

Sense of life as a category of rehabilitation pedagogy

The answer to the question why we live and what we live for, and whether it is worth to live, seems to be important for every human being if he can only go beyond the confined circle of instinctual biological determinations. “Semantics of the question: who shall (should) a person be determines the sense of human life. This question is posed by pedagogy since the beginnings of its existence, it was earlier posed by philosophy, out of which pedagogy had stemmed and on the foundation of which it leans”¹. According to Kazimierz Obuchowski, finding sense in one’s life is one of the three needs (next to the cognitive need and the need of emotional contact) forming the specificity of human existence in the world.² It means that for an intellectually developed and emotionally mature person the lack of satisfying the need of sense of life causes a lasting discomfort, and in the extreme cases leads to self-destruction.

The situation which particularly forces one to ask the question about sense of life is the threat of the perspective of death and the experience of suffering. In the postmodern world, where eudaimonism in its hedonistic version seems to triumph, it may be natural to conclude that a sensible life is the life of happiness, and that the life of happiness is the life without suffering. Yet if the suffering is unavoidable, as a result of which happiness becomes unattainable, it is easy to conclude that life is devoid of sense.

Rehabilitation pedagogy, the purpose of which is not only to supply knowledge and help people stricken with their fate in their everyday existential struggles, but also to demonstrate the possibilities of attaining the existential fulfilment by them, has to reconcile the difficult-to-accept presence of suffering in the world with sense of life.

¹ W.Pasterniak, *Rozjaśnić egzystencję. O dylematach i rozdrożach edukacji*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Polskiego Towarzystwa Pedagogicznego, 2001 s. 30.

² K.Obuchowski, *Węzłowe problemy osobowości*, „Studia Filozoficzne” 1974, nr 11

One of the ways of eliminating this contradiction is the incorporation of personal suffering into the universal order of existence. As a result, suffering acquires a transcendental dimension, evolves into a conscious offering, a factor enriching one's personality, and not only into a physical or mental ailment.³

With disability or a lasting illness is connected the sense of stigmatization and exclusion from a normally functioning community, which leads into the crisis of faith in the axiological order of the world. Traumatic experiences often cause decomposition of individual value systems and take away the power to strive laboriously for what is necessary in life, and what comes easily to other – fully able – people. In such crucial moments, ill or disfunction-stricken individuals start to experience crisis in their feeling of sense of life together with existential anxieties.

Existential anxiety is also connected with the confrontation of individual value systems with dissimilar judgemental attitudes of other people, when the obviousness of separation of good from evil becomes shaken.⁴ As Władysław Dykcik stated: "Social disapproval of the expectations of disabled individuals triggers in them the sense of powerlessness, senselessness of life, self-estrangement, loneliness, isolation and alienation in nearly every new difficult situation, which may limit the normal regulation of their interpersonal relations with the closest environment further still".⁵

The danger of value crises lies in the fact that they often destroy the structure of personality. However, one needs to pay attention to the possibility of positive consequences of the overcome axiological crises. If a person experiencing a fierce value crisis wins an inner battle and saves the endangered values, it will bear fruit in the form of a growing integration of personality, the sense of victory over human weakness. Such a person, finding elements of heroism in himself, rebuilds himself on a higher existential level in a way.⁶ This dialectical character of critical situations is also a

³ See V. E. Frankl, *Homo patiens*. Warszawa, 1984.

⁴ P.Oleś, *Wartościowanie a osobowość: Psychologiczne badania empiryczne*, Lublin 1989

⁵ W.Dykcik, *Pedagogika specjalna wobec aktualnych sytuacji i problemów osób niepełnosprawnych*, Poznań, 2005 s.258.

⁶ A.Jacyniak, & Z. Płużek, *Świat ludzkich kryzysów*, Kraków 1996.

challenge to rehabilitation pedagogy so that it could reinforce what is the evidence for personality reconstruction on a higher axiological level in them.

A serious loss of health usually causes negative emotions in those who suffer from it, changes their attitude towards themselves, other people and the world, and hinders therapeutic undertakings or compensatory training: "Deprivation of a number of needs taking place during the process of illness often makes it difficult or even impossible for the ill to achieve important life aims. This may cause frustrations manifesting itself in aggressive behaviour or expressions of anger towards God, fate, oneself or other people. It has a negative influence on the process of medical treatment, abiding doctor's orders etc., especially when aggression is directed towards the medical staff."⁷

Reduced ability has an important impact on the creation of picture of oneself by those who have to overcome environmental obstacles on a daily basis. Frustration is the predominant feature of this picture: "Among the causes of frustration [...] one should mention: reduced movement within the environment, impossibility of independent self-care, exclusion from a group, teasing, mockery, the feeling of inability to defend oneself, distancing oneself from the family, experience of unhappiness, humiliation, loss of anonymity, the feeling of one's own pejorative otherness, physical suffering, little physical efficiency, limitations in self-managing and deciding about one's future."⁸ That is why the experience of positive emotions at home and in the environment becomes so important for a person with reduced ability: "Mutually accepting emotional relations with the family, integrative contacts and interactions with society confirming humanistic importance of faith in oneself and the other human being, condition the fulfilment of sense of disabled person's individual mental life, always leading towards a full affirmation in the closest environment"⁹.

Looking for sense of life cannot be abstracted from the social context. Brutal political rivalization, decadence of culture, economic and moral collapse of a nation limit the possibilities of choice of individual existence. In spite of the declared removal

⁷ A.Gańuszka, *Człowiek przewlekle chory. Aspekty psychoegzystencjalne*, Katowice 2005 s.38.

⁸ P.Majewicz, *Obraz samego siebie a zachowanie młodzieży niepełnosprawnej Ruchowo*, Kraków, 2002 s.58.

⁹ W. Dykcik, *Pedagogika specjalna wobec aktualnych sytuacji i problemów osób niepełnosprawnych*, Poznań, 2005 s.259.

of obstacles and the integration of people struggling with their disability into the environmental functioning, social ostracism towards them is not a thing of the past. Its sources are manifold. One of them is the fear of otherness, characteristic for the majority of people. Janina Wyczęsany explained it in the following way: “The cause of disorders in relations between healthy and disabled people is the fact that a person is prone to certain stereotypes of appearance and functioning of others, and, as a result, any otherness awakens anxiety or astonishment. Thus he has a tendency to keep at a distance people who look or behave differently in order not to disturb his own feeling of safety and peace”.¹⁰

Although the systematic work on oneself and on the maturity of one’s personality make it possible to become free from enslavement of social stereotypes to a certain extent, in explaining the outer relations of the feeling of sense of life society cannot be treated merely as an abstraction present in the background, since it is the society which creates more or less favourable (or extremely unfavourable) conditions for a wise life in accordance with individual life aspirations. Subordination of human aims to production of material goods and power over nature characteristic for the modern civilization involves the danger of reification of a person, especially the one with reduced ability. Against it warn the representatives of Christian philosophy, for whom deviations of technical civilizations are the harbinger of axiological catastrophe through the closing of a human being to the sphere of sacrum. As Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec wrote: “A person works and thinks [...] not only to make his life more and more comfortable and useful, since apart from usefulness, comfort, functionality there exist other, never outdated values the object of which is the human being himself – cognition as such, love, creativity – are these truly human values which cannot be treated functionally. And the highest manifestations of human being: contemplation of truth and beauty as well as realization of good has always been regarded as the only worthy aim of a person’s life.”¹¹

Philosophical justification of the autonomy of personal aims in view of all varieties of outer reductionism was made by Max Scheler in the classical treatise from 1928, *Stanowisko człowieka w kosmosie* [On the place of man in the cosmos]. A person as an

¹⁰ J. Wyczęsany (2002). www.wsp.krakow.pl/konspekt/10.

¹¹ M.A. Krąpiec, *Ja – człowiek. Zarys antropologii filozoficznej*, Lublin, 1996 s.5.

acting centre – intentionally expecting to surmount the borders of sensuality and open to transcendence – through the acts of reason, will and emotional states such as “goodness, love, remorse, respect, spiritual astonishment, happiness and despair, free decision” (Scheler 1987: 82) – constructs himself in relations with other people, the world of nature and human products. Phenomenon of human life lies in the fact that it runs in two currents which are in a ceaseless quarrel with each other. On the one hand, it is a biological process accomplished according to the laws operating in nature, and on the other – a chain of actions dependent on consideration and will, taken on account of the values in order to attain goals which are in accordance with these values.

Teresa Borowska claimed in her work *Pedagogika ograniczeń ludzkiej egzystencji* [Pedagogy of limitations of human existence] that: “in the contemporary pedagogy, existential problems seem to locate themselves continuously in the sphere of *absent discourses*”¹², but the affirmation of life is possible only when one finds and names its sense. Discovering and creating values which are the justification of sense of life reinforce positive attitudes towards life and guarantee happiness of existence, at the same time motivating a person to self-perfection, overcoming one’s somatical limitations and spiritual sibiratism. Thanks to discovered and created values the effort of existence acquires justification. It can be comprehended from the extrabiological perspective – not as a decadence, progressing loss of vitality, but as an adding of new mental qualities and cultural artefacts to the existential universe.

Sense of life cannot be measured with a universal measure. Human beings as people are not competitors in a planetary race with the same rules, on the contrary – they are unique, and each of them has to justify to himself the relevance of the chosen way. That is why it is impossible to compare individual existences to the ideal model, since none of that kind exists. We can thus say that: “life has got sense when it has been organized in such a way that it creates a whole moving rationally towards the fulfilment of the best aims out of those the realization of which we are capable of in the given circumstances”.¹³

¹² T. Borowska, *Pedagogika ograniczeń ludzkiej egzystencji*, Warszawa, 1998 s. 9.

¹³ T.Czeżowski, *Jak rozumieć sens życia* [w:] *Pisma z etyki i teorii wartości*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź, 1989 s.172.

People with reduced ability are prone to deprivation of the most important needs – including the need of the feeling of sense of life. Helping them should not be reduced to material, technical and logistic support. It also has to embrace the compensation connected with axiological horizon. It will be possible through holistic and fully personal approach to their problems. Only such a perspective guarantees that people suffering from physical imperfection will not be exposed to the process of personal degradation and perceived as medical cases, and the communication between them and the society of people free from somatic limitations will not be reduced to compassion and occasional charitableness.

Comparison of e.g. axiological preferences and existential dilemmas of people stricken with disfunctions of motor organs with their fully able peers allows to state that the differences between the examined groups on this plane of life are almost unimportant.¹⁴ This is an important argument for developing all kinds of environmental integration of people with reduced ability. If one takes into consideration that people understand each other most deeply and feel the sense of community with each other when their perception of detailed values, and most of all, of sense of human existence in the world is similar, we can state that there is no rational much less moral evidence for perceiving disability as the justification for social exclusion or limiting the possibility of personal development.

The attitude of young people with disability towards their own existence, evaluation of individual sequences and threads of life, expectations about themselves, their dear ones and society, plans and dreams – are of particular importance for these people, since in their case the consequences of positive signals as well as of negative informations coming from the environment are magnified as a result of an unstable social position and limitation of the autonomy of choices and strivings. The will to live up to the norms delineated by the fully able fixes the state of neurotic anxiety in these people which manifests itself in continuous attempts to prove one's worth and social usefulness to oneself and the environment.

The confirmation that the differences in emotional quality of life – which is after all the most important evaluation criterion of the virtues of personality – between people

¹⁴ See M.Rorat, *Wartości i poczucie sensu życia młodzieży z dysfunkcją narządu ruchu*, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2006.

stricken with disability and community of those enjoying perfect health are marginal, may help people who encounter the barriers of incomprehension to find and strengthen the sense of self-esteem. This, in turn, is the basic condition of a successful complex rehabilitation and revalidation assuming the active participation of the subject, with whom this treatment is connected, in creating the quality of his own life.

Analysing the modus of human existence, Viktor Emil Frankl distinguished its actual (“existence given”) and facultative (“existence set“) side. This division is particularly important for rehabilitation pedagogy which has to support a person with incomplete ability in his rehabilitation and development of the germ of his potential so that he could achieve the state of existential fulfilment possible in his situation. Frankl’s statement: “A human being never *is* but *becomes* a human being, a human being is not the one who could tell about himself: I am who I am – but he can only say about himself: I am who I shall become...” (Frankl 1984: 20) – may serve both as an optimistic motto and the conclusion of rehabilitative efforts.

References:

1. Borowska, T. (1998). *Pedagogika ograniczeń ludzkiej egzystencji* [Pedagogy of limitations of human existence]. Warszawa.
2. Borowski, H. (1992). *Wartość jako przeżycie. Wprowadzenie do aksjologii* [Value as an experience. Introduction to axiology]. Lublin.
3. Cichoń, W. (1996). *Wartości, człowiek, wychowanie, zarys problematyki axiologiczno-wychowawczej* [Values, human being, upbringing, axiological and educational issues in outline]. Kraków.
4. Czeżowski, T. (1989). *Jak rozumieć sens życia* [w:] *Pisma z etyki i teorii wartości* [How to understand sense of life. In: Papers on ethics and the theory of values]. Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź.
5. Dykcik, W. (2005). *Pedagogika specjalna wobec aktualnych sytuacji i problemów osób niepełnosprawnych* [Special pedagogy in the face of present situations and problems of disabled people]. Poznań.
6. Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Homo patiens*. Warszawa.
7. Gałuszka, A. (2005). *Człowiek przewlekle chory. Aspekty psychoegzystencjalne* [A chronically ill person. Psycho-existential aspects]. Katowice.
8. Jacyniak, A. & Płużek, Z. (1996). *Świat ludzkich kryzysów* [The world of human crises]. Kraków.
9. Krąpiec, M. A. (1986). *Ja – człowiek. Zarys antropologii filozoficznej* [I – human being. Philosophical anthropology in outline]. Lublin.
10. Łobocki, M. (1993). *Pedagogika wobec wartości* [w:] *Kontestacje pedagogiczne*, red. B. Śliwierski [Pedagogy in the face of values. In: B. Śliwierski (Ed.), Pedagogical contestations]. Kraków.
11. Majewicz, P. (2002). *Obraz samego siebie a zachowanie młodzieży niepełnosprawnej ruchowo* [Picture of oneself and the behaviour of motorically disabled youth]. Kraków.
12. Mariański, J. (1996). *Postawy młodzieży wobec sensu życia* [w:] *Człowiek – wartości – sens. Studia z psychologii egzystencji. Logoteoria i nooteoria. Logoterapia i nooterapia*, red. K. Popielski [Attitudes of youth towards sense of life. In: K. Popielski (Ed.), Human being – values – sense. Studies in the

psychology of existence. Logotherapy and nootherapy. Logotherapy and nootherapy]. Lublin.

13. Obuchowski, K. (1974). *Węzłowe problemy osobowości*, „Studia Filozoficzne”, nr 11 [Crucial personality problems. "Philosophical Studies", 11]
14. Oleś, P. (1989). *Wartościowanie a osobowość: Psychologiczne badania empiryczne* [Evaluation and personality: Psychological and empirical studies]. Lublin.
15. Pasterniak, W. (2001). *Rozjaśnić egzystencję. O dylematach i rozdrożach edukacji* [To brighten up the existence. On the dilemmas and crossroads of education]. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Polskiego Towarzystwa pedagogicznego.
16. Rorat, M. (2006). *Wartości i poczucie sensu życia młodzieży z dysfunkcją narządu ruchu* [Values and the feeling of sense of life of the youth with motor organs disfunctions]. Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego.
17. Scheler, M. (1987). *Stanowisko człowieka w kosmosie* [w:] *idem, Pisma z antropologii filozoficznej i teorii wiedzy*, tłum. i wstęp S. Czerniak, A. Węgrzecki [On the place of man in the cosmos. In: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research]. Warszawa.
18. Wyczesany (2002). www.wsp.krakow.pl/konspekt/10

