Challenge Paper: Rethinking Meaning, Purpose, Identity and Spirituality

"You are what you seek."

"Life does not owe you happiness, it offers you meaning."
Victor Frankl.

Purpose of this Document

This document outlines a set of challenges for the future of meaning, purpose, identity and spiritualty, focusing not just in the western world but also global issues and contexts across the world, society and the life span. In doing so, the intention is to establish a basis for an inspired conversation and journey of change for the better. This paper draws upon a journey that many people have been involved in, from many different contexts, throughout history– philosophers, educators, researchers, colleagues in professional organizations and universities, colleagues who work with students every day in classrooms around the world, colleagues in health services and institutions, colleagues in the business sector, social justice, science, marketing, commerce, media, the arts – people in every sector of society, including faith and spiritual paths. What this document seeks to capture are the issues, challenges and opportunities individuals, educators, health workers, institutions, governments, social justice, commerce, business, communities at large, the arts, and science, policy makers and humanity now need to address.

Humans are meaning-seekers. Meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality are crucial and oftentimes implicit in every area of our lives, from birth to death, for each and every one of us, in every part of the world and across all societies. These concepts are intimately connected in terms of our functioning as healthy human beings and are crucial to our health, happiness, fulfillment and wellbeing, throughout life. Hence this paper groups them together.

In our world today little attention is paid to the significance of our lives, i.e., to our sense of meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality. We are taught, and incentivized, to focus on 'profit' making, on competition, to be caught up in 'issues' such as wars & conflict, to amass possessions, to create wealth and to cultivate a desirable body/image. Are we caught in glamour? These foci are creating illness and distress for many human beings across the world.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore how to raise our awareness of, embed and make explicit, the significance of meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality (MPIS) within every aspect of our lives. To take education as an example: How do we educate students about MPIS in primary and secondary education (as opposed to just religion)? How do we ensure that, on their journey through the education system, active attention is given to each learner's sense of meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality? This remains a challenge, and is highly problematic and politicized, in many countries. Education (at all levels), and the communities in which we live, remain the principal wellsprings of meaning for all of us as we grow and develop. These contexts provide essential skills and social engagement around our identity, the meaning and purpose of our lives and our spirituality. MPIS is, to an extent that we rarely acknowledge, the foundation for everything else we do as a society, in education, health, businesses, commerce and government.

The Key Challenge Being Addressed in this Paper

This paper does not address all of the challenges we face across the globe in creating, fostering developing and maintaining meaning purpose, identity and spirituality in every aspect of society across the lifespan. Instead it focuses on a number of critical issues/areas that will have an impact on the daily lives of those in various contexts across the world, such as education, health, government, social justice, politics, business, commerce, sport, the arts and culture.

Its focuses strongly on (a) the need for a commitment to and from a **variety** of individuals, governments, public services, private businesses and enterprises, and on (b) the need for **shared** principles, ethics and understanding to drive a variety of policies, systems, and practice at local, national and international levels.

The paper is informed by a 60-year personal and professional journey, focused on observing, working with, harnessing and witnessing the health, happiness and wellbeing of individuals and organizations who have struggled/wrestled with, and yet developed a grounded, strong and healthy sense of, their life's meaning, purpose, sense of identity and their own spirituality—across the lifespan, in various

sectors of society, around the world. To summarize all that experience in three bullets, the challenge we need to address here is:

- Raising and developing **awareness** of how individual, group, collective, community, cultural, and lifespan/life-stage issues relate to life's meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality.
- Building and creating the adaptive, relational, collaborative **capacities** of each individual, community and organization, with regards to MPIS.
- **Responding** to the specific needs of **individuals** within the particular organizational frameworks and societal contexts within which they work and live.

The Sponsor of this Paper

This paper has been written by Sarajane Aris[1] who has spent close to forty years working in and around the UK National Health Service, and particularly within mental health. She has formerly worked as Head of Adult Clinical Psychology Services in Derbyshire UK, Director of Policy for the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Clinical Psychology, as an Associate for the Care Quality Commission, and as the Mental Health Lead for Avon Gloucester and Wiltshire's Strategic Health Authority.

She was the national lead for spirituality within the BPS and was the psychology representative on the National Mental Health Spirituality Forum for over 10 years. She founded the Transpersonal Network of Clinical and Counseling Psychologists in UK. She has written and contributed various chapters on spirituality for a number of books over the last 30 years, including her most recent publication with Stephen Murgatroyd, *Beyond Resilience: From Mastery to Mystery* (2017). This book focuses on meaning and purpose.

As part of her current role on the Leadership and Management Committee for the Division of Clinical Psychology, she has recently set up a national mentoring scheme. She is currently offering mentoring to women leaders across the world in the not-for-profit sector (via the Aspire International Leadership Foundation), and for clinical psychologists within the BPS. She is also working with her local MP (a UK cabinet member) on how to create a culture of compassion, authenticity and transparency within government and politics.

Assumptions Behind This Paper

So as to facilitate a conversation – both online and in-person, certain assumptions have been made:

1. **A sense meaning purpose, identity and spirituality (MPIS) are core/essential/critical requirements for an individual and society to function effectively and healthily**, and contributes to longevity, wellbeing and happiness. MPIS are at the heart of our functioning and wellbeing as human beings. We are a 'meaning making' species (Frankl, 2006). Therefore, attention needs to be given to this in all areas/sectors of society, in both the developed and developing parts of the world. MPIS therefore needs to be treated/seen as inherent, salient, inclusive, relevant and explicit in all aspects and sectors of society, globally, across cultures and across the lifespan. MPIS can be developed anywhere, at any moment in time in society, such as in a school, the playground, at home, in business, technology, across the lifespan, but it requires awareness. Schools, home life, local communities, relationships are all contexts in which MPIS are developed and forged, and therefore make a difference. Our sense of MPIS will change, develop and be expressed differently across the lifespan- our needs and understanding may be different at different life stages, and may depend on the people we connect with, who influences our thinking and who we forge relationships with during our life journey.

2. **The significance of developing MPIS has been lost in society. This therefore requires the awareness, recognition and respect of the public in all domains, contexts and cultures across the world.** Quite often, meaning, purpose and identity in particular (or lack of them) "just happen". We rarely apply deliberate focus upon their significance, and rarely cultivate explicit awareness of the importance of them to our own wellbeing.

3. **The 'thread' that weaves through individual, collective and global meaning, purpose and identity is our implicit and inherent sense of spirituality.** Whilst this may be expressed differently in different parts of the world and in different faiths, cultures or religions, what links us globally, is that we are inherently spiritual beings. In this, we are 'one'. It is a universal aspect of our being—something of ourselves that we can identify in every other person everywhere. It can motivate us and enable us to link in many ways to others and do something for the rest of the world in places that require our contributions. Spirituality is an aspect of our being that we may not be consciously aware of, or able to make sense of, until

we turn our attention to it. For some individuals this may not happen until later life, or until facing death.

4. **All people in all sectors and organizations across the world should be enabled/encouraged to develop a healthy sense of MPIS, across the lifespan, in a culturally relevant and appropriate way**. Space and time needs to be devoted to this. This should be a major driver for public policy in every country and culture with respect to health and wellbeing. While there are many non-profit and for-profit organizations dedicated to this work, systematic investment and focused action on reducing loneliness, expanding compassion and creating opportunities for all to engage in the exploration of meaning need to be created.

5. **Different people from different backgrounds and cultures across the globe and lifespan require different supports to develop a sense of MPIS at different stages in their lives**. People with special needs, from different cultures and backgrounds with different histories, the young, adolescents, those in mid-life, the elderly…all require different kinds of support to enable them to develop and renew a healthy sense of MPIS appropriate to their different context, stage and culture.

These are some "big" assumptions and are clearly open to challenge. They are not meant to be exhaustive. They are meant to be indicative of where **I'm** coming from as we get together to create ambitious actions to address the MPIS challenge. And they are meant to help you react and clarify where **you're** coming from, as we get together to tackle this challenge together.

The Big Issues

Ultimately the essence of who we are is spiritual. We are all connected. To re-iterate, we are 'meaning-seeking' beings who like to make sense of what happens to us. If we are prevented from doing this, or are unable to find meaning, this can be a root of stress, distress and unhappiness and can ultimately lead to a sense of alienation and ill health. When we look at the critical issues facing us in more detail, the issues outlined below appear to be some of the most important. They provide a starting point for a dialogue and for the actions I suggest we take:

1. Changes in the Sources of Meaning, Identity and Spirituality: Historically, sources of MPIS have related to and have their roots in relationships, family, gender, sexuality, culture, work, technology and community across the life cycle/span and across cultures. We will look at some of these briefly below, focusing on changes to these meaning sources:

a) Relationships: while meaning is unique to each of us- the result of our own personal journey- it is fundamentally about our relationship to ourselves, others and the wider cosmos. Social Networking research demonstrates the key to healthy functioning is a good support network, meaningful connections to other people and a broad sense of spirituality. Without meaningful relationships, research shows that a person is vulnerable to mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety and suicide. With the pressures facing people in the world today, with work related pressures, and social media, **meaningful** connections are reducing. This impacts on a person's ability to make and sustain these relationships, across the life span.

The nature and function of human relationships, particularly for younger generations, across the world is changing dramatically with the emergence of social media platforms. While many young people have many social network connections, they appear to be more isolated and less connected in meaningful relationships.

b) Family: 'What families 'look like', how and when they form, what they do, how they feel, and the challenges they face, are in many ways, far different from the experiences of earlier generations'.(Meg Luxton, researcher, York University, Ontario. 2011 study *Changing Families. New Understandings)*

There are a variety of reasons for this:

- Divorce is now more common-33% of first marriages end in divorce and 16% of those who then remarry, divorce.

- 1.64 million families in Canada are single parent families.

- 77,880 same-sex couples lived in Canada in 2017, 24,370 of them were married. This is three times the number of married same sex couples counted in 2006. Same sex couples in general grew in number by 61 per cent over the same period.

- In 2007 the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that more than two persons could be parent to a child- the biological mother and father and the mother's female partner or father's male partner.

Other factors that are also affecting the nature of families are the practice of parenting, the growing role of care givers and grandparents. There is a shift in family dynamics as a result of the nature of the changes in work, economic pressures, and developments in social media. Finding meaning through families is now more demanding than it once was. Both the young and the elderly have to work at

being a family member, and find more of their own route, even though they may be unsure of how to do this task or how to sustain this task over time.

c) Gender, Sexuality and Sexual Inequalities: Western or developed nations have moved a long way from being 'male' or 'female' and towards a wider acceptance of the notion of gender identity based on personal decisions and orientation. The phrase 'LGBTQ' is not unfamiliar or unusual in developed or western nations. In 2014, Facebook ended a decade of only giving its users 'male' and 'female' options on its site by adding 71 gender identification terms- an update many saw as long overdue. For a young person, this is another difficult challenge for meaning-finding and meaning-making- 'which of the seventy-one gender terms do I identify with, and what happens if I change my mind?' It is captured in the debate about students in school who identify with a different gender from that with which they were born: which bathroom do they use? Many schools in Canada now have gender-neutral bathrooms. But the support for different gender identities has been a struggle (and continues to be a struggle,) especially in faith-based school systems and some public areas across the world. In other parts of the world such as the Emirates states, the Arab World, some parts of Asia and Africa, such gender identity issues are forbidden. A woman's place and role in some societies and faith systems, such as Islamic, and other areas of the world is still seen as insignificant and 'less than'/inferior. There are areas where women are forbidden to go. In other areas such as parts of Africa, for example in Cameroon, rape and genital mutilation of women in particular remain commonplace. Where women are forced to give birth to an unwanted child, this means that a number of children are born into this world with an immediate emotional, psychological and possibly physical disadvantage.

These gender and sexuality issues will impact greatly on all of our sense of self, our identity and our spiritual self.

d) Culture: Many countries across the world host festivals for food, music, and culture each year. Edmonton, in Canada, Wells and Glastonbury in the UK, for example, host the Heritage and Food and Wine Festivals, in which the music and food from over one hundred countries provides the basis for a public celebration of identity and meaning, symbolized by dress, music, art and food.

Many nations are comprised of different ethnicities. In a major study of Canada in particular, from Victoria University by Schimmele and Wu (2015) of ethnic identity, especially of immigrants they observe the following:

- The ethnic/social identities of immigrants develop through their interactions with members of the host community. When these interactions are positive, immigrants tend to assimilate or integrate. When negative, immigrants feel marginalized or develop radicalized identities that associate with ethnic balkanization, and intergroup conflict, which can escalate to government

extremism such as ethnic cleansing, witnessed recently with the Rohingha people forced to flee their homeland.

- First-generation immigrants tend to prefer national-origin identities (e.g., Chinese), while their children tend to adopt hyphenated (e.g., Chinese-Canadian) identities. This suggests the acculturation of immigrants is an intergenerational process.

- For both first and second- generation immigrants, a national label remains important. Few second-generation immigrants are adopting a purely national identification (e.g., Canadian), which suggests that the process of acculturation is ongoing.

- Strong ethnic identities are not incompatible with a sense of belonging in countries such as Canada and the UK.

- Bicultural identities (e.g., Chinese-Canadian) are common among the second generation. There are two explanations for this pattern of self-identification. First, Canada's multi-cultural environment encourages the simultaneous retention of cultural distinctiveness and a sense of belonging to the host nation. Second, some racial minorities are hesitant to 'drop the hyphen' because of subtle perceptions of being less 'Canadian' than their White counterparts. UK has a similar phenomenon/pattern.

- A strong ethnic identity and a weak 'Canadian' identity do not necessarily imply a lack of incorporation. For some immigrants, identifying as 'Canadian' has little concrete meaning.

- The prospects for integration depend on socioeconomic mobility. Limited economic resources and opportunities tend to increase the likelihood of assimilation into an underclass and adoption of 'oppositional' identities. The experience of racism or discrimination discourages a sense of belonging to the host nation and local community. This experience can also lead to 'politicized' identities as immigrants.

In short, ethnic identity involves young people in particular and also older adults who have to adapt to these changes in making choices and determinations as to what components and aspects of their sense of self and meaning will be derived from which culture. How others react to these choices- parents, extended family, close friends and influencers-makes a difference to a person's sense of self, their identity, their purpose and meaning.

e) Work: Many of my generation, (and even more of the generation before mine) defined themselves in terms of their work, career and faith: my father was a German Jew, a child fleeing Germany/Pruschish Holland with his two brothers on the last kinder train to UK, at 8 years old, not speaking a word of English at that time. He was taken in and looked after by English guardians until he was of an age where he could work. He studied at night school, became an engineer and went on to

become a Works Director of a steel business company 'Metalrax', making and supplying Rolls Royce components and fire extinguishers. This work and his family gave his life meaning. He successfully retired by devoting his life to my step-mother, dancing and taking a keen interest in investing in the stock market. My grandfather on my mother's side was initially a shoe-maker in Birmingham after the war, making shoes for children who had no money for shoes, having flown rescue planes in World War Two. He was an entrepreneur, became a businessman and co-owned a business for many years. He was musical and loved to play the piano by ear. When he retired later in life, this was a key passion for him and one of the aspects of how he retained his sense of meaning and identity. Work occupies a great deal of the time and energy in our lives, to the point at which many define themselves by the work they do. In a *Globe and Mail* poll of over 12,000 people, a third said that their personal identity is defined by their career and that the loss of their job had a profound impact on their sense of self.

Dennis Marsden and Euan Duff in their book *Workless: Some Unemployed Men and Their Families* look at the impact of job loss on a persons' sense of self, meaning and purpose. They look at the implicit contract between workers and their employees: in exchange for their labour and skills, employers not only pay them, but support the sense of identity and reinforce their roles daily in the workplace and in the community. Work provides structure, meaning, shapes leisure and family, and creates a sense of certainty. When a person is unemployed, the implicit contract is broken. No longer does a person have shape in their life, no longer do they have tasks with meaning, they have to create and recreate their sense of who they are. This has significant consequences for health and mental health (Murgatroyd and Wolfe, 1982).

In most of the developed world, youth unemployment is higher than overall unemployment. In Canada, for example, youth unemployment (those aged 15-24) is stubbornly stable at 11.5% of the age cohort-this despite record levels of employment. In other parts of the developed world- Spain and Italy, for example- the figures are much higher at 43%. For the Euro-area as a whole, the figure is 18.9%.

Youth unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, has a profound effect on health, a sense of identity, the development and formation of relationships and social interaction generally. Young people unemployed for two years or more report significant senses of loss of meaning, purpose and shape to their lives. Despite many being well educated (including some individuals holding graduate degrees), they turn to other activities to give them meaning- crime, drugs, sex, deviance. Finding work that pays money but brings no satisfaction or meaningful sense of identity also just reinforces questions in the mind of young people about their worth and the meaning for life.

f) Community: Aaron Williamson, a consultant in Toronto, recently published a fascinating model of the community aspects of identity as the first step towards developing a theory of community formation. He recognizes that 'a community or potential community is a complex system' and that 'community itself is an emergent quality--community, per se, does not exist; it is a perceived

connection between a group of people based on overlaps of *intent, identity, interest and experience'*. Where there are strong 'overlaps' between these aspects of self among members of a group, that group will emerge to be a community:

- If the overlap is mainly *common interests*, it will emerge as a *Community of Interest.* Learning and recreational communities are often of this type.

- If the overlap is mainly *common capacities*, it will emerge as a *Community of Practice.* Co-workers, collaborators and alumni are often of this type.

- If the overlap is *common intent*, it will emerge as a *Movement.* Project teams, eco-villages and activist groups are often of this type.

- If the overlap is *common identity,* it will emerge as a *Tribe.* Partnerships, love/family, relationships, gangs and cohabitants are often of this type.

David Pollard has developed this further by suggesting that identity is strongly linked to interest, intent, capacity, action and learning. Also important is the affinity with others and social connections. He shares a 'map of meaning' given to a person by a variety of domains in their life:
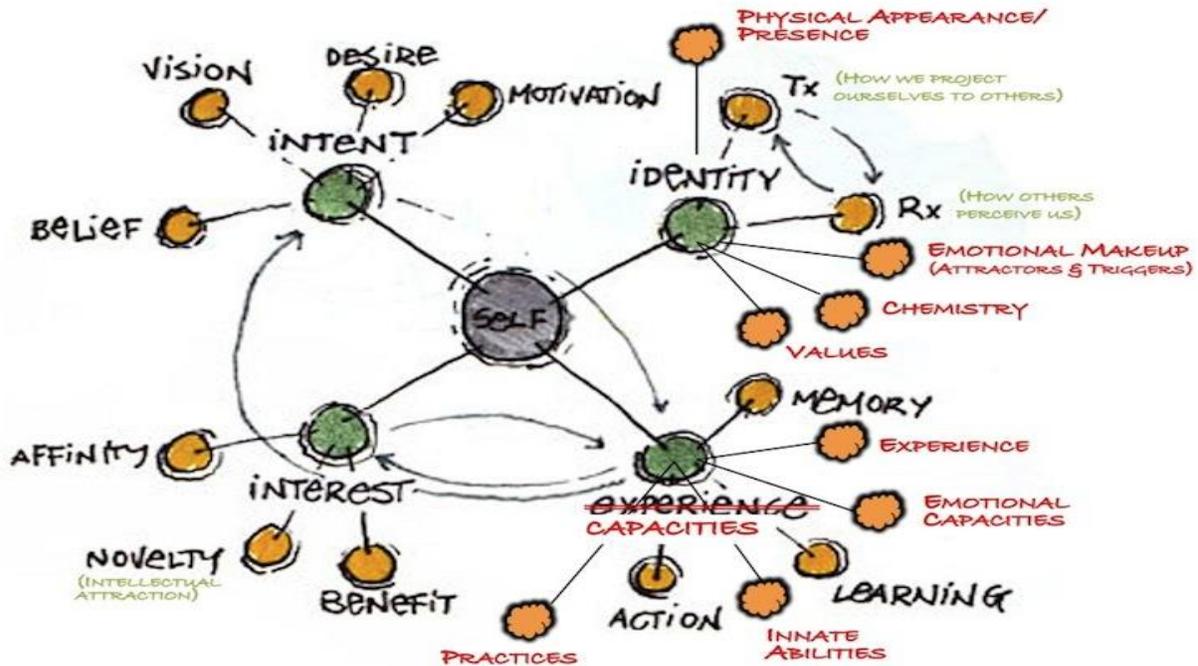
g) Spirituality*:* Many people have lost their sense of our spirituality and are disconnected from the wise and knowing part of ourselves, our inherent wisdom. Recent conflicts, particularly evident in the name of religion and 'Jihad' in the Islamic world, and longstanding ones between Palestinians and Jews, demonstrate our need as human beings to look at new ways to find resolution and tolerance worldwide, without erupt into war or racial conflicts. The United Nations was established to address this as one of its key pillars. Throughout history we have struggled to find a common parlance spiritually that leads to peaceful existence together as human beings. Religion (as opposed to spirituality) has divided the world, rather than look for what connects us. The meaning and purpose of our lives are impacted by these holy conflicts that lead to wars and destruction for young and old alike.

More recently the Buddhist, Christian and Catholic worlds have been shaken by sexual, physical and emotional abuse that has been kept hidden by their leadership teams. This is impacting on followers' sense of themselves and the meaning given to Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism and Islam. It has caused deep questioning amongst some of the members of the faith traditions. For some it has shaken their sense of meaning and purpose, their identity and of course their spiritual path.

Religion, as opposed to spirituality and spiritual principles as taught in schools and communities, can lead to a limited understanding of our spiritual nature.

h) Technology*:* Many young people turn to Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, and WhatsApp to connect and engage with others. Indeed, many are now addicted to these technologies. They see 'relationships', 'likes' and 'shares' as statements about their identity and responses as either acceptance or rejection of the identity and persona they are working to create online.

Social media is problematic as a means for developing identity, as a large number of researchers are observing. Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, has argued that the smartphones were one of the most likely major causes behind sudden increases in mental health issues amongst teens after 2012, reflecting the use of these devices for social media conversations. She documents features of "iGen" in her 2017 book. Born after 1995, iGen is the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone. With the social media and texting replacing other activities, iGen spend less time with their friends in person -- perhaps one of the reasons they are experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

However, technology is not the only thing that makes iGen distinct from every generation before them: they are also different in how they spend their time, how they behave, and in their attitudes toward religion, sexuality, politics. They socialize in completely new ways, reject once sacred taboos, and want different things from their lives and careers. More than previous generations, they are obsessed with safety, focused on tolerance, and have no patience for inequality. iGen is also growing up more slowly

than previous generations: eighteen-year-olds look and act like fifteen year olds used to. They find their sense of meaning and identity more elusive and impermanent.

The Search for Meaning for the next generation of young people: We end this section where we began-- young people are searching for meaning and seek to understand the true nature of themselves, who they are, and the meaning of their lives in context. Many of the frameworks, however, which enabled their parents and grandparents to find meaning, are more fragile and more complex for the current generation of young people than they were for previous generations. Worldwide they are struggling for a sense of themselves and how to navigate these complexities before them. They are seeking meaning and a sense of purpose in new ways, but often fail to find it.

2. Education and the Search for Meaning: Many public education systems across the globe fail to put any explicit focus upon a learner's need to develop a healthy sense of MPIS. Instead the focus is on achievement and performance against other education systems. In the developing countries and areas such as the Middle East, Africa, and parts of rural Asia, education (particularly for women) is sometimes basic and, for many, non-existent. Cultural pressures deprive women and some children the opportunity of receiving an adequate education. This may mean that many learners are deprived of educational opportunity and are therefore restricted/limited in their opportunity to develop a mature and healthy sense of MPIS. The consequences are serious, and multi-faceted. E.g., restricted access to education is one of the factors that can underlie extremism and crime.

Some reasons why this is the case are that (a) key players do not always want to prioritize or focus on a student's sense of meaning and purpose and their sense of identity and spirituality. Performance, technology, teachers, buildings, money are seen as more important; (b) in sharp contrast to competency and performance measures, there is too little focus and too few meaningful measures in education to monitor and assess an individual learner's sense of MPIS; (c) inequality in both access and outcomes; and (d) political leaders who make policy do not show an interest in focusing on and prioritizing MPIS in their policies and agendas – they prefer to focus on employable skills and technical competencies—i.e., on progress which can be measured and trumpeted.

3. Young People and Their Search for Meaning: Many young people are struggling with the question of meaning. Victor Frankl, a psychotherapist who survived Auschwitz, explored the power of the search for meaning. He suggested this is more powerful for a person than the search for pleasure or power (Frankl, 2006). He had observed that those in Nazi prison camps who had given up on purpose and a sense of future were less likely to survive than those who did have a strong

commitment to a positive future. He developed an approach to help people find meaning called '*Logotherapy*'. This involved three basic themes:

- Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones.

- Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.

- We have freedom to find meaning in what we do, and what we experience, or at least in the stance we take when faced with a situation of unchangeable suffering.

Many young people appear to have little sense of or connection with their spirituality. In developed countries like Canada the evidence shows the following challenges;

- Across the world, some 46% of young people find school a stressful place. In Canada this figure is 63%. Schools make young people stressed and unhappy.

- An estimated 1.5 million Canadian children and youth (aged 5-24) are affected by mental health issues and are ***not*** receiving access to appropriate support, treatment or care, with as many as 70% of young adults living with mental health problems or illnesses reporting that symptoms started in childhood. Approximately 6% of young people experience anxiety disorder serious enough to warrant treatment.

- Youth are among the highest risk populations for suicide. In Canada suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among 15-24 year olds. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Canadians between the ages of 10 and 24. Teen suicide is growing, especially amongst First Nations and disadvantaged youth. One way of committing suicide is to use opioids. Opioid abuse is rising as are deaths amongst young people. Some 4,000 people died from opioid overdose in 2017, with many of these being young people. In the US, opioid deaths now exceed those from lung cancer.

While stress, anxiety, depression, suicide and mental health have a variety of causes, four keys to all these causes are 'meaning' 'purpose' and 'identity' and 'spirituality'. Many of the underlying causes come back to the fundamental questions- 'does my life have meaning and a sense of purpose? What gives my life meaning? Who am I and is my life of value?'

4. Inequalities across the World. In some parts of the world, education has made a difference to some aspects of equity, but in others it has not. For example, girls and women have challenges in moving beyond primary education in many parts of the world and in others, First Nations and aboriginal persons rarely succeed at the same level as other citizens in their own countries. Globally, the expansion of higher education has secured access to higher education for those already positioned to benefit, i.e. the middle and upper class. The basic structure of education systems affects equity.

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Traditionally, education systems have sorted students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. This lack of equity affects/impacts a person's capacity to find fulfillment and meaning in their life, restricts an individual in the development of a sense of purpose, and impacts on their identity and self-esteem, their capacity for meaningful employment, limiting and reducing their career and job, opportunities and the ultimately, the quality of their life. Many of the issues just explored become more significant if the expectation that a "good education" would lead to a satisfying and meaningful life are not met. In this situation, inequality is experienced as a denial of identity.

5. The Status of Spirituality in the World. In the modern world the focus for many appears to be on acquiring wealth, power and status. We have an unconscious obsession with creating, protecting and maintaining strong identities based on ephemeral phenomena, national, professional, race, political persuasion and more. We give very little airtime to our spirituality. We get caught up in, and are distracted by, 'holy wars', religious differences, and what divides us, rather than what unites or connects us. Corporations, the financial world, the charitable sector, governments across the world have their own agendas and may simply want to keep things as they are. In this way they maintain a 'status quo', rather than look to our connectedness, what is an intrinsic and shared connection, and the wisdom in our connectedness, which could lead to co-operative ways of operating.

6. MPIS across the life span/life cycle: Little attention has been paid, in any country (with rare exception), to directly addressing an individual's particular needs to develop their spirituality, enable the meaning and purpose across their lives and help in developing a healthy sense of identity. Research indicates that wellbeing and longevity are enhanced significantly for people who have developed a sense of spirituality, meaning and purpose. (Gilbert, 2014).

7. Death and Dying: Many societies and cultures ignore or downplay some of the significant issues around death and dying, for a variety of reasons. Others have significant rituals around death and dying. From my work in the NHS, I know intimatey the challenges doctors, who face death and dying daily, encounter when trying to manage their own feelings. They often "shut off", and then find it hard to support grieving relatives. This can impact and minimize the significance of the meaning of death and loss for others. Western cultures in particular can downplay the meaning of death. We are obsessed with youth, and remaining young. The media, magazines, the news ("Merchants of Immortality") all play into beliefs around remaining young and defying death. This can leave individuals unprepared and with no 'rites of passage'.

8. An aging population. We have an aging population who are living longer. In the UK, it is not uncommon to find people living up to 110 years in some Care Homes. We have more illnesses of old age such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and dementia. The issue of what aging means for a persons'

identity and the meaning and purpose of their lives needs addressing urgently in order to sustain and maintain the wellbeing of the population and communities at large into old age/the 'sage' era. (One reason Britain has a Minister for Loneliness is to tackle this issue.)

9. The planet and sustainability. By 2050 some 9.5 billion people will live on Earth – a planet undergoing significant change due to changes in climate, ocean quality, extreme weather events and availability of minerals and water. Though many are tackling these issues – the UN's sustainable development goals provide a framework for this work – the impact of these actions is not sufficient to enable us to be confident about the future of the species. Indeed, some have suggested we have now entered the era of palliative care for the human species (Scranton, Jadad and Enkin, 2017). For some, identity is connected to place, and meaning to a sense of belonging to a community – both are threatened by climate change (communities may have to move) and by extreme weather events which often lead to a loss of home, family and sense of place. More will go hungry and more will experience challenges as we adjust to a massive change in the scale of challenges faced by a larger population living on the planet.

10. Communication and communicating together. We all communicate in different ways across the world. Words have different nuances in different cultures and language is used very differently to mean different things across age groups, classes, sectors of society and cultures. Misunderstandings are often forged through assumed meaning. Governments across the world are shrouded in secrecy, duplicity, lack of transparency, double speak and more. We need key influencers who stand up to be counted, are passionate about specific areas and see it as their meaning and purpose to communicate clearly and straightforwardly about the issue, so that small incremental steps can lead to meaningful change and development.

These challenges suggest that there is a great deal to do, within and across societies, to support all cultures and individuals with their unique and collective sense of MPIS.

Possible Actions

A word of caution: the rush to "solutions" or 'fix it quickly' is fraught with problems – it is a bit like climbing Mount Everest wearing flip flops instead of proper kit for the task at hand, or competing in a significant tennis match with a high profile tennis player without training. These are suggestions aimed at triggering a response which in turn should lead to "better" suggestions for action- it's a process and collaborative journey.

These are also very Western and Northern Hemisphere views of the world. While I have worked with people from Asia, visited Africa, India, many countries in the Pacific and spent time with all sorts of people from various walks of life from around the world, my deep experience and thinking is Western (particularly British). We are reminded daily in the news and social media forums of the ongoing impact of colonialism, war, conflicts, of poverty and of other factors which lead to very different challenges and solutions in the west and east, in the North and the South.

Our focus needs to be upon creating the most effective conditions in every context across the world to develop and sustain individuals' capacity to continuously develop their sense of sense, their compassion and their spirituality. This means more than coming up with a scoring system for meaning, purpose and identity competencies within our education system and securing good results on tests. It means rethinking the nature of work and community to foster compassion and spirituality. It means a conscious and active pursuit of a meaningful personal journey across each life span, developing and building a conscious awareness of what gives our own lives and other people a sense of meaning, purpose and identity; it means looking actively for ways to deepen our sense of spirituality, mastery and understanding, both individually and collectively. We need to understand and work with the obstacles to this. In this way we will create, engage, inspire ourselves and others.

The journey of our lives across the life span needs to enable us to connect with the deep source of our being, who we truly are, permit and ensure making and developing meaning, exploring our individual and social identity, engaging in risk-taking to understand our boundaries, learning from failure, and success, and developing a creative response to the challenge of learning and exploring this journey together as interconnected beings, as well as learning alone. These connections need to extend globally.

Here are the possible actions that could support this. To reiterate where I'm coming from: my decades of experience working on these challenges tell me that the actions we take need to:

- Raise and develop **awareness** of how individual, group, collective, community, cultural, and lifespan/life-stage issues relate to life's meaning, purpose, identity and spirituality.
- Build and create the adaptive, relational, collaborative **capacities** of each individual, community and organization, with regards to MPIS.
- **Respond** to the specific needs of **individuals** within the particular organizational frameworks and societal contexts within which they work and live.

Some specific action areas are:

1. **Develop educational and awareness-raising programs to give a focus to, enable and embed MPIS within a range of organizations and contexts in society**. This agenda

needs to be taken up actively in education systems, from primary, through to higher education, healthcare systems, businesses, non-profit and community organizations, the arts, science, technology, media, sport, governments. This may require national and international policy developments and investment in resources to support learning, networking and research. Compassionate cities are beginning to emerge as part of the work on smart cities (Kellehear, 2012; Donovan, 2018) – we need to find more ways of enabling this work.

2. **Government programs and policies**. Awareness programs and enabling assessment systems need to be established in education, health businesses, commerce, the arts, media etc. in order to raise awareness and develop peoples' appreciation of the need to attend to and develop the meaning and purpose of their lives, their identity and sense of spirituality for happiness, fulfillment and well-being. Some governments are already doing this – assessing happiness as the basis for their development (Dubai, Maldives, Bhutan, Thailand – see Anielski, 2008) Governments themselves need to look at their ways of operating to develop compassion and transparency and to model meaningful ways of operating – some initial work related to this is now beginning in England.

3. **Focus the education system on the four pillars** of education suggested in 1996 by UNESCO in the Delors report *Learning – The Treasure Within*, to actively work with MPIS. This recommended that the work of schools should be focused on:

    a. Learning to know
    b. Learning to do
    c. Learning to live together, learning to live with others
    d. Learning to be

The implication here is that our focus should be on the development of the person in the context of learning, skills, collaboration, compassion and social engagement - setting the stage for meaningful education, education that provides MPIS. Skills are important, but they need to be pursued in the context of these broader goals. We need to focus on building a sense of MPIS, strengthen the skills for learning for life, build a collaborative environment for consciously learning and developing these areas of ourselves and others. Some call this a commitment to holistic or lifelong learning, contrasting this with the prescribed/discrete and time-bound learning required to pass a test and then forgetting what has been "learned".

4. **Strengthen early childhood learning experiences**. While some have seen this as "starting school early", one of the real focuses for early childhood education needs to be strengthening MPIS via developing their sense of curiosity, creativity and collaboration through play. A range of studies – see a summary by Raburu (2015) – suggest that early childhood education and play are critical in shaping the self and the individual's sense of identity. More opportunities for early learning, for play and for social engagement of young children (all young children, not just those that can afford to pay the high costs of day-care and early childhood education) could make a significant difference to the sense of meaning, purpose and identity.

5. **Drive public policy with a focus on meaning purpose identity and spirituality across the lifespan and across the world** – an interconnected and holistically functioning world for all of us. This requires engaging policy makers in the process of policy development and engagement, inclusion of people of all ages with a variety of needs, and creating environments that encourage collaborative learning about MPIS. Digital technologies which permit collaborative and peer-to-peer activities can be supportive here. In health policy, for example, too few patient voices and future patient voices are involved in shaping health services. For cancer care, palliative care and other critical illness points of care, engaging patients in designing clinical pathways and supportive environments can make a difference to the way in which identity and meaning can be found *through* such experiences.

6. **Strengthen work on essential skills** –Many individuals do not have the language, numeracy and cognitive skills they need to respond to the challenges and opportunities associated with many jobs when they leave school. This limits their ability to create meaning and purpose for themselves. Strengthening literacy and numeracy and the other essential skills (including emotional intelligence) can have a significant impact on wellbeing and an individuals' capacity to develop meaning and purpose in their lives. It should be clear that these skills are all developed in a context – through the study of subjects, skills, work, social projects and individual competencies – and through social interaction. Learning these skills needs to be seen as a holistic endeavor, not like learning bits and pieces. This will become increasingly important as many work-places are disrupted by new technologies and a great many people (around 20-30% of the workforce) will need to develop new skills and new ways of working. Lifelong learning and reskilling creates opportunities to use these learning times to explore the place of work and skills and shaping meaning and identity.

7. **Strengthen the specific training and professional development for teachers, health care workers, business people, politicians, in the areas of MPIS**. There is a need to

build communities of practice locally, regionally, nationally and internationally and share effective practice in these areas of understanding. Organizations do not necessarily know how to foster and support compassion, understanding of self or identity, even though they may desire to. They need to see why this is important, how it can be done, what impact this work can have on an organization and how this will benefit all stakeholders. Sharing practices and promoting effective practices can enable the more rapid adoption of appropriate methods of support for these kinds of initiatives.

8. **Help people ASSESS where they are now on their journey to self and identity - help to developing an individual or a community's sense of MPIS**. Creating effective, reflective assessment tools and instruments that enable individuals, groups, communities and governments understand the current state of compassion, wellbeing can be helpful. For example, helping young people assess their social and emotional wellbeing has been a task set to educators in Australia since 2003. Doing so helps identify new learning challenges, new opportunities to engage with students and teachers and new ways of working to build resilience, compassion and spirituality (Bernard and Stephanou, 2018). Systematically using assessments to strengthen supports can also aid governments look at the way in which identity and meaning shape responses to social, economic and community challenges. New assessments of social coherence can be helpful in community development investment decisions.

9. **Make life-long learning more than a slogan. Make it meaningful**. Learning is already something we each need to commit to throughout our lives – to stay healthy, to be active citizens, to be creative at work, to live meaningful and purposeful lives. This is a major system challenge. But is also a challenge to engage learners' curiosity and enable them at all levels in a love of learning new materials and skills, all the time. It is about the hard work to develop intrinsic motivations in a commercial world that is bent to feed us extrinsic motivations as shoppers and consumers. Many seniors – in some countries a very large group of people – are exploring the meaning of their lives after retirement. Many are also coping with loss, becoming carers for partners with mental or physical illnesses and battling loneliness. New learning and support opportunities are needed to support these transitions and life-changes. Too many are left to "fend for themselves" when they are not really equipped to do so.

10. **Work with local communities in terms of developing MPIS across the globe.** Bring local community organizations together to look at their common humanity, their similarities, particular issues and resources for enabling each person's sense of MPIS should they wish to

engage in this both as individuals and collectively. Find active ways to develop and appreciate our shared and intrinsic connections together, and our 'Being' as a fundamental shared reality. Some communities are doing this, through organizations like REACH Edmonton, which is networking 180+ community-based organizations and exploring reconciliation, immigration, youth adjustment to employment, the impact of sexual violence and many other issues through collaborative, supportive networks enabled by evidence-based practice. Many other such organizations exist around the world. All are generally underfunded, supported by passionate volunteers and yet do remarkable work. How can we ensure their ongoing practice and impact – what needs to happen to enable them to continue?

These are broad headings. We need to make these challenges more concrete and meaningful, adapting them for each context and country.

That's just for starters. I'd like our discussions to identify **specific** actions that can be big steps toward secure three very specific outcomes:

1. More people engage and practice compassion and care for others on a daily basis in the communities in which they live.

2. More people experience a strong sense of satisfaction in who they are, what they do and how they live their lives – fewer mental health challenges, fewer suicides, less depression.

3. More people have more access to supports, learning and opportunities to explore their identity, compassion and spiritual selves more often.

We need to identify specific actions and projects that would support the achievement of these three outcomes.

Next Steps

This paper is intended to stimulate conversations – both online and in person. The online forum can be joined at maproom.rebase.camp (by invitation only). The invite-only basecamp to explore these issues is being held in Toronto on 14th November 2018. Your invitation has already been issued.

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