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Logotherapy as a framework of a cure for COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

*At times, human existence is resisted by certain external force and affirms that there exists a meaning in suffering similar to the meaning in life. Suffering is an integral part of life like fate and death, without which life is incomplete. An external force, be it a war or a dreadful pandemic outbreak, may possibly hem in people for an unknown period of time. Such provisional existence in a confined space affects balance in the psychological state of mind. Decline in the belief of future predominantly lingers in the minds of people. This paper attempts to view the ongoing pandemic period of COVID-19 through the lens of Logotherapy, a theory propounded by Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. It also highlights that holding on to the inner self is the only way out of sufferings.*

Keywords— Human existence, sufferings, Logotherapy, COVID-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the war years, under the shadow of Nazism, millions of people were captured and gathered in destructive camps. Taken as prisoners, they were brutally tormented and treated less than a swine. Victims after the stint in the deadly camps jotted down their views in the form of letters and diaries which rooted as Holocaust literature. Such works provide an insight about their pain and sufferings in the concentration camps. Viktor Frankl was one such victim. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* was about survival and his source of strength to survive. It provides a subjective stance to his experience as a prisoner, the hardships he went through as a forced labor by working restlessly in an icy area with almost-torn shoes, the punishments he received for trivial acts, the authoritative Capos, the unrelenting struggle for daily bread, the rather hygienic atmosphere, the favor he received for his comforted talks, the hope he held till his freedom and his theory Logotherapy.

A laboratory produced virus, COVID-19, proliferated across the world, pulls down the economy of the Nation, drives people to death and made the surviving soul to hold on fear of contamination. It had conquered every place and left its mark, more violently. People's state of mind during the quarantine was depressing and completely void. It was a fight against the survival for unknown period of time, which is indirectly proportional to the amount of hope the people accumulated. People's vision of future was barren and daring similar to the prisoners of the concentration camp. In the fight against the reality, the mental stability of the people becomes imbalance. The hope and belief in future vanishes at the increasing arrogance of the power holders

"...three phases of the inmate's mental reactions to the camp life become apparent: the period follows his admission; the period when he is well entrenched in camp routine; and the period following his release and liberation" (MSFM-22)

The symptoms which characterize the first phase, as pointed out by Frankl, is shock that results from an unexpected sequence of happenings. Masses of people were loaded in a train, travelled for days and nights unaware of the final destination added a sense of shock when they got a glimpse of the concentration camps. The events followed up the admission in the camps were a selection. Able bodied are chosen as a hard labor for digging the tunnel and developing railroads. Moslems were burnt to death as they are unfit to toil. The state of shock persisted till it they get used to the sufferings. In the same light, the ongoing pandemic instilled a sense of shock with its unexpected consequences. Unfit were deceased and the rest of the population striving not to be deceased. Caught unawares and perplexed about the follow up situations. People undergo delusion of reprieve where there clung to the shreds of hope and believe to the last moment that it would not be so bad. The state of illusion relating the dreadful diseases and curiosity about the consequence of the diseases are predominant in the initial stage.

"...the blunting of the emotions and feeling that one could not care anymore, were the symptoms arising from the second stage of prisoner's psychological reactions..." (MSFM-35)

In the second phase, people prone to insensitivity. Prisoners' life in the camp was thought to be a provisional existence. They believed that in the following Christmas they would be freed but when the days were nearing there never occurred a slightest possibility of freedom. *With the end of uncertainty there came an uncertainty of end (MSFM-79)*. Prisoners began to lose hope. They die less from lack of food or lack of medicine than from lack of hope, lack of something to live for. Similarly, the pandemic left people less sensitive. The provisional quarantine extends to the "provincial existence of unknown limit". Future was almost ruined by disrupting several levels of professional and personal life. The creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to an individual.

The third stage was concerned with the psychological state of the prisoner after his liberation. The prisoners had to pick up the leftover threads to weave the rest of his life. The realization of the self was lost and relearning by rewinding the past was encouraged.

"...what was happening to the liberated prisoners could be called "depersonalization". Everything appeared unreal, unlikely, as in dream. We could not believe it was true" (MSFM-95)

Individual feel divorced from their own personal self as not belonging to the same person or identity. The body possesses fewer inhibitions than the mind. Apart from that, bitterness and disillusionment would occur during the return to the normal life. Thus, number of hardships would be ready to surround him. Sufferings would become inevitable after the liberation from the pandemic. Victor Frankl came up with the theory of Logotherapy which makes the individual to cling to hope. Logotherapy focuses on future and it defocuses all the vicious circle formations and feedback mechanisms that dominate in the development of neurosis. Thus, the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic would be broken.

"Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in the life and not a secondary rationalization of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone" (MSFM-105)

Viktore Frankl puts forth that in a due course of finding meaning to our existence, there arise an existential frustration. Unanswered questions, fear of reality, vision of future would degrade the mental stability when the situation is unfavorable. There are ways in which COVID-19 impacted the individual. A constant sense of insecurity, limitation of travel, marked social behavior, the phobia of outdoors, stigma towards the people with slightest symptoms of the disease and debunking the misinformation in the digital world collectively has a negative effects on the psychology. These existential problems do not emerge from conflicts between drives and instincts rather from the will to achieve the meaning of the life. Certain conflicts are normal as it leads to the ways of perfection and even healthy if the cause of the conflicts is clearly researched. The inner equilibrium may seem collapsed which could be redressed by Logotherapy by bringing out the hidden meaning of life that lies under every suffering.

"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, freely chosen task...what man needs is not homeostasis but what I called noo-dynamics" (MSFM-110)

Existential vacuum is another widespread phenomenon of recent pandemic. A state of boredom gives rise to such vacuum. When the rush of the busy days is halted for uncertain period of time the void occupies, ruling the throne, as the individual is thrown off balance with the new acquired leisure time. In that case, Logotherapy suggest ensuring the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. It results from breaking down the meaning of life in to snippets and targeting on a concrete assignment which demands fulfilling to reach the desired 'whole' set of meaning. Situations challenge the man and demand him to sort certain issues and he must respond by his responsibilities which is the essence of human existence. Frankl states that the meaning of life can be discovered in three possible ways.

- *By creating a work or doing a deed.*
- *By experiencing something or encountering someone.*
- *By the attitude we take towards unavoidable sufferings (MSFM-115)*

Admits the quarantine period, boredom and hopelessness go hand in hand and to set back the tract, individual must involve in creating a work or a task to accomplish in the so-called barren days. This eventually leads to stick to the productive activities.

Experiencing something such as goodness, truth, beauty or love towards other human sometimes results in finding the meaning of life. Viktore Frankl interestingly referred to an incident in concentration camp which highlights that the love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. He was forced to travel miles with the heavy load on his back to work in icy lands with the injured foot. He could not make himself out. The sudden flash of thoughts about his wife transfixed him. He imagined her answering his calls, smiling back at him and her frank and encouraging look. It added to his strength. He regained hope and began to work hard to ensure that he was fit enough to serve in the camp. He desired to meet her after his liberation which added meaning for his existence and a motivation to go an extra mile in his work. Logotherapy highlights that love serves as an ultimate goal to which man can aspire. *The salvation of man is through love and in love (MSFM- 49)*. During the pandemic situation when the hope continues to drain, the flash of dearest members in the life would uplift the spirit and provide a reason to overcome the hardships.

Meaning in life simultaneously proves that there exists a meaning in suffering and motivates to surpass the finite intellectual capacity of the man. The meaninglessness of life, as marked by existential philosopher, ends in vain. Sufferings are accepted if the cause for the undergoing sufferings is definite.

Logotherapy, as put forth by Viktor Frankl, is neither teaching nor preaching. The logotherapist widens the perspective so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible. Covid-19 pandemic had registered the minds of people that the further existence and the future of life were futile. The livelihood was lost, dearest souls were infected or even deceased, increased monetary issues, educational laggings contribute much to the sufferings. Life is a super set which contains happiness and sufferings as subsets. Patience to achieve destination is highly recommended. The pandemic acts as a test to the inner strength and a desire to turn a personal tragedy into triumph is the intellectual act during hard times. Thus creating a meaning to sorrows and holding on to the inner self fetches the purpose of life.

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