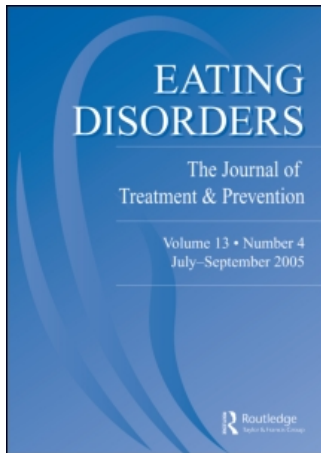


This article was downloaded by:[Nye, Stacey]  
On: 22 June 2008  
Access Details: [subscription number 794286179]  
Publisher: Taylor & Francis  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Eating Disorders

### The Journal of Treatment & Prevention

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713666342>

The Therapist's Voice, Judith Ruskay Rabinor, Editor

Stacey Nye<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> North Shore Center, LLC, Mequon, Wisconsin, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2008

To cite this Article: Nye, Stacey (2008) 'The Therapist's Voice, Judith Ruskay Rabinor, Editor', *Eating Disorders*, 16:4, 358 — 361

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10640260802116041  
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10640260802116041>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## The Therapist's Voice

JUDITH RUSKAY RABINOR, Editor

### **Tragic Optimism and the Search for Meaning: Enhancing Recovery in Psychotherapy**

STACEY NYE

*North Shore Center, LLC, Mequon, Wisconsin, USA*

Whoever has a reason for living endures almost any mode of life.  
Nietzsche

Abby, a 19-year-old-college sophomore, was my last patient on a particularly exhausting day. We had been meeting for about 8 weeks and she was still bingeing nightly. She used the session to vent her frustrations about not being farther along in her recovery. "Why me?" She asked imploringly throughout the hour. "Why not someone without goals and dreams?"

Finally, irritated by her helplessness and impatience, I sat forward in my chair and said to her (with a vehemence that I don't usually exhibit), "You can give up if you want. You can throw up your hands, admit defeat and decide to let your eating disorder get in the way of all your plans. Or, you can decide that there are reasons you are going through this right now that you may not currently understand. You can choose to believe that there may be meaning in your suffering, and your eating disorder may be part of your path, an essential step in realizing your future."

She stared at me wide eyed.

Uh oh, I thought. "Did I come on too strong?"

"No," she responded hesitantly, "I'm thinking about what you just said."

The session ended shortly thereafter. I berated myself the rest of the night, hoping I hadn't damaged what felt like a new and still tentative therapeutic relationship. I wondered whether she would return the following week.

---

Address correspondence to Stacey Nye, Ph.D., FAED, North Shore Center, LLC, 10303 North Port Washington Road, #203, Mequon, WI 53092. E-mail: [staceynye@sbcglobal.net](mailto:staceynye@sbcglobal.net)

Abby did return, exuding a calm and confidence I had never seen in her before, and announced, "I thought about what you said the whole week and decided that you were right. Plus, the passion with which you spoke really had an impact on me. I have been saying positive things to myself, eating better, and I haven't binged since."

In my mind, I wiped the sweat from my brow with relief. I lucked out this time. The timing of that intervention had been based more on my exhaustion than the therapeutic needs of my patient. But, in reality, I often encourage patients to consider that their illness has an ultimate meaning or purpose. In fact, personal experience with discovering meaning and opportunities in suffering resulted in my own enhanced resilience, spiritual transformation and achievement; so much so that the concept is now at the heart of my psychotherapy practice.

Six years ago I lost all of my hair secondary to the autoimmune disorder Alopecia Areata. In my search for a cure I pursued New Age/Eastern practices when Western medicine failed to make my hair grow. While educating myself, I began meeting people who believed in auras, past lives and spirits. Once a true cynic, I believed in nothing that I could not see. Yet I started having vivid dreams, reading books about reincarnation, and consulting Reiki healers and spiritualists. At first I was frightened. It felt like a wall had come down around me. As soon as I stopped fighting it, though, a calm came over me that I had never experienced prior. I found it reassuring to believe that I knew my loved ones in past lives and I probably would see them again in future ones. It was a comfort to know that my ancestors follow me around in my day to day life, offering me their silent support and guidance. I felt a new connection to family, friends, patients and even my dog, which was intense and compelling. I even had a fresh appreciation of the present moment, whether it was helping my kids with homework or watching the final season of *The Sopranos*. Years of therapy for the superficial and neurotic ails of my life so far had failed to uncover this buried treasure of my new, bald existence. This spiritual rebirth gave my life greater meaning. It enriched me personally and professionally in ways that likely would never have happened had I not lost my hair.

I was first introduced to this attitude of *tragic optimism* by Viktor Frankl, Viennese psychiatrist, who endured years of unspeakable horror in Nazi death camps. During, and partly because of his suffering, Dr. Frankl developed an approach to psychotherapy, Logotherapy, which illustrates how terror can be transformed into a positive force for change. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (Frankl, 1959) Frankl described the process by which discovering the meaning to suffering helps one to not only survive it, but use it to create achievement and triumph.

Frankl explained that a crisis can be an opportunity for a spiritual rebirth and a discovery of meaning for existence. Although suffering is not a necessary condition for meaning, it tends to trigger the quest. As long as we are suffering we remain in a state of tension between what actually is on the

one hand and what ought to be on the other hand. As long as we suffer we remain psychically alive. Suffering guards us from apathy, from psychic rigor mortis. We mature in suffering, grow because of it, and it makes us richer and stronger as a result.

Suffering is inevitable; our patients come in already with symptoms. Our immediate responsibility is to do what we can to alleviate their suffering. In addition to alleviating suffering, however, we can help our patients to re-perceive his or her situation, to bring to consciousness the idea that meaning can be found, and it is their responsibility to recognize and fulfill that meaning.

Tragic optimism can be energizing and empowering. We alone determine whether we give in to conditions or stand up to them. We alone have the capacity to creatively turn life's hardships into something positive or constructive by turning them into achievement and accomplishment. Since losing my hair I have presented at three professional conferences, published articles and used the models of tragic optimism and the search for meaning to further connect with and enhance my clients' recovery.

Natalie, a 17-year-old bulimic, did not come into therapy searching for meaning. She was irritable, depressed and anxious. She was also intent on losing weight, staying thin and keeping up with all of the other blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauties at her all-girls school. As therapy progressed, and the real Natalie began to emerge, I found myself wondering about the persistence of and ultimate meaning in her illness. Natalie had everything: loving parents, attentive boyfriend and dynamic personality. She was bright, engaging, and beautiful. Everyone loved her, including me, as she was the model patient-insightful, attentive in sessions, and grateful for my help. Yet, she continued to stay out past curfew, get caught drinking, and "puke her guts out."

One day, though, she surprised me. She arrived in my office and announced, "I'm going to work harder at getting better. Then I'm going to go to school and become a therapist." What, I wondered had prompted this transformation?

The day before, when leaving her dietician's office, she saw a young girl sitting in the waiting room looking miserable. A few years younger than herself and quite thin; she knew immediately that she must have an eating disorder too. She fought the compulsion to yell, "No, not you too. You're too young and you don't want to live like I do." This had become a defining moment for Natalie, in terms of her bulimia as well as her life.

Prior to therapy Natalie was directionless. She was a good girl who did what everyone told her to do. She got good grades, helped out at home, and didn't cause her parents any trouble. But she felt empty and identityless, and her eating disorder both filled her up and gave her a sense of direction and self. Confronting the young girl in the dietician's office forced her to face up to her own lost and empty life. It energized her to discover a meaning in her illness and course for her life that she did not know had existed prior to this point. I emphasized for her in the session that she may

not have even made this discovery had she not been in a dietician's office that day. She agreed. Her illness had given her the opportunity to uncover this meaning, a buried treasure within.

We all have this within us, this buried treasure. Frankl thought that we could discover it by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. Illness gives people the "opportunity" for suffering. It is our job to help our clients comprehend their responsibility to seize these opportunities and discover ultimate meaning in their suffering. And, by discovering meaning, recovery is enhanced and limitless growth beyond that becomes possible.

## CONCLUSION

Whether or not it is true, that our symptoms have meaning, that things are *meant to be*, or *happen for a reason*, is almost irrelevant. If I believe this to be so, I act in a way that makes it so for me and my patients. And, as with any good self-fulfilling prophecy, if I am looking for evidence of meaning, I am likely to find it. Chip Brown concurs in his bestselling book *Afterwards, You're a Genius* (Brown, 1998):

*. . . the idea of intrinsic meaningfulness is central to the metaphysics of healing. Maybe the very effort to live by such a code creates its own meaning. . . . You learn to pretend that everything happens for a reason, and meaning appears, like magic, out of nothing. . . . Maybe it is (crazy), or maybe it is fox crazy. Maybe there is also real magic in magical thinking (pg. 383).*

Viktor Frankl firmly believed that meaning in life was an effective antidote to anxiety and fear, and that adversities and suffering become more bearable when one has something worthy living and dying for. He was convinced that this philosophy helped him and others in the concentration camps survive. Discovering meaning in my life (the spiritual awakening that evolved through my pursuit of better health) became an effective antidote to the suffering I experienced as a result of losing my hair. I am convinced that I needed to go through this traumatic experience in order to have these doors open to me, and my personal and professional life has been forever enriched and transformed because of it. Furthermore, by helping my patients search for meaning, I am enhancing their recovery by showing them the opportunity to discover their own buried treasure and ultimately live their lives to the fullest.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, C. (1998). *Afterwards, You're a Genius*. NY: Riverhead Books.  
 Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.