

32 Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor E. Frankl

In the first part of Dr. Viktor E. Frankl's extraordinary book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the author recounts his years at Auschwitz. His perspective is not only as a prisoner but also as a psychiatrist. Thus his story is told with both a compelling intimacy and a professional distance.

In the book's second part, Frankl explains logotherapy (*logos* denotes "meaning" in Greek), a form of therapy which involves choice and personal responsibility, which he developed out of his concentration camp experience. Because Frankl found meaning even in the intense suffering of a concentration camp, he believed that anyone, particularly those prone to despair during ordinary times, can discover meaning in their lives. Every individual will hopefully find personal meaning in life. We, individually, must ask what life demands of us, rather than what we want from life, and then answer by acting responsibly.

When Frankl wrote this book in nine straight days in 1945, he wanted to publish it anonymously, using only his number: 119,104. Friends persuaded him to allow his name to appear on the title page, and that is how it originally was printed. Written with intense honesty, the book struck a chord among people everywhere and became a bestseller. Recounting his firsthand experience in the camps with great intimacy, he showed us how he found meaning through tragedy.

Pain, which comes to everyone in life, is not without value. If we allow it, it can be a call for growth and transformation. This, then, is ultimately a book about hope, resounding with an optimism that even during ordinary, peaceful times is uplifting.

A familiar aspect of Holocaust literature emerges from Frankl's book. He recounts hellish experiences of Auschwitz, but also

relates how he sought and found pleasure, not merely in spite of his surroundings, but precisely because of them.

To speak of happiness, no matter how minute, as an Auschwitz prisoner, is stunning. Frankl knew that regardless of any physical pain and degradation he was forced to endure, no one could rob him of his self-respect. Only he had the power to choose where to focus his thoughts. He drew strength through countering his physical pain by focusing on images which nourished his inner life.

The grotesque existence of Frankl's life at Auschwitz is overwhelming. He writes about how to ward off a Kapo's blow: when excrement splashed up into a prisoner's face while cleaning the latrines and sewage, he should appear indifferent, never expressing revulsion or attempting to wipe it off.

Another anecdote reflects on the horror while revealing Frankl's empathy. Sleep, no matter how brief, was a reprieve. One night he watched a fellow prisoner writhe in the midst of a nightmare. About to wake him, he realized it would be better for him to dream: no nightmare could be as frightening as the reality this man experienced when awake.

Meanwhile, amid the shock, the detached curiosity, the apathy, there was also grim humor. Prisoners, hairless and naked in the showers, tried to have fun—because, after all, they were actually washing with *water!* One feels the desperation that precedes such laughter and the release that it brings.

The harder external conditions became, the more one needed to look within. Thus one's spiritual life could be enriched in the camps. Prisoners who had a satisfying intellectual life beforehand were often able to survive better than those in robust health who lacked a stronger inner life. One feels this unequivocally about Frankl, who chose to hold on to hope because he understood that it was a prerequisite for the will to live. He saw men lose it, then die. He decided to be mentally strong. His first night at Auschwitz he promised himself he wouldn't commit suicide by running into the electrically charged barbed wire.

Later, he forced himself to get outside of his physical self by seeing how he could benefit from what he was enduring. He imagined the war over and that he was now speaking on a podium to an audience about his experience in the camps. In this image, he felt restored to dignity and validation.

Finding something positive to sustain him emotionally was

imperative. By blocking out certain images and focusing on positive ones, he was able to know pleasure in solitude, even for five minutes: sitting on a shaft leading to water pipes, staring at the blue hills of Bavaria, rather than the lice-ridden corpses nearby. One of his fondest memories is of nights when he roasted pilfered potatoes alone in front of a fire made with stolen charcoal.

The most poignant passages of the book have to do with Frankl's loving recall of his wife. Amid the constant pain, he pictured her and thus willed himself to live. "The salvation of man is through love and in love." He discovered that "love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance." Even a man with "nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment in the contemplation of his beloved."

Thinking he might die soon, Frankl forced a tearful friend to memorize his will. One wonders what a man who is without possessions has to leave, and discovers how rich a man he really was. "Listen, Otto, if I don't get back home to my wife, and if you should see her again, then tell her that I talked of her daily, hourly. You remember. Secondly, I have loved her more than anyone. Thirdly, the short time I have been married to her outweighs everything, even all we have gone through here."

In another section, Frankl explains that one can find kindness in any group of people. He tells of a prison guard who was so compassionate that he chose to spend his own money on medicine for sick prisoners. After the war, prisoners hid the guard in the Bavarian woods, telling an American commander that they would not disclose his whereabouts until the American swore that no harm would come to this SS commander. The promise was kept, and the SS commander wound up supervising a clothing collection from nearby villages for the newly freed prisoners.

Frankl has truly given the gift of himself to his readers.