

# **Man's Search for Meaning**

## **By**

### **Victor E. Frankl**

#### **Foreword (by Harold Kushner, author)**

- In the 1930's, Frankl was cast into the Nazi network of concentration and extermination camps. (ix)
- He describes poignantly those prisoners who gave up on life, who had lost all hope for a future and were inevitably the first to die. They died less from lack of food or medicine than from lack of hope, lack of something to live for. (ix)
- Frankl kept himself alive and kept hope alive by summoning up thoughts of his wife and the prospect of seeing her again, and by dreaming of lecturing after the war about the psychological lessons to be learned from the Auschwitz experience. Frankl focuses on the question of why anyone at all survived. (ix-x)
- Nietzsche: "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How." (ix)
- Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. (x)
- Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you. (x)

#### **Preface to the 1992 Edition**

- For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. (xiv-xv)

#### **Experiences in a Concentration Camp**

- On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves. We who have come back know: the best of us did not return. (5-6)
- Three phases of the inmate's mental reactions to camp life become apparent: the period following his admission; the period when he is well entrenched in camp routine; and the period following his release and liberation. (8)
- The symptom that characterizes the first phase is shock. Upon seeing the Auschwitz signs, and the immense camp known for its gas chambers, crematoriums, and massacres, Frankl was horrified, but this was just as well, because step by step he had to become accustomed to a terrible and immense horror. (8)
- Upon arrival, 1500 captives were cooped up in a shed built to accommodate probably 200. One 5 ounce piece of bread per person was the only food in four

- days. Men and women were then separated into two groups and then filed past a senior SS officer who split the line presumably upon his perception of who was healthy and capable of work. This sent 90% of Frankl's transport to their death within a few hours. (11-12)
- The next day everything was taken from them; they were told to strip and only retain their shoes and belt or suspenders; all hair was shaved from their bodies; they were sent to the showers; 9 men shared a 6-8 foot bed tier with two blankets. (14-17)
  - The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. (18)
  - Experienced prisoners suggested – shave daily, even if you need to use a piece of glass; if you want to stay alive – look fit for work; remember to shave, stand and walk smartly.(19)
  - Lessing: “There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose.” An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior. (20)
  - In a few days, the prisoner passed from the first to the second phase; the phase of relative apathy, in which he achieved a kind of emotional death. There was boundless longing for his home and family and disgust with all the ugliness of everything. Due to his psychological reactions, he did not avert his eyes anymore as his feelings were blunted – he watched unmoved. (20-21)
  - Daily and hourly beatings were normal. The physical pain did not hurt the most; it was the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all. (23-24)
  - Reality dimmed, and all efforts and all emotion were centered on one task: preserving one's life and that of the other fellow. The constant necessity of concentrating on the task of staying alive, forced the prisoner's inner life down to a primitive level. Those prisoners trained in psychoanalysis often referred to this “regression”. (28)
  - What did the prisoner dream about most frequently? Of bread, cake, cigarettes, and nice warm baths. (28)
  - Because of the high degree of undernourishment which the prisoners suffered, it was natural that the desire for food was the major primitive instinct around which mental life centered. (29)
  - The daily ration consisted of very watery soup once a day with a small piece of bread. In addition, there was an “extra allowance” consisting of  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's of an ounce of margarine, or a slice of poor quality sausage, or a small piece of cheese. In calories this diet was absolutely inadequate especially given the heavy manual work and constant exposure to the cold in inadequate clothing. When the last layers of subcutaneous fat had vanished, we looked liked skeletons disguised with skin and rags. We could watch our bodies starting to devour themselves. The organism digested its own protein, and the muscles disappeared. Then the body had no powers of resistance left. One after another the members of our little community in our hut died. (30)

- There was a “cultural hibernation” in the camp with two exceptions: politics and religion. Political discussions were mostly about rumors of the military situation. The religious interest was the most sincere imaginable. There were improvised prayers or services in the corner of a hut or in the darkness of a cattle truck shuttling to a distant work site. (34)
- In the winter and spring of 1945, there was an outbreak of typhus which infected nearly all the prisoners. The mortality was great among the weak. There was practically no medicines or attendants. (34-35)
- Sensitive people used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature. (36)
- On early morning marches to distant work sites, in the dark, cold and icy wind, some would whisper of their wives hoping they were well and better off and find encouraging strength. This helped Frankl discover the truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. He grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart. *The salvation of man is through love and in love.* He understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. (37)
- Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. Whether or not they are actually present, whether or not they are still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance. (38)
- This intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation, and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past. (39)
- Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. (43)
- Suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. The “size” of human suffering is absolutely relative. (44)
- Everything that was not connected with the immediate task of keeping oneself and one’s closest friends alive lost its value. The mental turmoil threatened all the values he held and threw them into doubt. Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If you didn’t struggle to save your self-respect, you lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value. (49-50)
- One of the camp’s most imperative laws of self-preservation: Do not be conspicuous. (51)
- The prisoner craved to be alone with himself and his thoughts. He yearned for privacy and solitude. (51)
- Near the end of his three years of imprisonment, Frankl, due to his medical background, was assigned to a clinic. When liberation was coming, he chose to

- pass up a chance to escape because he couldn't leave his patients. Tremendous inward peace came upon him. (58-59)
- Prisoner apathy was also the result of other factors. Hunger and lack of sleep contributed to it. Lack of sleep was due partly to the pestering of vermin which infested the terribly overcrowded huts with poor hygiene and sanitation. (62)
  - In the final analysis, it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of camp influences alone. Therefore, any man can decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually. Dostoevski said, "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." Those martyrs whose behavior in camp bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. The way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away - that makes life meaningful and purposeful. (66-67)
  - Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails gives him ample opportunity to add a deeper meaning to his life. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not. (67)
  - Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man – his courage and hope, or lack of them – and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. (75)
  - Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. "Life" does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete. (77)
  - There was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatness of courage, the courage to suffer. (78)
  - Nietzsche: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger." (82)
  - Amongst the guards, some were sadists in the purest clinical sense. The feelings of the majority of the guards had been dulled by the years. They would refuse to take active part in sadistic measures, but they wouldn't prevent others from carrying out the acts. Some guards took pity on the prisoners. (84-85)
  - The mere knowledge that a man was either a camp guard or a prisoner tells us almost nothing. Human kindness can be found in all groups, even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn. (86)
  - The third stage of a prisoner's mental reactions was the psychology of the prisoner after his liberation. The man who has suddenly been liberated from mental pressure can suffer damage to his moral and spiritual health. Some were now the oppressors instead of the oppressed. They justified their behavior by their own terrible experiences. Only slowly could these men be guided back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them. In addition to this moral deformity, liberated prisoners had to deal with bitterness and disillusionment when they returned to their former life.

- While they weren't expecting happiness, they weren't expecting the unhappiness many found. (84,90-92)
- Upon starting to realize their "freedom" after liberation, the prisoners found that they had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to relearn it slowly. (87-8)
  - The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear any more – except his God. (93)

## **Logotherapy in a Nutshell**

- In contrast to psychoanalysis which is retrospective and introspective, logotherapy focuses on the future, that is, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future. In logotherapy, the patient is actually confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life. And to make him aware of this meaning can contribute much to his ability to overcome his neurosis. Logotherapy focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning. (98-9)
- Logotherapy, striving to find a meaning in one's life, is the primary motivational force in man. Frankl speaks of a *will to meaning*; Freudian psychology is centered on the *will to pleasure*; and Adlerian psychology focuses on the *will to power* using the term "striving for superiority". (99)
- A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an *existential distress* but by no means a *mental disease*. Logotherapy regards its assignment as that of assisting the patient to find meaning in his life. It tries to make the patient aware of what he actually longs for in the depth of his being. (102-3)
- Man's search for meaning may arouse inner tensions rather than inner equilibrium. This tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health. Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension – the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. (103-5)
- Sometimes man does not even know what he wishes to do. He either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism). (106)
- An existential vacuum – a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness - manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom. Boredom is now causing more problems than distress. (106-7,141)
- Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. (107)
- The meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. (108)
- Logotherapy tries to make the patient fully aware of his own responsibility; therefore, it must leave him the option for what, to what, or to whom he understands himself to be responsible. It is up to the patient to decide whether he

should interpret his life task as being responsible to society or his own conscience. (109-110)

- The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche – “the self-transcendence of human existence”. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. (110-1)
- According to logotherapy, we can discover the meaning of life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. (111)
- Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. Love is not understood as a mere side-effect of sex; rather, sex is a way of expressing the experience of that ultimate togetherness which is called love. (111-112)
- Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice. In no way is suffering *necessary* to find meaning. (113)
- Changing one’s *attitude* (especially when you can’t change one’s *fate*) is one of the basic tenets of logotherapy that man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life. (113)
- What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms. *Logos* is deeper than logic. (118)
- At any moment, man must decide, for better or worse, what will be the monument of his existence. (121)
- Logotherapy, keeping in mind the essential transitoriness of human existence, is not pessimistic but rather activist. (121)
- Anticipatory anxiety – it is characteristic of this fear that it produces precisely that of which the patient is afraid. “The fear is mother of the event.” (122)
- In the same way that fear brings to pass what one is afraid of, likewise a forced intention makes impossible what one forcibly wishes. (122)
- Logotherapy bases its technique called “paradoxical intention” on the two-fold fact that fear brings about that which one is afraid of, and that hyper-intention makes impossible what one wishes. In this approach the phobic patient is invited to intend precisely that which he fears. By this treatment, the wind is taken out of the sails of the anxiety. (124)
- Gordon W. Allport’s book, *The Individual and His Religion*, “The neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management, perhaps to cure.” (125)
- Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment. (131)
- Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary. (131)
- Freedom is not the last word. Freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. (132)

- Frankl recommends “that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.” (132)
- A human being is not one thing among others; *things* determine each other, but *man* is ultimately self-determining. (133)
- In the concentration camps, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions. (134)

### **The Case for a Tragic Optimism (from 1983 lecture)**

- Tragic optimism – optimism in the face of tragedy - means that one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the “tragic triad” – pain, guilt, and death. (137)
- Human potential which at its best always allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.
- Optimism is not anything to be commanded or ordered. One cannot force oneself to be optimistic indiscriminately, against all odds, against all hope. And, this is also true for the other two components of the triad inasmuch as faith and love cannot be commanded or ordered either. (138)
- Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to “be happy.” Once the reason is found, one becomes happy automatically. (138)
- And how does a human being go about finding meaning? Logotherapy conceives of conscience as a prompter which, if need be, indicates the direction in which we have to move in a given life situation. (145)
- There is no reason to pity old people. Instead, young people should envy them. It is true that the old have no opportunities, no possibilities in the future. But they have more than that. They have realities in the past – the potentialities they have actualized, the meanings they have fulfilled, the values they have realized – and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past. (151)
- Today’s society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and, in particular, it adores the young. It virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in so doing blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness. (151)

### **Afterword (by William J. Winslade)**

- 1991 Library of Congress/Book-of-the-Month-Club survey asking readers to name a “book that made a difference in your life” found *Man’s Search for Meaning* among the ten most influential books in America. (155)
- Victor Frankl, born in 1905, died in 1997.
- In September, 1942, Frankl and his family were arrested and deported. He spent the next three years at four different concentration camps – Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kaufering, and Turkheim, part of the Dachau complex. (157)

- Why, then, do some people find themselves feeling so empty? Frankl's wisdom here is worth emphasizing: it is a question of the *attitude* one takes toward life's challenges and opportunities, both large and small. A positive attitude enables a person to endure suffering and disappointment as well as enhance enjoyment and satisfaction. A negative attitude intensifies pain and deepens disappointments; it undermines and diminishes pleasure, happiness, and satisfaction; it may even lead to depression or physical illness. (160)
- Frankl offers readers who are searching for answers to life's dilemmas a critical mandate: he does not tell people *what* to do, but why *they* must do it. (161)
- On the first day of his return to Vienna in August, 1945, Frankl learned that his pregnant wife, Tilly, had died of sickness and starvation in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Sadly, his parents and brother had all died in the camps. (161)