

Man's Search for Meaning

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Viktor Frankl's 1946 book **Man's Search for Meaning** chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate and describes his psychotherapeutic methods of finding a reason to live. According to Frankl, the book intends to answer the question, "How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?" Part One constitutes Frankl's analysis of his experiences in the concentration camps, while Part Two introduces his ideas of meaning and his theory of logotherapy.

According to a survey conducted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress, *Man's Search for Meaning* belongs to a list of "the ten most influential books in the United States" (*New York Times*, November 20, 1991). At the time of the author's death in 1997, the book had sold 10 million copies in twenty-four languages.

Experiences in a concentration camp

Frankl identifies three psychological reactions experienced by all inmates to one degree or another: (1) shock during the initial admission phase to the camp, (2) apathy after becoming accustomed to camp existence, in which the inmate values only that which helps himself and his friends survive, and (3) reactions of depersonalization, moral deformity, bitterness, and disillusionment if he survives and is liberated.

Frankl concludes that the meaning of life is found in every moment of living; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. In a group therapy session during a mass fast inflicted on the camp's inmates trying to protect an anonymous fellow inmate from fatal retribution by authorities, Frankl offered the thought that for everyone in a dire condition there is someone looking down, a friend, family member, or even God, who would expect not to be disappointed. Frankl concludes from his experience that a prisoner's psychological reactions are not solely the result of the conditions of his life, but also from the freedom of choice he always has even in severe suffering. The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having a faith in the future, and that once a prisoner loses that faith, he is doomed.

An example of Frankl's idea of finding meaning in the midst of extreme suffering is found in his account of an experience he had while working in the harsh conditions of the Auschwitz concentration camp:

. . . We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us."

That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife.

Occasionally, I looked at the sky where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me; saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life, I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I 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.* I 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. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, “The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory. . .”

Frankl also concludes that there are only two races of men, decent men and indecent. No society is free of either of them, and thus there were “decent” Nazi guards and “indecent” prisoners, most notably the capo who would torture and abuse their fellow prisoners for personal gain.

His concluding passage in Part One describes the psychological reaction of the inmates to their liberation, which he separates into three stages. The first is depersonalization – a period of readjustment, in which a prisoner gradually returns to the world. Initially, the liberated prisoners are so numb that they are unable to understand what freedom means, or to emotionally respond to it. Part of them believes that it is an illusion or a dream that will be taken away from them. In their first foray outside their former prison, the prisoners realized that they could not comprehend pleasure. Flowers and the reality of the freedom they had dreamed about for years were all surreal, unable to be grasped in their depersonalization.

The body is the first element to break out of this stage, responding by voracious eating and sleeping. Only after the partial replenishing of the body is the mind finally able to respond, as “feeling suddenly broke through the strange fetters which had restrained it.”

This begins the second stage, in which there is a danger of deformation. As the intense pressure on the mind is released, mental health can be endangered. Frankl uses the analogy of a diver suddenly released from his pressure chamber. He recounts the story of a decent friend who became immediately obsessed with dispensing the same violence in judgment of his abusers that they had inflicted on him.

Upon returning home, the prisoners had to struggle with two fundamental experiences which could also damage their mental health; bitterness and disillusionment. The last stage is bitterness at the lack of responsiveness of the world outside – a “superficiality and lack of feeling...so disgusting that one finally felt like creeping into a hole and neither hearing nor seeing human beings anymore.” Worse was disillusionment, which was the discovery that suffering does not end, that the longed-for happiness will not come. This was the experience of those who – like

Frankl – returned home to discover that no one awaited them. The hope that had sustained them throughout their time in the concentration camp was now gone. Frankl cites this experience as the most difficult to overcome.

As time passed, however, the prisoner's experience in a concentration camp finally became nothing but a remembered nightmare. What is more, he knows that he has nothing left to fear any more, "except his God."

Frankl's meaning in life is to help others find theirs.