

# The Power of Meaning

Star Morrison

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## A LITTLE ABOUT ME

The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in their life.

– Viktor Frankl, 2006, p. 109

Up until about a decade ago, I spent my life on and off the streets, and in and out of jails, hospitals, and treatment centres. Due to trauma, emotional distress and having little or no positive coping mechanisms, I started using substances at a very young age. As a result, I have spent the majority of my life trying my hardest to stop. It took 20 years of efforts and finding an entheogenic plant medicine called Ibogaine<sup>1</sup> before I was finally able to detach from my dependency on opiates. It is a controversial treatment and largely unaccepted by the current medical establishment for a variety of reasons, including its powerful psychoactive properties. It was a difficult transition from living a life that centred around my substance use to one devoted to learning how to become the best version of myself, which is an ongoing, life-long process. When I did stop abusing substances, I found myself at one of the lowest points in my life, desperate and suicidal. Despite no longer being physically dependent on substances, I found myself in an existential crisis. I did not know who I was, who I was supposed to be or what I was supposed to do with my life. I continued to suffer emotionally and then I found a life raft. The book by Viktor Frankl (2006), *Man's Search for Meaning*, came into my life during this time and had a profound effect on me. I believe his message helped to shape the way I approach suffering in my life, including my current incarceration. There is a loss of control that occurs during incarceration that is reminiscent of a similar lack of control that arises during periods of substance dependence.

Frankl is both a concentration camp survivor and the founder of logotherapy, an existential-humanistic approach to psychotherapy. Friedman and Schustack (2012) define logotherapy as the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. Frankl was a peer and colleague of both Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, who are credited with being the founders of the First and Second Viennese schools of Psychotherapy, respectively. Frankl differed in his primary foundational belief that “life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught,

but a quest for meaning” (Kushner, 2006). Frankl believed in the power of personal choice and stressed that the potential for self-fulfillment can come from finding meaning in suffering (2006). Meaning is derived from three potential sources, “in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times” (Kushner, 2006). Courage comes from the attitude an individual takes in the face of suffering.

Although I struggled, I continued to work on my own development – it was with self-love and determination that I started a new life off the street. At this time, I began working with Ibogaine as a Compassionate Withdrawal Management Facilitator and later, as a Treatment After-Care Co-ordinator and Peer Counsellor. I found great meaning and purpose in my work, supporting individuals struggling with problematic substance use and mental health concerns. After six successful years of this work, there was a tragic incident during an Ibogaine treatment resulting in a client’s death. Health Canada’s re-classification of Ibogaine,<sup>2</sup> coupled with the death of my client and related mitigating factors, resulted in my current incarceration. I was devastated, by both my client’s tragic death and the charges that followed. Again, I found myself in existential crisis and, again, I turned to Viktor Frankl’s work. Once more, Frankl’s work became relevant and influential in my life. I decided that I had choice. I could let my emotions take over and wallow in depression, self-pity and suffering or I could try to find meaning. I chose the latter, embracing Frankl’s meaning making triumvirate of work, love and courage in the face of suffering. I began utilizing this support infrastructure to navigate the transitional journey from intake to release.

## INTRODUCTION

Incarceration is a naturally emotion-provoking situation and it would be easy to solely discuss its negative aspects. This paper, however, approaches this subject not from a typical deficit standpoint, but from a cautiously optimistic perspective. As a currently incarcerated woman, I am well placed to examine the complex and myriad emotions that arise from incarceration. The carceral experience follows a common path that includes three distinct phases: *intake*, *settlement* and *pre-release*. These phases are similar to the three stages in the Model of Transition created by Bridges and Bridges (2009): ‘letting go’, ‘the neutral zone’ and ‘new beginnings’. A third intersection to

these first two groupings involves three key pillars of support: personal, institutional and external. These three supportive networks can be used as resources throughout the carceral experience. Using Bridges and Bridges (2009) Model of Transition as a framework, I examine how each phase corresponds to a stage of transition and discuss how the pillars of support interrelate. This paper demonstrates how these three different components combine to offer opportunities for setting goals and making meaning within a carceral setting. The personal and individual nature of each experience must be acknowledged. However, I believe that incarceration and the many emotional challenges that are faced, can create a transformative, productive, and cathartic experience for many incarcerated individuals. While many environs and circumstances may allow for comparable transformations, I have found that the restrictive, oppressive, and confining nature of the carceral setting provokes a uniquely profound opportunity. There is the possibility for positivity despite this environment. Frankl (2006, p. 131) said that man “decides whether he gives into conditions or stands up to them”. By creating my own meaning, I am making my stand.

## STAGES OF TRANSITION

Transition starts with an ending and ends with new beginnings.

– Bridges and Bridges, 2009, p. 5

Bridges and Bridges (2009) Model of Transition acts as a framework for examining the phases of incarceration and the inherent potential for growth that successful navigation offers. Bridges and Bridges discern the difference between change and transition, explaining that change is an external event while transition is the emotional, psychological, and sometimes spiritual impact that change has on an individual. In this case, the change event is sentencing, and arrival at the institution and transition is the process of incarceration. Bridges and Bridges identify three distinct stages of transition an individual must traverse to adapt successfully to whatever change has occurred: ‘letting go’, ‘the neutral zone’ and ‘new beginnings’.

‘Letting go’ is an ending of what was. It is a loss of old ways of doing or being. Acknowledging the loss that occurs at this time is important according to Bridges and Bridges (2009). During this stage, it is also important to identify what we need to let go of and what is beneficial to keep. Recognizing and releasing negative behaviours and/or relationships

that no longer serve an individual can create space for new experiences and growth. Celebrating personal strengths and maintaining effective practices that are supportive during transition is also beneficial. Often, 'letting go' can be an emotionally turbulent time as an individual grieves what is being lost and prepares to engage in a new way of being.

The next stage is 'the neutral zone' where old beliefs, personal values and ways of being begin to shift in preparation for 'new beginnings'. This stage can be fraught with confusion and frustration as an individual learns to resolve the many differences that accompany the change event. However, it is also during 'the neutral zone' phase that significant opportunities for personal growth occur. By setting goals, an individual creates the opportunity for meaning-making.

Lastly, in 'new beginnings', individuals have developed new ways of thinking and being that are in alignment with their situation. Positivity, confidence and hope are common emotions. The learning and growth, which has accompanied the change event, is integrated.

## PHASES OF INCARCERATION

Several key sequences occur during incarceration: *intake*, *settlement* and *pre-release*. These correspond with Bridges and Bridges (2009) stages of transition and offer a series of emotional challenges, as well as opportunities to maximize the potential for personal growth and minimize stressors. The general timelines can vary drastically depending on the incarcerated individual, their motivations and their sentence length. However, I will offer these differentiations. *Intake* includes the arrival to the institution and the subsequent months wherein the intake assessments and procedures required by the institution are completed. *Settlement* is the interim period after intake and before *pre-release*. During settlement individuals begin to navigate life within an institution whereby housing, programming, work, recreation and social interaction combine to offer each individual the opportunity to create their own agenda. *Pre-release* begins when an individual actively engages in release planning and preparation. Throughout these phases, it is necessary to access available supports to enhance meaning-making and ease transition.

### Pillars of Support

To successfully manoeuvre transition, Bridges and Bridges (2009) note the necessity for proper internal and external supports. Developing and

accessing these supports is essential to success. There are three main pillars of support in the carceral environment – the personal, institutional and external – that can act as potentially powerful resources. The first component of this infrastructure is the personal, internal, aspect. An individual's attitude, fortitude and intentions are key elements. Developing the personal dimension of support requires a certain amount of emotional and behavioural self-awareness, along with a willingness to engage in self-reflection. The second element is institutional and includes the resources that are available to an individual during their incarceration. Engaging in the process of self-directed exploration and personal advocacy is necessary to take full advantage of the institutional resources at hand. External supports constitute the final element of the infrastructure, which include positive people and places that incarcerated people can rely on both during incarceration and post-release. Maximizing potential by using these supports, while navigating the emotionally charged journey of incarceration can afford an individual the unique opportunity for emotional growth and meaning-making within the carceral setting.

### **Putting It All Together**

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into an achievement.

– Frankl, 2006, p. 112

I now explore how the triads of Bridges and Bridges (2009) phases of transition, the stages of incarceration and pillars of support interrelate, as well as provide opportunity for finding meaning. This includes aspects of my own emotional experience traversing the carceral setting at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVIW). It is critical to clarify that this paper focuses on a very particular carceral setting, GVIW – a federal institution with a multitude of established programs and resources. I offer only my own experience and belief in the possibility for positivity and meaning making which exists if, and only if, one decides to pursue it.

### **Intake and “letting go”**

Carceral settings can be fraught with hopelessness and ennui. Often, *intake* is the most challenging period for many individuals. This phase corresponds to Bridges and Bridges (2009) ‘letting go’ stage and relies heavily on the personal component of the support infrastructure. Bridges and Bridges (2009) note that there can be a great sense of loss during the ‘letting go’ phase, when it is important to consciously acknowledge forfeiture of the past. Individuals must release what no longer serves them and shift from old belief systems, values, relationships, and ways of being. As mentioned earlier, this can be a frightening process. However, it does offer the opportunity to be courageous. Choosing the attitude of courage, despite what may seem to be hopeless and overwhelming circumstances, is something Frankl (2006) believes creates the space for meaning to arise. Individuals tend to try to make sense of their experience using an external frame of reference that is no longer applicable, a hindrance to growth within a paradigm that has shifted dramatically upon incarceration. I definitely felt the loss Bridges and Bridges (2009) allude to. Frustration, confusion and anger were prominent emotions, all of which are part of grieving. In my experience, I had to acknowledge the loss of my freedom, access to friends and family, livelihood, and many of the rights and privileges that accompanied life before incarceration. My previous experience with incarceration was outdated and vastly different from my current reality in the federal institution at GVIW. Around 20 years ago, when I was unhealthy, struggling with substance dependence and mental health concerns, I was in and out of provincial jail, and spent time in a Super Max facility in the United States where access to programs, community resources and supports was non-existent. My life was drastically different back then and my behaviour, mental health, values, and goals cannot compare to my current circumstances. Therefore, any preconceived notions or expectations of what jail life would be like, were useless. I am such a different person, physically, emotionally and spiritually, and in a very different stage of life, so those outdated notions no longer applied to my current situation.

There are many challenges in this first stage/phase – one must learn to navigate the system, access resources, and learn both the official, institutional rules and procedures, as well as the underlying social rules developed by the prison populace. I faced several unforeseen challenges during *intake*: lack of proper mental health support, including the cessation of all my mental health medications despite life-long documented proof



of prescriptions; lack of communication with loved ones, as getting phone access is an unnecessarily complicated and lengthy process at GVIW;<sup>3</sup> confusing administrative procedures and requirements; and, finally, the general learning curve of institutional life. For me, everything was unknown and uncertain, and I found myself bouncing around emotionally between anger, intense frustration, depression, high levels of anxiety, and hopelessness. Self-reflection became a critical practice throughout this period, helping me identify what strengths I had, as well as what negative feelings and thoughts to release. Transitions are stressful. Many internal and external factors contribute to stress levels. Attempting to decrease stress with manageable and controllable practices is vital. Exercise, yoga, meditation and proper nutrition are tools I have frequently used to help decrease stress in my life, so I implemented a daily regime to take advantage of their benefits. Self-study, writing, art, and journaling were tools I knew supported my well-being and helped to process some of the more difficult thoughts and feelings bombarding me, and so I made sure to include them in my daily schedule as well. Frustration, unhappiness, apathy and anger threatened to overtake me. I used the above-mentioned tools to enhance my personal strengths and keep negative emotions at bay. Typically, I am a positive, social person, who is adaptable, friendly, compassionate, outgoing and challenge-oriented. These are some of the strengths I needed to tap into to survive mentally. The willingness to embrace change, set goals and utilize resources is paramount for any successful transition, especially in a carceral setting. During the *intake* and 'letting go' phase I found it important to set small, highly achievable goals in order to build confidence and a sense of accomplishment. I used a tool developed by Jack Canfield (2005), The Rule of Five, which consists of setting five daily achievable goals. This is a particularly useful method for developing positive behaviours and I have used it since ceasing the use of problematic substances over 10 years ago. Here is an example of one of my Rule of Five lists. I attempt to accomplish all five every day and keep track of my success.

Star's Rule of Five:

1. Meditation (at least 20 mins)
2. Write/Journal
3. Create something (bead, paint, crochet, bake, etc.)
4. Exercise
5. Read

Using Canfield's resource as a tool can help to create daily structure and meaning. I choose goals that can assist me with managing my emotions and/or act as an outlet if I am feeling angry, frustrated, sad, or overwhelmed. I formulate my goals to ensure that my mind, body and spirit are addressed, and each day offers a new chance to accomplish these goals. This helps to enhance my self-worth, as well as nurture positive thoughts and behaviours.

### **Neutral Zone and Settlement**

The 'neutral zone' and *settlement* phase allows for further growth and opportunities to find meaning. After making it through the turbulent and uncertain *intake* and 'letting go' phase I started to relax and feel more confident. I was achieving my daily goals and using self-reflection to monitor my emotional well-being. I knew more about what was expected of me socially and institutionally, learned what my correctional plan entailed, and settled into the rhythm of everyday institutional life. I no longer felt so overwhelmed. I made a conscious decision to further insulate myself from negative stressors and improve my quality of life by continuing to develop the personal tools I carry with me while beginning to access available institutional resources. I set new goals that encompassed broader objectives including employment and education. There is a variety of employment and education opportunities, as well as supplementary programs available in many federal institutions. These can be tailored to suit an individual's goals. My experience shows that it is in the quest of these options that meaning arises. I pursued multiple education opportunities, finishing two year-long college courses, three university credits and multiple in-house training sessions. I found institutional employment as a photographer, a position that allows me to do something I love while giving back to others. I am also learning to play the guitar, a life-long goal. These pursuits prove and further solidify the work and love aspects of Frankl's (2006) meaning-making triad. It is during the *settlement* and 'in between' phase that I chose to create additional meaning by sharing my passion for meditation, yoga, and fitness with fellow prisoners. I took the initiative to form several groups, teaching meditation and yoga respectively. I also started a fitness club, where women come together to share their experience each week, track their progress, and share recipes and workouts. I try my best to establish some modicum of routine and actively search for ways to spend my time productively. While I am not always successful and struggle to maintain motivation and discipline, courage and diligence keep me moving forward. I am constantly,



actively, involved in creating meaning in my life. When I am exercising, practicing yoga and meditation, learning, working and giving back to my community, I feel good about myself. I am calm, content and joyful. These actions operate as a buffer against what is often an oppressive and negative environment. The *settlement* or 'in between' process of setting goals, taking advantage of resources and using supports offers a wealth of options incarcerated people can access. Operationalized with courage, this becomes a catalyst for accomplishment, growth and self-development. I find that as time moves forward, the values, belief systems, and ways of being from the 'letting go' and *intake* phase have shifted, and I am ready to move into 'new beginnings' and prepare for my release.

### **New Beginnings**

'New beginnings' is the third stage in Bridges and Bridges (2009) model and correlates with *pre-release*. The initial shock of *intake* / 'letting go' followed by the productive *settlement* / 'neutral zone' can prepare an individual for the final stages of *pre-release* / 'new beginnings'. This is the time when all the work an individual has put into their personal-growth, development and meaning making comes to fruition. New thoughts, behaviours and attitudes are integrated during this stage. As I await my upcoming parole date my emotional state is stable and positive – I feel confident and accomplished. My external supports, which I have cultivated throughout my incarceration experience, are in place to assist my reintegration into society. These supports include caring and healthy family members and friends, as well as external institutional supports and community resources. Setting new goals and preparing for the next major change event of release will flow more easily. Personally, I feel well prepared to move toward 'new beginnings' / *pre-release*. Through an awareness of the process, resources and the potential for meaning making, I have used the carceral experience to evolve.

## **CONCLUSION**

Even the victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself, he may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.

– Frankl, 2006, p. 146

It is the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering that matters most. Frankl (2006) called the ability to rise above hopeless situations courage. Incarcerated individuals are in a situation that cannot immediately change, therefore, we can choose to adopt an attitude that is positive and productive or we can give up and allow the circumstances to destroy us. As Frankl (2006, p. 112) observes, “When faced with unavoidable suffering, we are challenged to change ourselves”. I chose to challenge myself throughout my incarceration and continue to do so by pursuing education fully, engaging in meaningful employment, accomplishing goals I set, and taking advantage of opportunities. I give back to my community by sharing my knowledge and experience in areas I am passionate about. This has created profound meaning for me during a difficult emotional time and space. Despite living in this rigid carceral environment, which seems designed to inhibit healthy emotional expression, I have attempted to be as positive and productive as possible. By focusing on supporting my mind, body, and spirit to manage my emotions and build self-esteem, I have reinforced practices that will advance my effectiveness and success upon release. I have done my best to take advantage of the available resources and, when more growth was needed, I created my own resources and made them available to others. I achieve the goals I set for myself, while assisting others in the creation and achievement of their own goals. Within the depths of my carceral situation, I hold tight to Frankl’s (2006, p. 137) words, “*life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable*”, and in this I have created profound meaning.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ibogaine is a progressive treatment for substance dependence, traditionally used by the Bwiti tribe in Gabon, Africa as a sacrament. It has been adapted and used clinically in the treatment of substance use disorder (Brown, 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibogaine’s longstanding status as a legal, natural health-care product, was changed in May 2017 when it was placed on the Prescription Drug List (PDL) without any formal notification to Canadian Ibogaine Providers. Until such a time as clinical trials have been completed, Ibogaine remains inaccessible for prescription in Canada. Portugal, Brazil, Mexico, and the Bahamas are among some of the countries where Ibogaine therapy remains a viable option for those suffering from substance dependence issues (Government of Canada, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Upon arrival at the institution, money must be uploaded to your phone account. If you had money in your provincial account, you must request to have it transferred to a phone account. This can take a week or more. After it arrives in your phone account

there is a phone upload every second Friday. If you miss the upload, you must wait another two weeks. If you did not have money in your account and are depending on someone sending money to you for the phone, they must be approved by the Institution via your parole officer. This can take a week or more. When an approved money order arrives, it must be processed through finance and then approved by your parole officer for deposit into your savings account. This can take a week or more. Then, you must send another request to have money moved from your savings account to your phone account. Meanwhile, you must submit a request to have individuals added to your phone list. Each person must be contacted by the institution and is approved only after verbal confirmation of your relationship. If no contact is made after three attempts, you must resubmit another request for that individual. In my own experience, it took two months before I was able to communicate freely with my family and friends.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Star Morrison* is 48-year-old writer, artist, life-long learner and advocate. Her lived experience provides a rich and unique lens on the complexities of mental health, substance use, and the penal system. Her incarceration gave her the opportunity to reflect and apply frameworks for understanding the challenge of transitioning through different phases of imprisonment and how women struggle through them. Currently, Star is completing her Master's in Counselling Psychology with the goal to integrate her learnings and support others.