

Toronto Meaningful Living Group Meetings: Lesson Two

Sunday, June 19, 2011; 3:00 – 5:00 PM

Brief summary of the second Meetup meeting – by Jessica

In attendance were: Lynn, Milly, David, Lee, Ming, Bushra, Tasneem, Rob, Steve, Melissa, Jessica, Emily, Renata, Alice, Julia, Christine, Jenny, Wing, John, Simone, Paul, Lilian.

Announcements – Lilian

- Two parallel meetings are scheduled every other week: Sunday at 3pm, & Tuesday at 7pm (the same materials will be covered). Jennifer has posted the dates on Meetup.
- These Meetup meetings are sponsored by The International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM; www.meaning.ca). We would appreciate it if you would become a member of INPM.
- Confidentiality: Lilian reminded the participants that personal issues shared during Meetup meetings must be regarded as confidential.
- Handouts: Previous handouts are also available on the side table.
- Free literature and information materials are on the foyer table. Help yourselves.
- Snacks this week were generously provided by Lynn Ji, Julia, and Lilian.

LESSON TWO: Human Agency and Free Will: Blessing or Curse? Led by Dr. Paul Wong

- Referring to his time teaching at Trent University, he states that the purpose of liberal education is to train students in the intelligent use of freedom. Freedom is a blessing only if we can use it wisely and responsibly: using it to do the right thing and becoming the persons we were meant to be. Abusing freedom will bring destruction to self and others. Running away from freedom and responsibility will handicap one's self. Therefore, the focus of the today's lesson is on the responsible and wise use of personal freedom.
- He poses the question, "How free are you?" and suggests that there are at least four basic types of freedom: 1) physical freedom, 2) psychological freedom, 3) spiritual freedom, and 4) political freedom. By way of demonstration, he asked one group member to stand up and jump (the group member complied with this request) and then asked the participant whether he did it out of his free will or external pressure.
- He talks about how the constant moral combat (not "mortal"!) going on in all of us, citing the Apostle Paul as an example (the evil he doesn't want to do, he keeps doing), and the unsuccessful keeping of New Year resolutions.

- To demonstrate how much people are controlled by situational factors, he described three sets of well-known scientific studies: Ash's Conformity Experiment, Milgram's Obedience Experiment, and the Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment. But he also pointed out that a small percentage of the participants had the courage to do what was right and said no to authority, temptation, and corruption. He also cited the heroes who risked their own lives to protect public properties during the Vancouver riots and Jewish people during Nazi occupation of Europe (i.e., Corrie Ten Boom).
- He then explains Viktor Frankl's Three Basic Tenets of Logotherapy: 1) Freedom of choice, 2) Will to meaning, and 3) Meaning of life, emphasizing that the "freedom attitude," which cannot be taken away no matter how oppressive and hopeless the situation.
- He then discusses B.F. Skinner's deterministic claims, that we are controlled by genes and the environment (e.g., reinforcement contingency) and that freedom and personal autonomy are illusions. He then describes other types of determinism. His conclusion: In spite of the numerous forces beyond human control, we still have the gift of free will, and can still exercise human agency.
- Paul says that deep down, the human heart yearns for freedom. He describes four historical events that demonstrate this universal desire: The French revolution, the American experiment, the Inspiration of the Statue of Liberty, and the worldwide democratic movement. He also describes the everyday experience of psychological resistance as additional evidence for the human need for internal control.
- He then reads a quotation from Eric Fromm that describes the meaning of freedom for modern man. Paul expands on it, saying that the cost of freedom from traditional authorities is a sense of lostness, confusion, and alienation, which creates existential anxiety (having to make one's own decisions and find one's own way in a chaotic and uncertain world). He says that because this can be a frightening state of mind, some find refuge by surrendering their freedom to some authoritarian systems (e.g., cults, Hitler, Jonestown) in order to regain a false sense of security and belonging.
- He then moves from escape from freedom to abuse of freedom, citing the Story of Adam and Eve (briefly summarized by a member of the group). He points out that this Biblical account reveals the fundamental truth of our creatureliness and finiteness. The command to not eat from a particular tree illustrates the universal law that there is always a limit to human freedom. When humans try to play god and violate their creature limitations, the consequence can be disastrous. Human beings are simply not capable of having unlimited freedom. Freedom is a blessing only when we recognise the limits of freedom and exercise our personal autonomy in a responsible way.
- He talks about the implications of free will: We are both moral agents and executive agents. We are held morally accountable for our decisions and actions. As adults, we are also expected to manage our own lives – we are the CEO of own lives. In a limited sense, people are masters of their fates and captains of their souls, because their choices determine their destiny. He concludes by emphasizing that only we can decide to make our own lives better; no one can make this decision for us. Oprah Winfrey's popular appeal is based on her message to empower women: You can take control of your own life and you have the power to make it better.

Discussion of the assigned exercise: Control Attribution Scale (CAS)

Paul discusses the meaning of the Control Attribution Scale (the exercise for this week). A few members shared how they had scored and we talked about how many people attribute control of their lives to things outside of themselves (e.g., I'm miserable because of other people). Paul, using the example of someone struggling with an addiction, emphasizes that therapists cannot help drug addicts if they don't want to change. Successful psychotherapy typically results in a gradual switch from external control to internal control in the clients. The group discussed their thoughts and experiences related to these ideas on external and internal control.

We concluded the formal part of the meeting with a reminder of our next meeting time (the Sunday July 3rd, at 3pm), and members stayed around to chat and enjoy refreshments.