

Meaning: the Power of an Idea

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (June 2025)



Interior in Paddington (Lucian Freud, 1951)

After decades in the university sector, I began a part-time counselling practice just three years ago. Retirement looks better from a distance, and I am not done. Freedom is great, staying relevant is greater. Autonomy to do what we choose to do, assuming we still choose to do, seems the best of both worlds. Golfing was never going to fulfil the itch to do.

As a Registered Psychotherapist, I needed to write a short profile describing my particular approach to counselling. With mental health statistics worsening, it is an important exercise.

I decided the exercise requires context. Over a period of two hours, I scanned the approximately 800 therapist profiles in my region. Not surprisingly, most therapists promise compassion and validation. These are important ingredients to establishing a therapeutic alliance, but my lingering question was and remains, what if the client's presenting behaviour is limiting or self-injurious? Do you validate or challenge? Seems an obvious answer, though in the subjective 'my narrative' world in which we now reside, obvious is not always enough. Still, when people are in pain, they tend to become more receptive to an objective assessment of behaviours that aren't working out. That simple revelation can lead to an opportunity for change.

The approach which differentiates my practice, is to be solution focused. Solutions we conjure for others can be examples of confirmation bias unless they are anchored in research and crafted in conjunction with the client. Experience and a dose of common sense also helps. Life is complex and often out of our control, requiring a balance between acceptance and the resolve to achieve autonomy where it exists. As clients develop trust they can begin to believe that small steps taken can lead to desired outcomes, even if not evident at the beginning of the process.

Conversely, excessive belief can undermine objective thinking. Some clients come in passively believing psychotherapy can be the magic bullet for their problems. I have to be careful to explain that solutions will likely be multifaceted, incremental, and on-going. Two steps forward, one step back, a fitting mantra.

People may have complex reasons for their problems, with trauma a frequent and insidious contributor. Problems may also be created or reinforced by bad habits, resulting from lack of discipline and resolve, which requires the establishment of replacement habits, the result of discipline and resolve. This potentially transformative process is not easy, will not result from wishful thinking, is not a magic bullet.

During my decades working with students with poor mental health, parents often asked if I could mitigate their child's resiliency deficiency with an hour long workshop. My response was to liken achieving resilient mental health to the calloused hands of a carpenter—that is, the result of dedication and hard work over time. The message was not always understood or well-received, but expecting to reverse a lifetime of bad habits with an hour long 'magic bullet' workshop is not the solution, encapsulates the problem. Wanting easy—the modern way—is not working, will not work, is why mental health concerns become crisis.

To find and enact a workable plan, taking responsibility is the first necessary step. We used to know that, our parents knew that. But modern life says otherwise. Young people are led to believe they are victims or must fight for universal victimhood in response to the unfairness of life.

The encouragement of an intransigent 'my narrative' mindset has subverted objective and critical thinking. Seems counter-intuitive, but it is logical that encouragement to be happily self-absorbed results in lack of resilience and unhappiness. With belief in self as the modern substitute for developing an

inner life, the individual has great pressure to be perpetually self-fulfilled and happy. We are burdened by the illusion of freedom of which we know not what to do.

If happiness is assumed and we have the freedom to be whatever we choose, how do we admit to unhappiness and how do we commit to being any one thing from a infinite number of possibilities? If we commit to any one thing from infinite possibilities, and we are not successful, disillusionment will be severe.

Years ago I did a series of presentations in primary schools related to my young adult mystery series. When I was introduced, teachers often told the students that they could become anything they wanted to be in life. These well-intended teachers presumably wanted to create a congenial setting for my presentation. The problem was, their message ran counter to my novel's themes. I didn't want a student was who never going to crest five foot zero to think he could become a professional basketball player if only he believed in himself enough. I preferred to tell the class that even Michael Jordan, with all his many gifts, was cut from his high school basketball team at age 15. I wanted students to know that failure and setbacks are normal, and that choosing a path well-suited to their talents and ambitions, augmented by hard work and persistence, is the proven path to success.

Finding a path we can passionately commit to requires knowing who we are, and modern life abounds with evidence that we are lost. People often admit to feeling hollow, and it is no wonder why. With nihilism the ubiquitous new normal, we still have to deal with the trifecta of pain, loss and death. Ernest Becker's 1973 opus work, *Denial of Death*, exposes the stark fear we cannot admit to even as it drives much of our behaviour. Humans are the only species with foreknowledge of inevitable death, which in the absence of meaning, is truly terrifying.

So, we deny, and in doing so, suffer more. If we cannot face the inward journey, we are left with outward distractions, the very essence of modern life. Greta Thunberg approved causes help construct an identity that masks fear, and suffices as a distracted version of meaning, for a time. But the question lingers, percolates below the surface: how does identity generated meaning affect our sense of self and mental health? How has the societal shift towards conformist ideological distraction shifted the meaning of meaning?

In the isolation of our individual freedom, we come by our modern angst honestly. There are many forces contributing to worsening mental health statistics—read Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*—but I would argue the root cause, is a crisis of meaning. In enduring the horrors of Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl came to understand that meaning determines survival. "A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how'."

Worsening mental health is particularly acute for young people, most of whom were raised during the societal obsession with self-esteem, and have been indoctrinated into the myth of self. (That dreaded, never to be experienced moment of self-doubt or poor self-esteem, might actually be a revelation of humility leading to a potential for forgiveness, acceptance or change). And as a consequence, during the most affluent and safest time in history, many people feel empty.

The fraudulent life as promised has not happened, and its lack of fulfilment causes shock at the stark reality of what life is. "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete." The expectation that life not include suffering, exacerbates suffering, mental illness and

unhappiness.

My thought, with credit to Dr. Frankl, is that we have to make a basic decision in life, choosing between grievance and gratitude. Modern life has tilted away from gratitude towards pervasive, ideological grievance of life's unfairness in all its various and manufactured configurations, with predictable results.

The Anxious Generation characterizes a listless, troubled generation of unhappy low achievers, despite its many advantages. And if the fulfilment of material wants and desires isn't working, where can we take solace, learn, and thrive? After the war, Viktor Frankl struggled to understand what his extreme experience at Auschwitz could possibly say about the human condition. He understood that human isolation—whether imposed or chosen—results in suffering, and it is literally true that one's circumstances are less a determinant of outcome than one's attitude towards the same. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Life as such is not passive suffering, but active engagement.

Frankl subsequently founded logotherapy, contending that even in the most extreme circumstances it is possible to find equilibrium in the pursuit of meaning. However difficult one's exterior circumstances; we never have to relinquish our innate personal freedom. As such, a therapist works with a client to seek meaning through passionate engagement; that is, establishing healthy relationships, forging values, pursuing creative expressive, making contributions to the world, alleviating other people's suffering. Developing the instinct to ferret positive from the inevitable vicissitudes of negative, is both spiritually and psychology modelled on Frankl's survival of the Holocaust. One needn't experience Frankl's extremity to be inspired to practice a positive, transcendent mind-set instructive in therapy, in life. In a

world of never ending bad news, that is a very good possibility.

My experience working with students convinced me that subscribing to victim ideology—endemic to the post-secondary sector—is not the way forward, does not help those it purports to be saving. The fact that the purveyors of victim ideology are overwhelmingly not of the constituency of the oppressed they purport to be saving, should be instructive. When we revert to any one of our many innate characteristics as defining ourself or others, we isolate and limit. The competition for victim status is inherently competitive, whereas the choice to seek connections outside of self is the cooperative road less travelled. By definition, taking this road requires courage, because it does not follow the herd.

My psychotherapy profile has a reactionary response to the virtual-signalling, aspirational modern world. Between depression-era/second world war parents, thirty years of competitive distance running, and forty years of working with university students, my bias is that people need a sense of urgency for a life that many experience as meaningless, inconsequential repetition. We all need to aware of, take responsibility for, and then actively engage in problem-solving before problems become crisis. The most difficult people to help are those who will not engage in their own life, whose drive is flat, passive or non-existent.

I used to approach the subject of meaning with trepidation. In the world of anything goes and nothing matters, fulfilling appetite is all we have. But I've been pleasantly surprised by client receptivity. It is no exaggeration to say there is palpable hunger for meaning among young people for whom its experience is low to no. That is, people welcome the discussion, often citing that it is not talked about, despite daily evidence of personal unfulfilled need. Even or perhaps especially in the world of material abundance, there still exists hunger for the scarcity of an immaterial idea. That

which is rare and denied, even if conventional and boring five minutes ago, will become subversively regarded, and eventually, most desired.

In the midst of Auschwitz scarcity stood Kanada (German spelling of Canada), named after that vast northern land of greatest abundance. Kanada warehouses brimmed with the abundance of possessions stolen from Jews who were warehoused and murdered in gas chambers. The cruel irony of Kanada was given redemptive reversal by Frankl's discovery of abundant meaning within camps created to enact the deprivation of death. Frankl's revelation is the very definition of hope, from which we can derive infinite meaning.

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife. His website is larrymccloskeywriter.com.

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