

I would like to dedicate this workshop and paper to the memory of my beloved mother Zdenka Novak who survived the Holocaust and gave me Life. She wrote a book about her experiences and it could be found in:

<http://home.twcny.rr.com/dani/ZWEB/table.htm>

### Applications of principles of Logotherapy to teaching.

#### Abstract:

Logotherapy is a field of psychology founded by Viktor Frankel who survived the Holocaust. Logotherapy puts therapy in a spiritual context and it literary means Therapy through Meaning. The primary premise of Logotherapy is that the search for meaning in life is identified as the primary motivational force in human beings. The lessons from the Holocaust and the theory of Logotherapy can help humanity overcome the existential crisis it is currently facing. The current generation has lost its grounding and the world seems to be meaningless. An increasing number of people all around the world are confused and afraid. The events of September 11, 2003 or the war in Iraq are examples. It is our calling and responsibility as educators to respond to that call for meaning and to help ourselves and the young generation create new meaning. Viktor Frankel seemed to have lost everything in the Holocaust but he did not use the inner will to live. Hitler and the third Reich is long gone but Logotherapy and the ideas that Viktor Frankel help bring to the world are continuing to transform and help people. In this workshop I would like to share how these ideas affected my own life and how to apply them to teaching.

The book "Man's Search for Meaning" was the first book that I read about the Holocaust as a 14 years old boy who was not aware that he himself was a child of survivors and the book guided me ever since. Reflecting on the past 25 years of teaching I realized that the principles of Logotherapy guided me all along as my teaching was gradually transformed and changed from Fear to Creativity and Love. During this workshop we will share how this process unfolded and explore ways how to bring the freedom and insight that was gained to every teaching/learning situation.

### Applications of principles of Logotherapy to teaching.

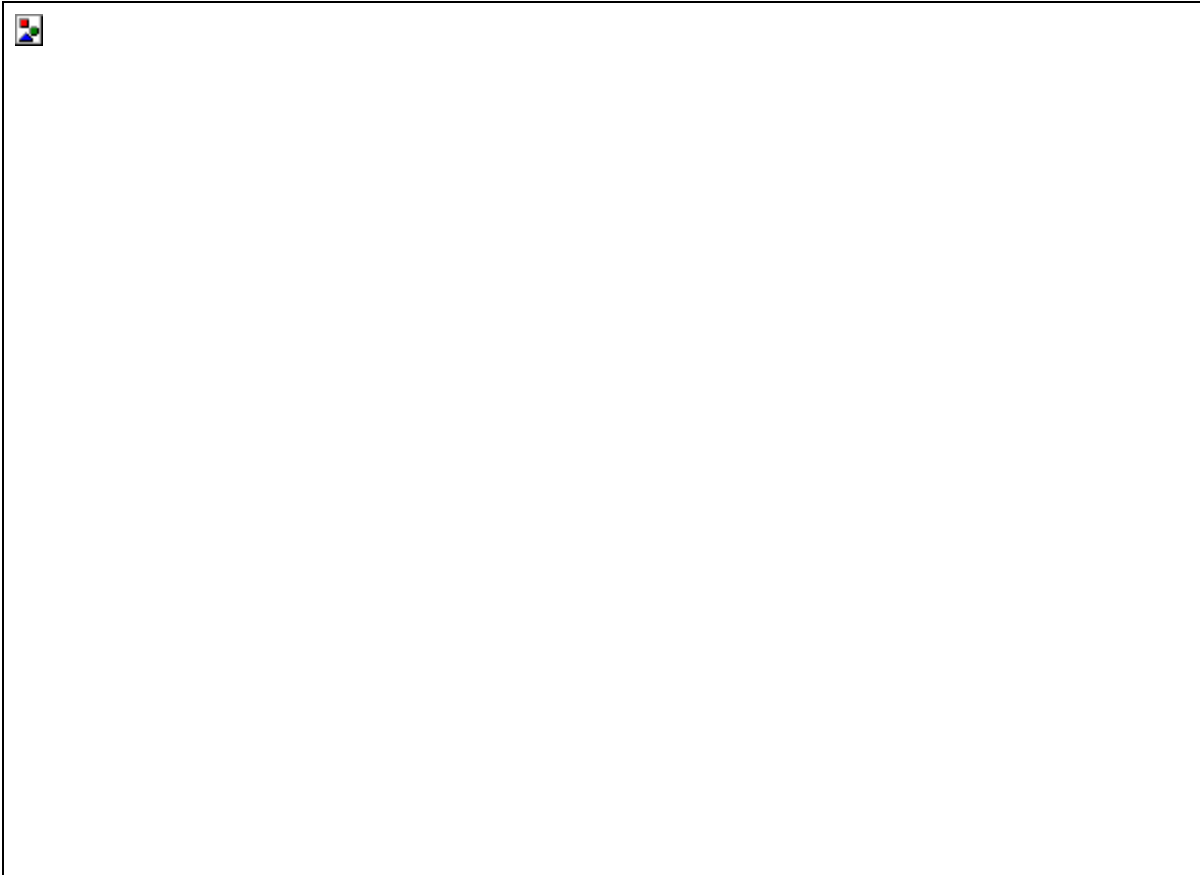
#### Finding the hole:

In a recent visit to Croatia I visited a place in the the Velebit mountain range where I read that members of my family have died by being thrown off a cliff during the Holocaust. After some adventures through the woods I finally arrived at the place. Instead of a cliff I saw a hole in the ground. Actually it was nature made vertical cave that seemed to be miles deep. I scream a primal scream for about 10 minutes alone. Me and my creator in the woods. It was not a scream of anger or agony. No. It was a scream of release and freedom. Finally I realized that this hole in the ground was all these years also in me and experiencing this gave my life deeper meaning or rather it helped me understand deeper the meaning of my life that the meaning that I was and still am creating out of my life as

a child of Holocaust survivors, as a teachers and as a human being. The purpose of this workshop is to share with you the weaving of that meaning and how it applies to teaching and learning.

I made a web page that describes this experience:

<http://www.ithaca.edu/dani/croatia/Jadovno/Jadovno.html>



The hole in Jadovno, Croatia

### Bibliographical background

I was born in February 1949 to parents who survived the holocaust and most of their family members including their previous spouses died in various places after Germany invaded Croatia. My parents never shared their experience with me and I am not sure if they shared much with each other and only years later I realized that the home atmosphere was covered with a thick cloud of sadness and depression. There was a need to shield and protect the only child (me) from the unspeakable realities of the past. Thus I was drawn from a young age to look for meaning in life and the first books I read when I was about 16 were Viktor Frankel's book "Man's Search for Meaning". After that I read many books about the Holocaust and looked for answers to the meaning of Life though spirituality (Zen Buddhism was my first Path). At the same time I completed my high

school and then graduated from the Technion in Pure Mathematics and came to the USA in 1976 to complete my PhD in Mathematics. In 1981 I became a teacher at Ithaca College where I still teach now. Through all these years I was still looking for meaning and read Viktor Frankel's book several times but gradually that search was interwoven into my teaching and I developed ways and methods to help students find their own meaning. The goal of this paper is to share these methods with the reader. From about the age of 14 I experienced waves of depression and fear that are difficult to describe in words. Only when I was about 40 years old I became aware of that thick cloud of sadness that permeated my parent's home and understood the connection between that atmosphere and my mental problems. This is why seeing that hole in Jadovno Croatia where my Mom's first husband died was such a releasing experience. By seeing the hole outside myself I could transform the hole within myself and fill it up with meaning and Life. Even though I suffered from these depressions I never took drugs and did not have any suicide attempts and somehow managed to continue teaching all these years even though from about age 14 or so I was not able to concentrate for prolonged and read only spiritual books and books that helped me relieve the inner turmoil. I still have periods of memory loss, anxiety and depression but it does get easier.

### My personal search for meaning

The first book that I read on the Holocaust was Viktor Frankel's book "Man's Search for Meaning". Viktor Frankel was a Holocaust survivor who founded a new field in psychology called Logotherapy and I will make connection between Logotherapy and Teaching in this paper.

The word Logotherapy literally means 'Therapy through Meaning'. The official web site of Viktor Frankel Institute is <http://logotherapy.univie.ac.at/e/logotherapy.html>.

Logotherapy puts therapy in a spiritual context and in this paper I would like to apply this theory to teaching. Even though I am identified by my teaching institute (Ithaca College) as a Math teacher I do not define myself that way. I define myself first and foremost as a teacher and only next as a math teacher. In a sense I view my teaching role as a midwife who helps the students to birth new meaning into their lives and the principles of Logotherapy can serve as guiding posts to that process of birth. Even though I am teaching with the framework of the discipline of Mathematics the examples and methods presented here could apply to any subject and also to a multitude of teaching/learning situations.

### Students find meaning in learning.

The primary premise of Logotherapy is that the search for a meaning in life is identified as the primary motivational force in human beings. Many students who study Math find it utterly meaningless and thus fail to learn the subject. What is meaningful for one person may be utterly meaningless for another. Many math teachers are focused on teaching the subject matter and covering the material rather than teaching the students and uncovering the knowledge that is already hidden inside the students. The root word in Latin of the word Education is Educare which can be traced to the Latin root words, "e" and "ducere". Together, "e-ducere" means to "pull out" or "to lead forth". See the Educare Institute in: <http://www.educare.org/index2.html>.

However there is a problem in taking this approach too far. What if the students themselves find meaning in an external reward like for example getting a good grade in a Math test without understanding the concepts? Is this wrong? According to Logotherapy the role of the teacher would be to help the students find their own meaning even if this may not coincide with the value system of the teacher himself. Here is a small example to illustrate the point: Imagine a student who knows that she needs to pass a math course in order to get certified so she can get a job and help her family survive the hardships. The student knows that she will not be able to grasp the deeper meaning of the subject and wants to be focused on passing the test. The role of the teacher according to common sense and Logotherapy would be to help the student pass the test and not waste their time on trying to understand the material which will hamper the outer success.

The source of the conflict in the previous example is in the collective mistake in schooling that our society as a whole is doing. By attempting to teach the masses we neglect individual needs. The teacher may not be able to change and correct this mistake but in spite of this he has the power to help individual students find their own meaning and realize it.

#### Students overcome fears in learning situations

Logotherapy theory can be used to explain and find method to overcome irrational fears of learning. Negative experience in learning Math at a young age can become a source of intense irrational fear later on in life that has the potential to cripple the growth of a person. An extreme example that illustrates it is demonstrated through the true story of Julie's dream:

*Julie was my student in the class "What Is Math" She was so afraid of Math that she never even looked at the board whenever anything mathematical was mentioned. One early morning Julie came to my office and handed me a paper and said. "Dani, I just woke up from a most vivid dream and wrote it down a few minutes ago, please read it:"*

*I took the paper and while Julie was still in my office I read the following story that will forever stay with me. This is what Julie wrote "I was sitting in a classroom with about 50 other students. Among them were my small high school class and also my current "What Is Math" class. The teacher locked the door and gave each student of us a fifty page Math test and said that only those students who pass the test will be allowed to leave the room. I knew that my best friend Katherine will pass since she knew Math well and indeed after just a few minutes she completed the test and gave it to the teacher who flipped through the pages and said "You did not pass". He then tied Katherine to her chair, poured some gasoline from a can around her and then struck a match and Katherine was burned alive in front of my eyes which were wide open. I could not close them in that dream.*

*I decided to approach the teacher and ask for an extension and to my surprise he agreed and unlocked the door for me. I went for a walk and there I met you Dani and asked you for help but you refused. That instant I woke up with two questions and their answers:*

1. *Why didn't Dani help me? (Answer: Because I could do it by myself)*
2. *What is Math? (Answer: Math is Love)*

By bringing her fear of Math to the surface Julie defined and created new Meaning for math in her world. Julie's dream demonstrates that fear can be transformed into creativity and by allowing the deep rooted memories to emerge into consciousness Julie was able to re-define her relationship with Math and she actually received an A in that course. Julie and I continued to be friends until this day and until recently Julie was sending me some brain teasers and curious math facts. Julie's situation is unusual in its intensity but quite common in principle. Julia, another student whom I taught many years ago wrote a web page that illustrates the intense and irrational fears that people may experience when they learn Math. See: <http://www.ithaca.edu/dani/inspirations/lovemath/Julia/TheDragon.htm>

Over the years I had many students who went through similar experiences. Most students did not share and probably did not remember the actual early traumatic experience that closed them off to learning Math in a creative way but some did remember. There was one student in particular who is worth mentioning. Laura took a math test in a large lecture room and was the last one to complete the test. She approached me with the test and shared the following experience:

*"A few minutes ago I was transported to my first grade math class. The teacher was explaining something on the board and everyone seemed to understand but me. I thought that something awfully wrong must be with my abilities to learn Math and only now I realized that the reason I did not understand was that I came from another kindergarten and while the other students learned the concept I did not".* Laura was a good student in our Algebra class at the college. She could learn any new subject like matrices well but when it came to the old material from grade school she froze and was unable to perform correctly.

Additional reports from students about overcoming fears in learning math were collected in:

<http://www.ithaca.edu/dani/inspirations/lovemath/mathblocks.htm>

After September 11, 2003 many students were in shock. The old world was not there any more. There was little to hang on too. This motivated many of some of them to search deep within themselves and to bring the fears and insecurities to the surface. I collected some of the writing in a web page:

<http://www.ithaca.edu/dani/inspirations/Love&Service/Newsletter/index.html>

[Teachers overcoming fears in teaching situations](#)

The process of creating meaning out of difficult situations happens to teachers as well as to students. Math teachers are usually seen as rigorous, pedantic and dry. A College Math teacher shared with me the following story that offers a different perspective:

*Among other topics, the class was working patterns, counting and also on the connection between math and cooking. The students were also preparing a Math Fair for children who will involve displays, posters, and demonstrations to share the beauty of Math with younger children. The teacher suggested to the students to make chocolate-chip cookies that will be decorated in a certain way that uses symmetry and pattern and motivate the kids to see math in the cookies. Two days before the next class the teacher decided that he will experiment with the cookies himself. He bought the ingredients and started baking. Not having the experience the cookies came out terrible. The mathematical patterns did not come up right, the cookies were undercooked. They were also too big and could not be separated from each other. The kitchen was a mess and a whole beautiful evening seemed to be ruined. The poor math teacher could not face the darkness and fell into an old bad habit that he had as a teenager. Rather than facing the problem at hand he buried his negative emotions and started eating the half baked cookies without control which created more and more inner frustration and inner turmoil.*

*But this is not the end of the story. The teacher went to sleep, shared what happened with his wife and with a loving friend and decided to bring the half baked cookies to the class to share with his students and demonstrate the human side of a math teacher. The next day was full of light, love and creativity and showed again, like many times before, how paradoxical and beautiful life is.*

My own personal experience as a teacher is full of situation of transforming fears into meaning. The recurring thought of not being able to teach because of my mental problems kept haunting me for years and sometimes paralyzed me almost completely. I remember times when I was so fearful to face my class that I was afraid to get out of bed until the very last moment and did not prepare anything. Somehow every time when I did rise up (and I always did) the fears were transformed and most of the sessions with the students were the best ones because the wall of separation between me and my students dissolved. I know I am not alone in experiencing these kinds of experiences. The teacher and author Parker Palmer who suffered to episodes of crippling depression in his forties when he was a revered leader of a Quaker spiritual community. The depression forced him to consider the core of his understanding of spiritual life itself. Parker Palmer wrote the book "The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life"

### Transforming difficult class situations into a meaningful ones

Teachers may face difficult teaching situation and feel disconnected from the students. The students have to come to class. The teacher has to come to class but no one really wants to come to class. The teacher has to teach the "material". The students have to learn the "material". Teaching and Learning becomes meaningless and empty. It is based on the needs of survival and of necessity and not on internal reason for the sake of

learning and understanding. Situations like this can and do happen in many classrooms. The feeling of meaninglessness and dread can spread like an epidemic and is not unique to classrooms but to any situation where human beings interact. The question that arises is how can a teacher transform this kind of situation and bring back creativity and newness into the class.

The following story that happened about 15 years ago and was recorded in my journal gives an example.

*Teaching can be very difficult sometimes. Imagine that you are sailing for days and nights in a small sailboat and there is no sun and no stars. Heavy clouds covered us. The feeling of hopelessness was like a grey cloud. This is how we felt every morning in our small Math Fundamental class that was meeting in the basement classroom without windows in Dillingham Center three times a week; Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8:00 in the morning. There were 8 of us, seven students and a teacher. No one really wanted to be there. There was no purpose, there was no meaning and we did not perceive any light. It was late fall and the days started getting shorter. Half a semester passed. Then one morning, when I could not stand the isolation and despair any longer I asked one of the students to sit on a chair and held her hands. I looked into her eyes and opened my heart. I shared how lonely I felt. How difficult it is for me to come to this class and how difficult my night was. Then it was her turn. She looked into my eyes and shared how difficult it was to wake up in the morning. How someone had activated the alarm at 2:00 and everyone was evacuated from the East Towers and only an hour later was allowed to return. The mutual sharing took only 20 minutes and when it ended something changed in the class.*

*There was an air of optimism and a feeling of new life. A few days later I decided to give all the students in the class a version the placement test again. It was a test similar to the test that they had failed when they first came to the college. The only change was that I allowed them to use a calculator. This time they all passed the test! I was so happy and they were so happy. It felt that now we can devote more time to explore deeper questions than just technical ways to solve math problems. A few days after they passed the test I had to go to a conference in Oregon. I also learned that one of the students is going to have her Birthday when I return. What an opportunity to celebrate. I made a decision in my heart to buy donuts when I come back from Oregon and bring them to class on Monday and have a surprise party to celebrate that all passed the test and have a birthday party at the same time. When I returned from Oregon on Sunday night, I was very tired and forgot my decision. The next morning I went for a walk with my dog Dubie on Warren Rd. It was very cold. From the distance I saw something white on the road. Was it snow? But it was not snowing. Coming closer I saw a box of fresh donuts. They probably fell from a delivery truck to one of the local motels. I took the donuts and brought it home and my small family enjoyed the feast with warm tea. Only then I remembered my decision. There were enough donuts for the whole class and we had our party. Only at the end of the term I told the students the story.*

The miracle that happened with the donuts (yes it really happened) is not the main point of this story. The main point is that the able to empty himself of Ego and by became

completely defenseless and honest with his students. He was able to open his own heart wide and reach the students and they open their hearts to him and only then could their hearts and minds be open to learn Mathematics. Fears vanished and were transformed into Love just like in Julie's dream.

### Practical examples of creating meaningful classroom situations

#### Students connecting with each other:

Sometimes when the class is separate and disjointed the students the teacher can arrange for the students to sit around a circle and share how they feel or answer a question that may not be directly related to the material studied. For example it can be focused on an event that happened in the world. In order to make the situation natural and non-threatening the following two rules could be adopted.

Rule 1: Every one can have a turn to share their insight.

Rule 2: No personal comments are allowed (to avoid ego based discussions that are based on personalities rather than higher principles).

Another method that works could be to physically move around the classroom and do something like shake hands or answers a question.

#### Students connecting with nature or another activity outside the classroom

Sometimes when the weather is nice it could be a wonderful experience to take the students outdoors or to a museum or do a similar activity depending on the circumstances. By changing the environment once in a while newness emerges and hearts open. At our college we have a pond and beautiful trees surrounding it and many times we brought the students there. Other times we took the students to cook in the dorms and created together a spaghetti meal and then ate it together.

#### Connecting with the community

"Giving and receiving are One in Truth" is a sacred principle in life. By connecting with people outside school students create new meaning for their learning. There are many ways to accomplish this: Bring groups of students to nursing homes is one of our favorite activities. The elders appreciate so much the younger people and students are transformed by the experience. Sometimes students may not be ready to face the physically challenging experiences that they may be witnessing in a nursing home setting and it can become a problem but even then it may be helpful for the student in the long run because the plastic "outwardly happy" model of the world that they guard so much will be shaken sooner or later and it may be better to shake it sooner than later. Reflecting later on the experience may be helpful to integrate it. Other forms of integrating learning with the community could be bringing children to the classroom or going to visit a school (or doing the opposite if the students are pre-college students).

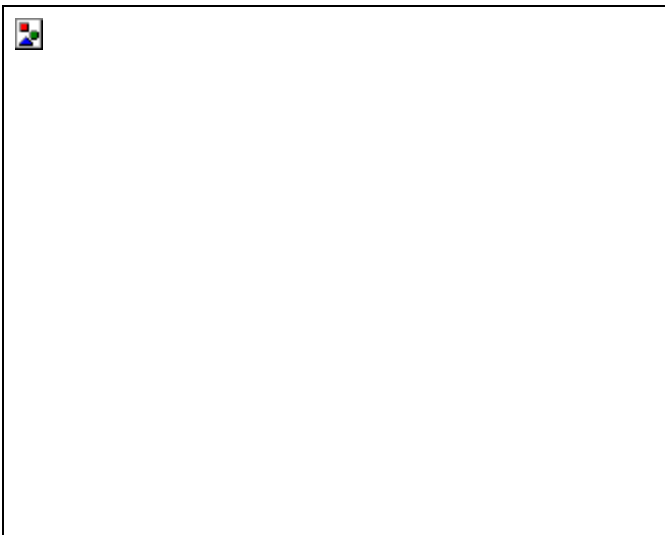
Also writing letters to prisoners can become a meaningful activity that connects students to the world.

### Keeping a journal and personal interviews

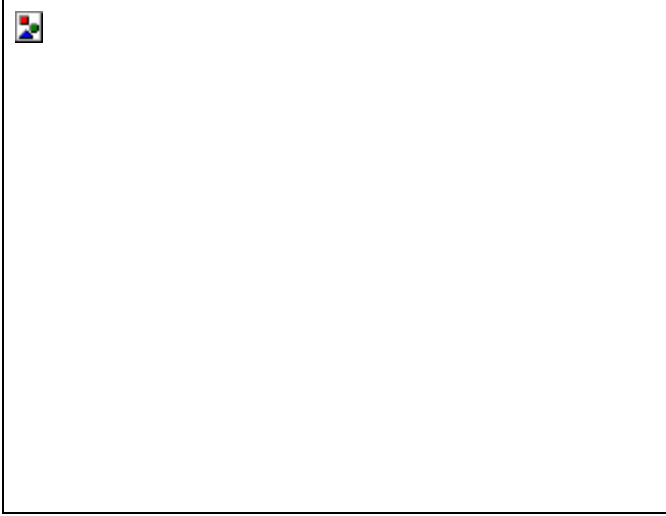
Giving students the option to keep a personal journal has the potential to make learning more meaningful. The teacher can know the students better and the student can connect and integrate the subject matter with his life and thus make it more meaningful. The teacher can also add a component of personal interviews to the class.

### Learning and teaching as Art

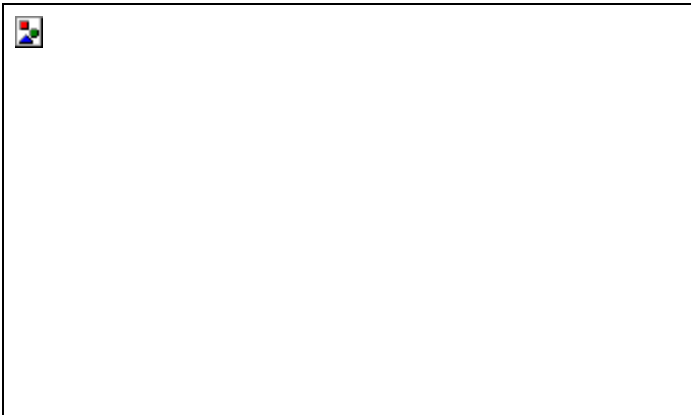
Lee Melen defined an artist as some one who defines himself so. Adopting this definition to teaching, every teacher who defines himself as an artist-teacher is an artist teacher. By this I do not mean that he is an art teacher but that anything he teaches is essentially an art form. This is easy to understand when one applies it to visual art or music but what about Math or History. My answer is that if the teacher views himself as an artist and allows himself to be creative and open to change and improvisation, risk, defenselessness and uncertainty than the classroom itself, the teacher and the students will become a medium of the art and the ever changing energy patterns will be manifested in this medium in a myriad of forms. My personal path along these lines brought me to place where I stopped planning my classes and most beautiful things emerge.



My daughter Edna brings kids from New Orleans to visit Ithaca



The Spiral of Life. Integrating Mathematics and Art.



Kids come to Ithaca College and interact with College students to make a Labyrinth with round stones