

## **THE LIFE - TRAUMA DIALECTIC; FROM SURVIVAL TO FULFILMENT**

We have now completed the basics of survival strategies, their help in diagnosis and treatment of symptoms. From here on we will digest them more, and see how we can further apply them in our lives.

First, let us look at the big picture, and this is the aim of this workshop. In the following workshop, we will look at the details of the picture.

Imagine a beautiful, complex tapestry. It is made up of different coloured threads- actually of eight basic colours, representing our eight survival strategies. There are different shades of these colours symbolizing biological, psychological and social facets of survival strategies. There are different intensities of these colours representing raw and refined aspects of these survival strategies.

Something is pushing, twisting, cutting, corroding the tapestry with its chemicals. Everything from the frame to the smallest threads are stressed to varying degrees. Eventually the force is traumatic, the frame breaks, and the tapestry tears. Acid dissolves parts of the tapestries.

The curator is in a panic. He has to put the tapestry together again quickly, or the gallery will not survive. He splints the frame with wire, puts patches on holes, and ties threads together in knots. These manoeuvres represent defences.

The tapestry is still traumatized. It is sick of the veneer of being OK, it wants to be really well.

First we take it to a safe place, and provide a steady new frame. Our optimism that we will be able to use our skills to repair the tapestry provides hope. Our eyes are drawn first to the greatest areas of destruction, the patches that cover black holes in the tapestry, representing invisible traumatic memories. The clues of what trauma happened lie there, and according to the damage, we diagnose the details of the trauma. For instance, we may apply a neutralizing chemical.

Then we carefully diagnose each traumatized thread, untie provisional knots and patches, find appropriate threads for the gaps, and carefully start to repair the tapestry.

Of course the tapestry of life is not static. It is different tapestries at every moment of life. In this sense it is more like a film, with a tear in a certain place, and distortion of the film thereafter. By repairing the original tear and subsequent distortions, the person may be able catch up with his or her life.

What I want to emphasise is that all humans are beautiful tapestries. And when trauma strikes any one of us, traumatized tapestries are damaged on different levels. They are its molecular and chemical structure; its threads; its message and meaning; its artistry and creativity; its place among other creative works of art; art itself; the maker of the tapestry.

In terms of traumatology, and survival and fulfilment, we may consider the levels of human functioning to be something like the following. I have suggested that this hierarchy of function levels is the depth axis of traumatic stress.

| <b>THE COMPONENTS OF THE DEPTH AXIS</b>              |  |
|--|--|
| ⚡ Instinctive physiological survival needs           | ⚡ Codes, rights, dignity, ethics             |
| ⚡ <b>Survival strategies</b>                         | ⚡ <b>Potential Spirituality from here on</b> |
| ⚡ Morality including good and bad, worth and justice | ⚡ Symbols                                    |
| ⚡ Meanings.  | ⚡ Identity                                   |
| ⚡ Ideals, values and principles                      | ⚡ Creativity, aesthetics                     |
|  | ⚡ Sacredness                                 |
|  | ⚡ Wisdom, knowledge, truth                   |

Beyond codes, rights and dignity, people can start to feel themselves to be spiritual, to have a soul. For instance, in identity, we have a sense that we are more than body and brain/mind. Similarly, we attach universal importance to symbols, like the cross, the veil, and words like democracy.

We are approaching philosophical questions, like what is the meaning and purpose of the tapestry. This is an important question, because the greatest loss and pain is not so much the pain of broken threads and mixed up colours, but ultimately the damage to the meaning and purpose of the tapestry.

A woman whose husband was executed next to her in bed, said “Don’t tell me I have PTSD, and that my suffering is normal. I know that. I want you to tell me what my life is from here on.” similarly Holocaust survivors understand their sufferings, but not why what happened happened. That is much more important to them.

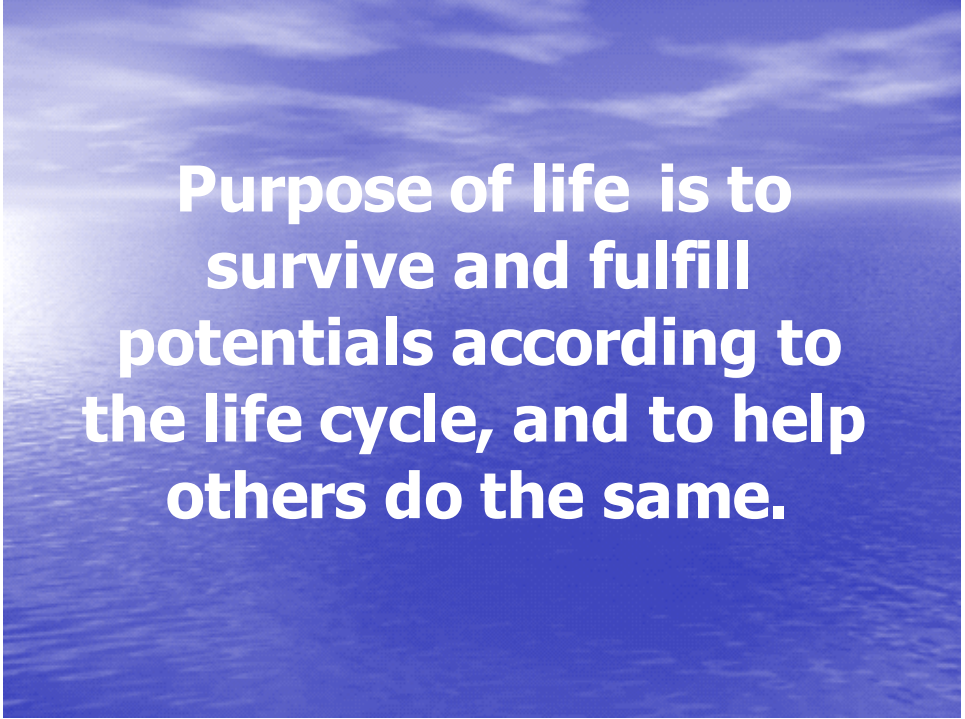
The same applies to the soldier in combat, the abused child.

In other words, people will put up with a lot as long as they feel that their lives have hope of meaning and purpose. This is more important even than life itself. People will sacrifice their lives for others, or for a cause if they believe that their lives will achieve thereby a purpose. *Without* a sense of meaning and purpose, people suicide.

When I ask people what is the meaning or purpose of their lives, they are taken aback, and feel I have intruded into a much more sensitive area than say, their sexual lives. It is such a sensitive question, that people don’t even ask themselves, what they live for. Eventually people come up with, like they have since Aristotle, with needs of fulfilment with love, belonging, relationships, having children, friends, a meaningful career, being useful to others, leaving a mark in the world, feeling part of the universe.

Let me use another metaphor. A life is like an apple. It buds, grows, ripens and falls. It has achieved its purpose. At such times, death may be seen as a friend. If the apple has a worm inside which destroys its core and it rots, or a disaster threatens to tear it off the tree prematurely, people use all their survival strategies to survive, and to achieve meaning for their lives.

We need to know what is the meaning and purpose of life. I suggest this.



**Purpose of life is to  
survive and fulfill  
potentials according to  
the life cycle, and to help  
others do the same.**

To fulfill, means achieving one's potentials in table 2, across the depth axis, ie from physiological to spiritual contentment.

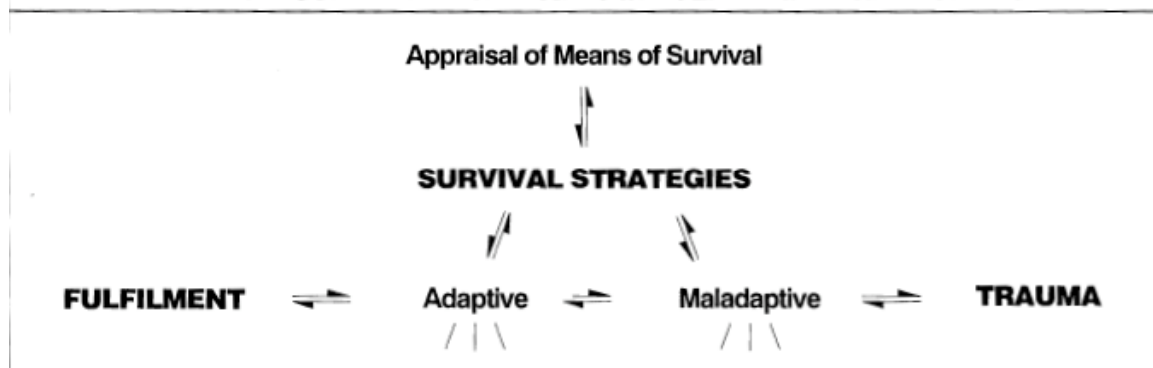
One needs to survive first and foremost, but only in order to fulfill oneself. Therefore we try to move from survival to fulfillment.

Fulfilling oneself is experiencing adaptive survival strategies as an individual, family member, and member of a community, and ranging from simple physiological needs being fulfilled in babies to fulfillment of belonging in the universe when old. Life is an ever more complex tapestry.

Survival strategies are the conceptual bridge between survival and fulfillment.

### Trauma and Fulfilment

FIGURE 6: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN FULFILMENT AND TRAUMA



Fulfillment derives from adaptive survival strategies. Like notes of an octave are essential to survival of music, and symphonies are fulfillments of such notes, so survival strategies are the bases of infinite combinations, overtones, harmonics and refinements which lead to a fulfilled life.

When trauma rips the tapestry, it rips across all components of existential meaning and purpose.

### Clinical Importance

Why is all this important clinically? Because people come to us either with survival symptoms, ie they fear for their survival, or fulfillment symptoms, eg they cannot fulfil their relationships. Something happens in the natural process of ascertaining security of survival **in order to fulfil life**. Either people fulfil lives when they should be concerned with survival, or more frequently, they act as if survival was an issue when it no longer is, and

are stunted in their fulfilments. Eg the combat soldier, the child thrown down the stairs.

An effeminate dentist was always denigrated by his father. From boyhood he called his son a sissy, inadequate, a girl. The man did always feel inadequate, and felt hampered in his creative desires.

When his father was dying, he confessed that he was the sole survivor of a platoon in the Korean War, and he was determined to not have a son suitable for the army. The father was motivated for his son's survival, the son was motivated to fulfil himself, but his father's survival wishes interfered.

A twenty year old second generation of the Holocaust university student presented feeling that he did not know who he was. He saw the world as fearful for no apparent reason. He felt worst when he followed his inner artistic desires and "unusual" fun such as playing lacrosse. Further, he felt ungrateful and wrong for his resentments of his well meaning loving parents. As a result of his predicaments he felt "depressed". All of him was "wrong". He would have fitted diagnoses of schizoid personality, anxiety or depressive disorders.

It became clear that all his life his parents overrode his desires and thinking, and the force of their love was based on extreme anxieties for their son's survival, itself based in the parents' Holocaust experiences. In the parents' world anything not directed to survival was dangerous. Hence playing sport, painting, fun itself, were seen as dangerous frivolities which the parents had to expunge from their son's mind.

In therapy the son's fulfillment desires were validated as normal, in contrast to his parents' stress and trauma worlds.

Eventually the son pointed out to his parents that after all they survived and had him in order to lead a normally fulfilled, not a Holocaust riddled life. Therefore their

purpose in survival was actually being fulfilled by his “irresponsible” ways.

The parents were able to come to terms with this new perspective. The son came to life and with gusto started catching up on missed fulfillments.

If parents see their children in terms of survival, but the children desire recognition in terms of fulfillment, children may see their parents’ eyes as unseeing, unempathic. As soon as a parent is satisfied that the child is safe, and he or she tunes out to what is important in their child’s fulfillment world, the parents may be sensed as unempathic, uninterested. When the child complains, the parents may feel hurt, because they would sacrifice themselves for the child’s survival. “How can you do this after all I have done for you?! Why, I would sacrifice my life for you!”

But they see survival needs not fulfillment ones. Children see fulfillment ones, not survival ones. These are points of much conflict between the generations.

It can be a watershed to move from a universe of survival into a new universe of fulfillment.

Such a watershed can occur in therapy. Clients become more interested in how to enjoy life, rather than unravel past traumas. Many therapists feel that at this stage they can stop, that somehow the patient will naturally find their way, as their traumas are resolved. This is not quite true. They need to learn about each fulfilling counterpart to the trauma that they had experienced.

Actually this is an overlapping process. During therapy we point out adaptive (fulfilling) alternatives to maladaptive (stressful and traumatic) survival symptoms, we tilt the see-saw from survival to fulfillment, and practice survival and fulfillment therapy.

[[**Finally**, we are brought to the philosophical conundrum of where survival and fulfillment fit into the philosophy of life.

Philosophers have thought that death was the opposite dialectical partner to life, represented by ultimate terror and a gnawing fear affecting everything (Becker, 1973). And yet we saw that death may not be opposed to life. It may be seen as the final fulfillment of a ripe life, a chosen option to

help others, or a way out of a life with no meaning. At such times life and death are not opposed, death is seen as a part of life.

I suggest that it is life and trauma that are opposite dialectical partners in our lives. Life's purpose is represented by fulfilment, and trauma threatens life's purpose and fulfilment. Death is terrifying only when it is absurd (Lifton, 1980) or when it terminates hope of a purposeful life. Then intense survival responses are evoked in the hope of a fulfilling life beyond the threat, and to avoid a purposeless death.]]

If you ask a patient "Of all the things in the world, what worries you the most?" after some thought they will give you a point on the see-saw between fear that they will not survive and fear that they will not fulfil their lives. Our task is to help them survive, and move from survival to fulfilment. In fact, usually they have already survived, but do not know it. We help to let them know it, and help to move them along to fulfilment.]]