

# Seeking Meaning Beyond Trauma

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



For many, the search for genuine meaning remains a desirous life-long pursuit. There are many expressions of meaning. How do we know when our lives can actually be characterized as meaningful? On a very fundamental level, searching for meaning places your life in a context of meaning. That is, you know what it means to lose meaning and to reacquire it.

An old definition of the word *meaning* is “to name”. When we name ourselves, we are attributing meaning to our lives. We can name ourselves as lovers of apple turnovers or as someone dedicated to supporting others in maximizing their human potential. The more devotion we get behind the name and the more the name points to serving something larger than ourselves, then the greater the depth and breadth of the meaning created. We might say that the richness of a meaningful life reflects what truly matters. Some ways to lean into the direction of creating meaning include identifying what you desire from life, acknowledging what life is asking of you, knowing your gifts and how they might best serve and knowing and living what you love.

Being able to generate meaning that offers direction and fulfillment depends upon an open and workable relationship with ambiguity or uncertainty, as well as taking action that consummates the vision we hold. The credibility of the previous statement is affirmed when we

are willing to get honest about the mystery, unpredictability and insecurity of life, as well so many of the dynamics that generate real meaning. Some of these dynamics shrouded in ambiguity include love, freedom, justice, courage, emotional intimacy, wisdom and compassion. Many Indigenous cultures Initiate young people into the mystery of life by a ritual, which anthropologists refer to as the ritual of the *Mysterium Tremendum* or Great Mystery. We continue to insist that the delusion of the right education, right bank account, right job, right spouse and neighborhood will make life certain, predictable and secure. Those things can create a measure of comfort, but that can't strip life of its mystery.

Beyond a culture that does not seem to be helping us to have the kind of relationship with ambiguity that is capable of generating meaning, there are many distractions along the way. The attachment to immediate gratification, needing to impress, addiction, arrested development and hubris can easily block the pursuit of meaning. However, early trauma, especially complex trauma where there are ongoing violations to a child's physical, sexual or emotional boundaries, or some premature loss can substantially inhibit an ability to generate authentic meaning. Trauma places the nervous system on alert for possible threats to safety. Being driven by a hijacked amygdala, children can easily move into adulthood vigilantly patrolling the environment in support of surviving.

### Literalized or Lost

My work with early trauma has shown that there are at least two significant ways that trauma can become an impediment to being comfortable relating to ambiguity. The first group I identify as “literalized” as they move away from ambiguity by reducing their experience to concrete information gathered by the five senses. The second group I identify as “lost” since they become lost in ambiguity, unable to bring meaning through real action. Let’s look more closely at the group coping with ambiguity by literalizing their experiences.

### Literalizing the Ambiguous

This group of survivors seems to have the pre-disposition of gathering information in concrete terms via the five senses. Hence, they can be defined as concrete learners. (See Anthony Gregor’s *Learning Typology Model*) Meaning is attributed to what is seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled. Negotiating emotions, values, abstract principles and diverse beliefs can be challenging. Black and white thinking places abstract considerations in neat boxes, missing the nuances of the lived experience.

As tolerance and acceptance for the unknown wanes, so does the need for immediate information increase. Since these adults were likely abused by family authority figures, any lack of clarity expressed by a contemporary authority figure will be immediately called into question. Typically, there is a receptivity to any charismatic leader exuberantly announcing opinions, regardless of how factual they are. As a result, conspiracy theories become extremely appealing.

In a recent article in *Psychology Today*, Dr. David Ludden points out that in a confused world people seek answers that comfort us and fit into our world view, answers that offer a sense of control and security as well as an opportunity to maintain a positive self-image aligning themselves with those who passionately claim to possess the truth. A history of complex trauma greatly amplifies the need to feel comforted by a particular world view, to have a sense of control and security as well as to have a positive self-image. This makes folks who

suffered from chronic trauma especially receptive to conspiracy theories.

The consequence of not being able to cope with ambiguity is captured in the following by James Hollis: “Living with ambiguity, not being too attached to the old ‘certainties’, and learning what life needs to tell us whether or not we think we are up to it are, frankly, the only ways to grow, become more capacious, live a larger journey.” When we are threatened by “what life needs to tell us” because it is ambiguous, we can easily sacrifice living in a larger journey.

When the ability to hold ambiguity and learn from it is compromised, several significant consequences result, leaving us living in a small journey.

- 1) There is a rigid attachment to black and white thinking with little tolerance for the grey of life. The most significant aspects of life come in grey: justice, love, freedom, responsibility, compassion, courage, integrity, morality and a maturity spirituality – just to name a few.
- 2) Since the above life experiences can be described as ambiguous meaning-makers, any adverse response to ambiguity can seriously mitigate the ability to create meaning in one’s life.
- 3) It becomes challenging to live life on life’s terms since life tends to unfold ambiguously by way of mystery and unpredictability.
- 4) Right and wrong thinking tends to seriously weaken a capacity to work with diverse beliefs, values and needs.
- 5) The essential ingredients of *curiosity*, *wonder*, and *imagination* that support a comfort with the unknown are muted. They are suspended in favor of maintaining a reliable surveillance of the environment. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk addresses the impact of chronic trauma has upon imagination. “When people are compulsively and consistently pulled back into the past, to the last time they felt intense involvement and deep emotion, they suffer from a failure of imagination, a loss of mental flexibility. Without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach.”

- 6) Having clear response to the dynamics occurring in an intimate emotional relationship are compromised. In the absence of immediate and concrete answers to ambiguous emotional issues, participants simply feel overwhelmed.

### Making Peace with Ambiguity

Making peace with ambiguity for adults who suffered from chronic developmental trauma will call for patience and receiving viable support. Here are several recommendations.

- 1) Learn to regulate your nervous system by first being able to distinguish a regulated nervous system from an unregulated one. Here are a few indicators of dysregulation: increased heart rate, shallow breathing, agitation, sweaty palms, increased muscle tension, becoming aggressive or withdrawn, an inability to identify what one needs. extreme thinking – everyone, no one, never, and always.
- 2) It is critical to interrupt any shaming or ridiculing thoughts about your unregulated nervous system. It can help to recall that an unregulated nervous system once assisted you in your survival of childhood.
- 3) Physical movement by exercising or taking a walk can help to interrupt a freeze reaction.
- 4) Focus on both your external sensation especially the visual and touch. Visualize the colors, shapes and textures in your immediate environment. Focus on internal sensations such as pulsation above the eyes, tight gut, increased heart rate, tense jaw, and flushed cheeks.
- 5) Upon reaching a measure of calm, acknowledge that you are learning to face ambiguity and the accompanying tension while letting yourself know that you are safe.
- 6) Give yourself the option of a physical boundary in order to support the feeling of safety.
- 7) Close your eyes and visualize yourself in a place where you feel comfortably free, courageous, intimate or some other positive ambiguous

situation. Hold the image for a minute or so and then begin to track internal sensation.

- 8) Speak to trusted others about your apprenticeship with ambiguity. Tell them how it's going, the challenges and the accomplishments.
- 9) Most somatic therapies can be quite helpful, I especially recommend Somatic Experiencing and EMDR.
- 10) With the right support and a measure of grace, the concrete learner may be able to find enough safety to be guided by the following from the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

### Lost in Ambiguity

This second group of survivors get lost in ambiguity in order to move away from some hyperarousal or perceived threat. They take up residency in abstract considerations. The neuropsychologist Peter Levine points out that this psychological move into abstraction is called dissociation. "Dissociation is one of the most classic and subtle symptoms of trauma. It is also one of the most mysterious. The mechanism through which it occurs is less easily explained than the experience of it or the role it plays. In trauma, dissociation seems to be a favored means of enabling a person to endure experiences that are at the moment beyond endurance – like being attacked by a lion, a rapist, an oncoming car, or a surgeon's knife. Dissociation interrupts the continuity of the felt sense."

Levine's notion of the "felt sense" can be understood as an awareness and connection to what is occurring in the body, such as internal sensations and emotions. Bodily experiences are translated into concepts, distancing the individual from what is happening in the body.

Curious enough, while traumatized concrete learners claim they are only bodies, the

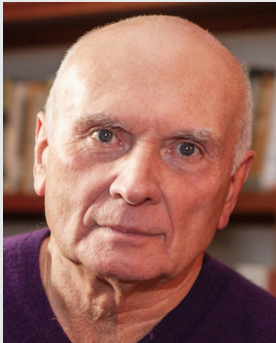
traumatized abstract learners claim they are only minds. This latter group needs to find safety while feeling their emotions and taking action that reflects what they truly love. Let's look more closely at what happens to folks lost in ambiguity.

- 1) Because being present in the here and now is mostly a bodily experience, they can easily miss what is occurring in the moment.
  - 2) Meaning is both a capacity to relate to the ambiguous, crucial elements of the human condition, coupled with the ability express them with real action. Meaning is compromised because of the loss of action.
  - 3) When emotions are translated into thoughts, it becomes difficult to feel and identify emotional needs resulting in a diminished capacity for emotional intimacy.
  - 4) Personal identity tends to become diffused amidst the airiness of conceptual activity. There is a loss of an embodied sense of who they are, their strengths, their accomplishments and what they truly desire.
  - 5) Engaging in the rhythm of a relational dynamic is hindered as they are challenged to feel empathy for the other while connecting to a felt sense of what is important for them to communicate.
  - 6) Typically, there is impairment to an ability to connect to instinct, which offers a significant source of information. Levine suggests, "Instincts, therefore, are about movement – how to find food, shelter and a mate, as well as how to protect ourselves. These responses need no learning. They are hardwired in the service of our survival."
- 1) Aromatherapy can be helpful to awaken the sensation of smell
  - 2) Therapeutic massage
  - 3) Reflexology
  - 4) Movement practices such as gentle yoga, tai-chi and dance
  - 5) Playing music and noticing either the body's response and/or what emotions are stimulated.
  - 6) Expressing emotions to trusted others, even if it is simply what feels pleasant or unpleasant
  - 7) Creating soothing images of your body in scenes that feel nurturing, comforting and soothing along with tracking internal sensation that follow holding such images such as a slow rhythmic breath, expansiveness in the chest or warmth in the cheeks.
  - 8) Carrying a touchstone which could be an actual stone, a medallion or any object holding sentimental value, reminding you of your commitment to let go of being lost in ambiguity and found in your body
  - 9) Telling the story of returning to your body to a trusted support system
  - 10) Employing some form of somatic psychotherapy

### Making Peace with the Body

Let's explore some ways that traumatized abstract learners can safely return to their bodies, relinquishing some measure of the comfort of being lost in ambiguity. It will mean learning to feel safe with both external and internal bodily experiences.

We are meaning makers. Although trauma can inhibit your capacity to make meaning, it need not be totally prohibitive. It may be that your innate predisposition to learn will create a particular relationship with ambiguity. Concrete learners who know how to take action, can learn to safely relate to ambiguity, adding to the richness of what it means to live a meaningful life. Abstract learners can learn to have a felt sense of their bodies and take real action reflective of being somatically informed. Each group is asked to live the questions: What courage is life asking of me? And what external and internal resources do I need in order to accept life's invitation?



**PAUL DUNION** earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.

