itself is still an ultimate framework of meaning that one holds in a relationship of understanding of themselves, and others, and defines a relationship of one's trust in and understanding of themselves in connection to their world.

The one piece that keeps Fowler from considering ultimate meaning frameworks such as nihilism a “faith” in and of itself, perhaps, is the fact that Fowler's definition of faith is still beholden to his Christian theistic bias. This bias toward a broadening of monotheism¹⁵ in and of itself as essential to understanding faith limits Fowler's application of the concept to other types of meaning-making frameworks that individuals may employ (nihilism, atheism, humanism, etc.). Instead, the concept of frameworks of meaning opens up as well as allows for religious and non-religious stances toward ways of being in the world. All

⁷ Fowler, 119.

⁸ Fowler, 184; 199.

⁹ Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, (1980 [1959])).

¹⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

¹¹ Fowler, 1-16.

¹² Fowler, xiii.

¹³ Fowler, 16-17.

¹⁴ Fowler, 31.

¹⁵ Fowler, 23.

stances of meaning making are possible, valid, and can appear in our own lives and in the lives of our clients in psychotherapy.

Meaning Making: Relevance for Spiritual Care and Psychotherapeutic Practice, Relevance for Effective Use of Self

Our framework of meaning is each human's way of ascribing and understanding ultimate meaning, and is a relationship of trust between the individual and the world around us. Following psychoanalyst Ana-Marie Rizzuto,¹⁶ our relationship of trust with the world is founded upon the earliest relationship with other – mother – as a relationship of care and trust. It is also founded on the familial and socio-cultural (and socio-economic) introduction to stories and understandings about the world, ourselves and our family, and our relationship to the larger contexts around us – what Streib refers to as the “multilayeredness”¹⁷ of religious styles.

The relevance of utilizing the concept of frameworks of meaning in the psychotherapeutic context is that it opens up a space of understanding with regard to the client's current meaning making process, including how they situate themselves in relationship to others, and in relationship to their socio-cultural world and worldview. Highlighted in this approach is the relevance of any spiritual or religious concerns of the client, but these "concerns" need not be ultimately spiritual or religious. In the frameworks of meaning approach, all manners of meaning-making are valid and equal - theistic, atheistic, or any type of approach that may fall in between the two. In such an approach, developmental stage can be relevant, but does not determine how a client makes meaning, nor is there a ranking of types of frameworks of meaning from more simplistic to more evolved.

Further, a client's framework of meaning, in the sense that it is illustrative of their way of both being-in-the-world and being-in-relationship to other(s), illuminates aspects of their attachment styles and basic level of trust in the world. If the client believes that the world is a safe place, and gathers meaning from their role in their imagined world, then the therapist has a clue that perhaps the client's attachment style is fairly secure. Life events such as death, loss and major change, will naturally have an effect on the client's perceived framework of meaning. Here, the therapist can begin to assess personality and grieving styles and may be able to influence a client's framework of meaning, and perhaps more suitably tailor therapeutic interventions for the client, in terms of loss and grief, that will fit more closely within the client's framework of meaning. Having a sense of the client's framework of meaning, then, affects both the therapist's understanding of the client in terms of worldview as well as attachment and personality style/type, and can assist in the tailoring and timing of particular therapeutic interventions.

With regard to the therapist's use of self, holding a concept of frameworks of meaning invites the therapist to reflect further on their own meaning-making process, and how they understand themselves in relationship to their perceived worldview, as well as in relationship to others. Virginia Satir underscores how important the therapist's use of self is in the therapeutic relationship. Honing the use of self provides the therapist with the tools

¹⁶ Ana-Marie Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979).

¹⁷ Streib, 149.

to empower the client¹⁸ as well as ensuring that the therapist does not harm the client. Awareness of one's own particular framework of meaning assists the therapist in understanding how they approach the therapeutic space and their use of self in the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, such awareness also assists the therapist in understanding counter-transferences that may arise; they may then decipher the client's own framework of meaning and how it may differ or be similar to the therapist's own framework of meaning.

Again, the framework of meaning may hold religious or spiritual content for the client, or it may not. The framework of meaning concept assists the therapist in understanding the importance of the religious or spiritual content, while not requiring them to be an expert in that content. Instead, the therapist is interested in how the spiritual or religious content itself informs the client's framework of meaning. At the same time, the therapist can reflect on their own framework of meaning, finding spaces of common ground and difference with their client's framework, in order to further refine use of self as well as comprehension of the client's own unique struggles and successes. In understanding how the client holds meaning, and holds themselves in relationship to that framework of meaning, the therapist is able to closely hone in on areas they can provide support, different avenues of exploration, and even challenges they can present to the client.

The Meaning Making Process – Framework of Meaning as a Way of Locating Self-in-Society, Self-in-Worldview

As humans grow and change, our relationship to our way of understanding our life story – our framework of meaning – grows and changes as well. Our relationship to this framework of meaning may be more or less conscious; in other words, it may be taken for granted until brought into distinct relief through loss, questions of theodicy, grief, death or trauma. Our frameworks of meaning may be destroyed, leaving us vulnerable until new ways of trusting or being in the world illuminate a fresh framework of meaning that one employs. Peter Berger termed this the “nomos,”¹⁹ or meaningful order that one imposes upon the world and their place within it.

A client's framework of meaning, then, gives clues to the therapist as to how the client sees themselves within their socio-cultural-familial setting, and within their worldview or nomos.²⁰ Depending upon what developmental stage, season or phase of life the client may find themselves in,²¹ their relationship to their nomos will be coloured by various factors. For example, a young adult in the late adolescent phase may find their nomos, their framework of meaning, becoming further disengaged from the parents influence and authority. Meaning making and understanding of self-in-society, self-in-worldview at this stage may become more influenced by close friendship groups and a sense of finding out who one really is in the world, on their own.

¹⁸ Virginia Satir, “The Therapist's Story,” in *The use of self in therapy*, ed. Michele Baldwin (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2000), 20.

¹⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

²⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

²¹ Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*; Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978).

At my present age and stage in life, I am in my mid-thirties and find myself completing tasks found in two of Erikson's stages of adulthood: intimacy vs. self-absorption, and generativity vs. stagnation.²² Comparatively, in Levinson's estimation, I find myself in the "settling down"²³ period - a time when one chooses to prioritize certain relationships and aspects in the self, in a different way than in the age thirty transition. I find myself in Fowler's conjunctive faith stage, which is expressive of a type of openness and new relational interaction with the self (the unconscious) and the other.²⁴ With these approaches in mind, I can say that my own framework of meaning is becoming consolidated in a different way than what was experienced at the end of my twenties and early thirties. I am entering into a space defined by growth outward in the self, but also prioritizing and refining aspects of self-in-world as well as aspirations and relationships. I am able, at this stage, to prioritize what is important but also what is of value - in terms of both self and others.

At this stage and age, I have suffered what I would term a dissolution of a previous framework of meaning, and now find myself expanding into a new framework of meaning. This new framework of meaning contains fragments of my old, destroyed framework of meaning. However, it is a wholly new space and way of relating to the world, as well as understanding of myself within that world. My *nomos*²⁵ has been radically made anew. The change in my framework of meaning I attribute to the death of my mother.

Death and grief are human experiences that can throw into deep existential relief the reaches and limitations of our own frameworks of meaning. Indeed, death and loss may shatter one's particular framework of meaning and leave one feeling stranded or utterly alone. The death of my mother shattered my framework of meaning - which is also another way of considering the grieving process. As I grieved, vulnerable and uprooted, I felt as though my connection to any kind of care or surety in the world had been destroyed. Moving through the grieving process was transformational in the sense that I moved from the old to the new - from my old manner of making meaning of the world to a home in a new framework of meaning. This movement was not a confident one - I was vulnerable, lost, uprooted and disconnected from anything I could consider a home in the world. As I travelled across that abyss of the unknown, I was not aware that a new framework of meaning would later house me, yet, here I am - capable of making sense of the world and of understanding and trusting my space within it.

As I reflect upon the role of loss and grief in my life and how it has affected my framework of meaning, I am reminded of C.S. Lewis's painful, beautiful exploration of the loss of his wife in *A Grief Observed*.²⁶ This deep, frank look at loss and grief resonates with what I consider to be the space that exists between the destruction of the old framework of meaning, and the creation of the new. Lewis questions faith, love, and even the existence of God - previously a key, central piece of his framework of meaning. The loss of his wife is such an utter shock to his understanding of self-in-the-world that his framework of meaning may

²² Erikson, 100-103.

²³ Levinson, 139.

²⁴ Fowler, 184-187.

²⁵ Berger, 1967.

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper Books, 1961).

no longer have space for a God whose existence no longer points to safety and surety, but rather, pain, loss and suffering.²⁷

Later in his life, after writing *A Grief Observed*, Lewis found his way back to belief in God. He was able to reconcile, or recreate, that aspect of his understanding of self-in-world, as he was able to create a new framework of meaning. This new framework contained aspects of the old, but was radically new as his way of being-in-the-world was radically made anew, after losing his wife. When I lost my mother, I lost my sense of safety in the world. I suddenly felt very vulnerable, as though death could come for me at any moment. The world felt unpredictable, and I felt as though I had lost my one, strong connection to my history - my earliest sense of self, and to the one person who would always care for me.

At the time of my mother's death, I was experiencing a radical alteration, indeed what I would term a destruction, of my previous framework of meaning. Three years after my mother's death, I reflect upon the new framework of meaning that I find myself within. Dream work can be a powerful method by which to connect to the unconscious, and reflect upon the whole self - in connection to questions of ultimate meaning. As I undertook the journey to explore more closely my own new framework of meaning, I utilized dream work as a method by which I could connect to my unconscious feelings and beliefs regarding basic trust, attachment, and connection to the world around me, and to my sense of my self within that world. My mother's death had shaken my basic sense of trust in the world, a key component of my framework of meaning. As I moved through grief, and moved further into adulthood, this basic trust aspect found a new expression in my framework of meaning.

My mother is still very much a part of my framework of meaning, my connection to my mother is not severed, but it is understandably changed. Below, I recount a recent dream that illustrates my connection to home, family, and sense of self in the world, in order to illustrate how dream work can be beneficial for the therapist and the client if meaning making and framework of meaning exploration becomes central in the therapeutic interaction.

Dream work and the Meaning Making Process

The dream content

I am walking from home (my parent's home) down the road that leads from the property, but the road in the dream is not a road that exists – it is a new geography. The road is surrounded by a body of water on either side, so that the road resembles a peninsula of sorts, stretching from the house to the world beyond.

As I am walking down the road, I notice that ahead are large rocks, or rather boulders, that I at first think I will not be able to get over, but then realize that I can. However, I look down and see that the water is encroaching upon different areas on either side of my path. I also realize that the water that is encroaching may eventually, if it continues to encroach onto the path, wash away part of my path and I will not be able to get back home.

I keep moving forward and go over the boulders. On the other side, I see my aunt Marilyn but she looks quite different, kind of like a version of me, but somewhat not like me at all. My aunt is setting a table and there is a buffet and hutch behind her. There are other people there who are supposed to be my father and uncle but they do not look like my father

²⁷ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

and uncle. I say hello to my aunt and that I love her and miss her. She says the same and continues happily setting the table and making dinner. I realize my friend is there and that they have begun introducing themselves to my family but, I think, they have already met.

Exploration of themes and meaning

The dream indicates my progress from my childhood home to the world beyond. The road is rocky, as well as under the threat of erosion - so much so that I may not be able to return. This does not cause me worry in the dream, as much as a noticing that return may not be possible or probable. Further, I notice that there are boulders that I believe I cannot traverse over - but then easily do. After I ascend over the boulders, my family and friends are waiting on the other side - expressing connection to me, and to each other, even if some of them look different to me.

To me, the dream indicates my movement from reliance upon childhood assurances of safety and security and reassures me that I am more than capable to handle any problems or difficulties that may arise in my path. Further, even though I think I am leaving my childhood home and all that it holds behind me, I come across family connections on my path - with all the trappings of hearth and home: the kitchen, a meal, familiar furniture. Not all of the faces are familiar - yet they are people who are related to me, illustrating the changing nature of my relationship to my family members, seeing these people in a new way, particularly my father.

With regard to my framework of meaning, the dream indicates that, even though I may no longer rely upon that connection to childhood assurances of safety and home, I find assurances and safety and home on my road as I travel. Family and friends are there, too, indicating our continued connection, even though there may be changes in the way we see and understand each other, now that my mother is gone. Problems that have arisen in my path, I easily transverse - indicating I am capable and able of continuing along my path in the world, even with its challenges, threats (the water encroaching), and changes. I have a solid foundation in myself, and a solid connection to those around me. The house and its elements I so associated with my mother - food, nurturance, connection, still exist along my path, even though they may be transformed. The assurance and connection to home that I felt destroyed when my framework of meaning was destroyed, continue anew in ways that I could not predict. My new framework of meaning highlights the changing themes of self, home, and family - but underscores that even though these things may change, my connection to them continues and it is something that I carry with me.

I believe it is important for the therapist to understand their own framework of meaning, and of seeing how that framework is influenced by age, stage and life events in ways that might alter or even shatter that framework. How one's framework of meaning becomes rebuilt, revised, or revisited is an important piece of self-knowing, and of understanding one's self-and-world and self-in-world is a way in which the therapist can refine use of self to the benefit of the client and to the benefit of the therapeutic interaction. Inasmuch as one can understand how grief and loss affects one's life, one can also begin to explore how grief and loss affects the individual's manner of meaning making, and of how they see themselves in relationship to the world and to their perceived place within it.

Conclusion - Considering Cross-Cultural Applications

Understanding that each client in therapy brings with them their own framework of meaning helps the therapist to understand that an array of religious, spiritual and secular styles of trusting and being may filter through the chair opposite theirs. Instead of limiting the client to a developmental framework of faith or religion,²⁸ then, what is required is a manner of conceptualizing meaning making as an encounter between the self and the world. In this encounter, the self strives to not only make sense of but to ascribe meaning to itself and to its place in its own particular world.

This is a type of growth and change that all humans experience in their life and, as such, my own particular experience is a universal one. Further, grief, loss and death may throw into distinct relief how our framework of meaning may no longer suit our new relationship between self-and-world, and may indeed spur forth the creation of a new framework of meaning altogether. What might that experience look like for a Christian individual, a Buddhist individual, or an atheist? These particulars give distinct and individual form and shape to the unique manifestations of the universal experience of making meaning of ourselves and our space or story in the world around us. Hence, this is why it is important for the therapist to be able to articulate and make use of a concept of meaning as framework – each client’s framework of meaning may be different, but their relationship to it is of utmost importance in the therapeutic encounter.

²⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*; Streib, “Faith Development Theory Revisited.”