Open Letter from Ukrainian Logotherapy and Existential Analysis Community

With each passing year, the popularity of Viktor Frankl's original ideas continues to grow in Ukraine, and more and more people are choosing to live by his philosophy. This is, of course, largely due to Frankl's personal experience. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, logotherapy has taken root in Ukrainian society. People who were unwillingly transformed from observers into direct participants in tragic events naturally seek support in the lived experience of someone who managed to endure similar circumstances. But if Frankl's experience is what draws Ukrainians to logotherapy, it's his philosophy of responsibility that makes them stay.

Because when you're faced with a mortal threat on a daily basis, you either forget everything human inside you and become ready to claw your way to survival at any cost — or you realize that your life, in the grand scheme, may not matter as much as what you leave behind. What you pass on becomes more important than how long you live.

This is how a new wartime ethic begins to take shape. Things that are everyday occurrences for most of the world become moral decisions: "Can I afford to eat out, or is it better to donate that money to someone who needs it more?" "Can I go on vacation abroad, or is that insensitive to those who can't sleep because of the shelling?" "Can I post a photo with a loved one on social media, or will that hurt someone who lost theirs to the war?"

To preserve our humanity, we are forced to cultivate an almost hyper-sensitivity, constantly cross-checking our choices against the experiences of those less fortunate.

And maybe it is precisely this cultivated sensitivity that makes it especially painful to watch how, beyond Ukraine, logotherapy seems to be shifting from a philosophy of responsibility to a form of escapism. Of course, one can understand the reluctance to explore themes that are too painful (though it is strange to see such avoidance in the professional psychological community). But recently it seems we're no longer just dealing with avoidance — we're witnessing an intentional disengagement.

The recently announced 5th World Congress of Logotherapy is perhaps the clearest example of this. Regardless of the personal merits and qualifications involved, the fact that one of the organizers is based in the aggressor state makes Ukrainian participation in the event morally unacceptable. Moreover, the official website of the congress is hosted on servers located in that country — creating technical barriers that make even accessing basic information about the event difficult for many.

And so one begins to wonder: is this just an unfortunate oversight, or should it be read as a signal — that Ukrainians no longer have a place in the global logotherapy community?

In logotherapy training, much attention is given to Frankl's personal story, though the focus tends to remain on the horrors of the Holocaust and his experience during imprisonment. But what survivors faced after liberation is usually overlooked. And yet, it is precisely in those memories that the true horror of what happened is revealed — because they help explain how the Holocaust was even possible.

Frankl writes: “Bitterness was caused by countless small things he [the freed prisoner] encountered in his former hometown. Upon returning, he found that in many places he was greeted with little more than a shrug and a few clichéd phrases. He felt bitterness and asked himself why he had endured it all. When he heard the same things almost everywhere: 'We knew nothing about it,' 'We suffered too,' — he asked himself, 'Can’t they say anything better?'”

These phrases, heard by survivors, sound as cruel as they are false. How could people not have known? And if that were true, how did those who risked their lives to save Jews during the war find out? Later, those people heard the same questions — not from Jews, but from their own children. And their children were left apologizing for their parents’ silence.

One Ukrainian writer, reflecting on the phenomenon of newer generations apologizing for the crimes of the past, wrote that perhaps “this is the Christian essence of forgiveness: the innocent are the ones who ask. The guilty wouldn’t ask, and they can’t be forgiven.”

The guilty usually insist on their innocence and claim they knew nothing — forgetting to add that they only didn’t know because they had learned to look away in advance.

Of course, the logic that only the innocent apologize is warped and damaging — and Frankl understood this. That’s why he spoke of individual responsibility: that each person who comes into this world has the task of making it better than it was before they arrived. Having gone through his own painful path, Frankl built his theory in response to the flaws he saw in the world around him, hoping to give that world a way to heal. But whether he succeeded in doing so remains an open question.

In this context, it’s worth paying special attention to the phrase “We suffered too.” How can one compare the suffering of someone who gradually lost everything they lived for — with the discomfort of those who continued to live their lives, only slightly less comfortably? Frankl wrote about how painful this comparison was, likely referring to himself. But he never spoke about what it cost him to overcome that pain — to dedicate his life to helping those very people.

And yet, if we now live in a reality where only the innocent ask for forgiveness, then it somehow becomes “logical” that the burden of compassion and understanding must fall on the one who suffered.

And so now, Ukrainians — despite all the losses and pain of this ongoing war — are expected to be mindful of the feelings of everyone who has been even mildly inconvenienced by it, even if the war hasn’t touched their lives directly. We are supposed to sympathize with the “fatigue” of the peaceful world from hearing about our war, and to avoid talking about death when others want to celebrate life.

But here’s the question: could our care for others’ feelings become the very reason why so many are again allowed to look away — and later, just like before, say they knew nothing about what was happening right in front of them?

Of course, it would be naive to think that this letter could change the current state of things. But not writing it would mean giving space to the favorite excuse of indifference — allowing the phrase “We didn’t know” to be used once again in the future.

So, this letter is addressed to anyone who reads it — but it is dedicated to the generations to come, before whom we, like everyone else, will one day have to answer. And when they ask whether we did anything to call for responsibility in the face of the challenges humanity faces today, we will be able to say that we did.

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