

LISA LEMPEL-SANDER

The Longing for Meaningfulness: *Defining the Self in the Context of the Other*

The longing for meaningfulness—a reference to the ongoing longing to enrich and deepen the experience of the self—originates in the early exchanges between infant and parent when the infant is first viewed as an area of unknown experience for his parents, and the object of their search for meaning. The imprimatur of the parental gaze contains the struggle to make the infant meaningful, giving him significance, firmness, and conviction, with respect to the relative aspects of who he is *to them*.

The experience of being made meaningful is paradoxical. While the parental gaze contains the meaning of the infant *to the parent*, the infant is, simultaneously, inspired to imagine himself in their gaze, creating an original unfolding of self experience—the experience of making the self meaningful. These are coincident and corresponding activities which place meaning and the activity of making meaning into a relational context where the capacity for self experience and for making the self meaningful, flows from an early experience *of being meaningful to the other*.

This paper explores the longing for meaningfulness, and the desire embedded in the moment of inquiry when the patient is asked, “*What does this mean to you?*”? Frequently, the patient shifts *away* from the work of creating, appearing to be overcome by a sense of awe, reverence, even rapture—all of which suspend the moment of inquiry in a bubble of expectation and desire, and make it feel practically holy. Here, I will explore why we engage in this paradox and why it facilitates creativity.

Licensed Psychoanalyst and faculty member, The Suffolk Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. Member, Board of Trustees, NAAP: Psychoanalytic Recognition Committee Co-Liaison, Federal Legislation; Licensed Attorney.