



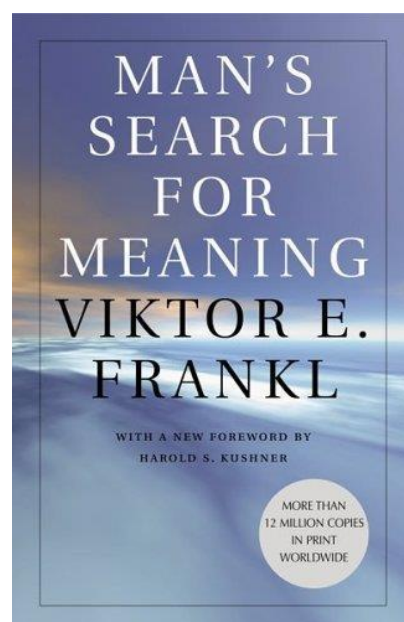
Viktor Frankl on the Human Search for Meaning

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

BY MARIA POPOVA. FROM <https://www.brainpickings.org/>

Celebrated Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor **Viktor Frankl** (March 26, 1905–September 2, 1997) remains best-known for his indispensable 1946 psychological memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning* (*public library*) — a meditation on what the gruesome experience of Auschwitz taught him about the primary purpose of life: the quest for meaning, which sustained those who survived.

For Frankl, meaning came from three possible sources: purposeful work, love, and courage in the face of difficulty.





In examining the “intensification of inner life” that helped prisoners stay alive, he considers the transcendental power of love:

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 actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.

Frankl illustrates this with a stirring example of how his feelings for his wife — who was eventually killed in the camps — gave him a sense of meaning:

We were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. “*Et lux in tenebris lucet*” — and the light shineth in the darkness. For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was there. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me.

Of humor, “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation,” Frankl writes:

It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. ... The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent.



Lithograph by Leo Haas, Holocaust artist who survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz (public domain)

After discussing the common psychological patterns that unfold in inmates, Frankl is careful to challenge the assumption that human beings are invariably shaped by their circumstances. He writes:

But what about human liberty? Is there no spiritual freedom in regard to behavior and reaction to any given surroundings? ... Most important, do the prisoners' reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?

We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. ... Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

[...]

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.



Much like William James did in his treatise on habit, Frankl places this notion of everyday choice at the epicenter of the human experience:

Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

Like Henry Miller and Philip K. Dick, Frankl recognizes suffering as an essential piece not only of existence but of the meaningful life:

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. 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, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity — even under the most difficult circumstances — to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. 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. ... Such men are not only in concentration camps. Everywhere man is confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through his own suffering.

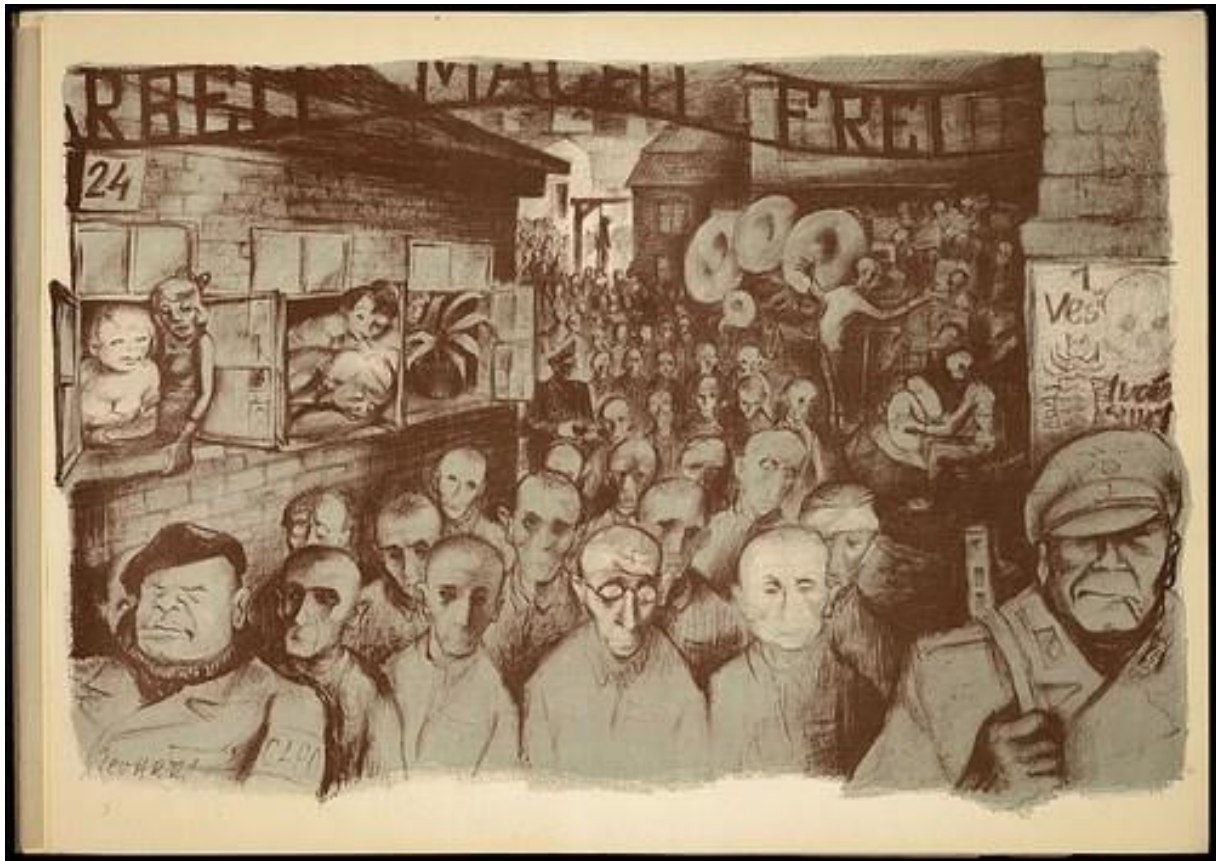
In working as a psychiatrist to the inmates, Frankl found that the single most important factor in cultivating the kind of “inner hold” that allowed men to survive was teaching them to hold in the mind’s grip some future goal. He cites Nietzsche’s, who wrote that “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” and admonishes against generalization:

Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, “I have nothing to expect from life any more.” What sort of answer can one give to that?

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it *did not*

really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life — daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. 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. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. “Life” does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life’s tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man’s destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response. Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross. Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.



Lithograph by Leo Haas, Holocaust artist who survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz (public domain)

In considering the human capacity for good and evil and the conditions that bring out indecency in decent people, Frankl writes:

Human kindness can be found in all groups, even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn. The boundaries between groups overlapped and we must not try to simplify matters by saying that these men were angels and those were devils.

[...]

From all this we may learn that there are two races of men in this world, but only these two — the “race” of the decent man and the “race” of the indecent man. Both are found everywhere; they penetrate into all groups of society. No group consists entirely of decent or indecent people. In this sense, no group is of “pure race” — and therefore one occasionally found a decent fellow among the camp guards.

Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings, reaches into the lowest depths and becomes apparent even on the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp.

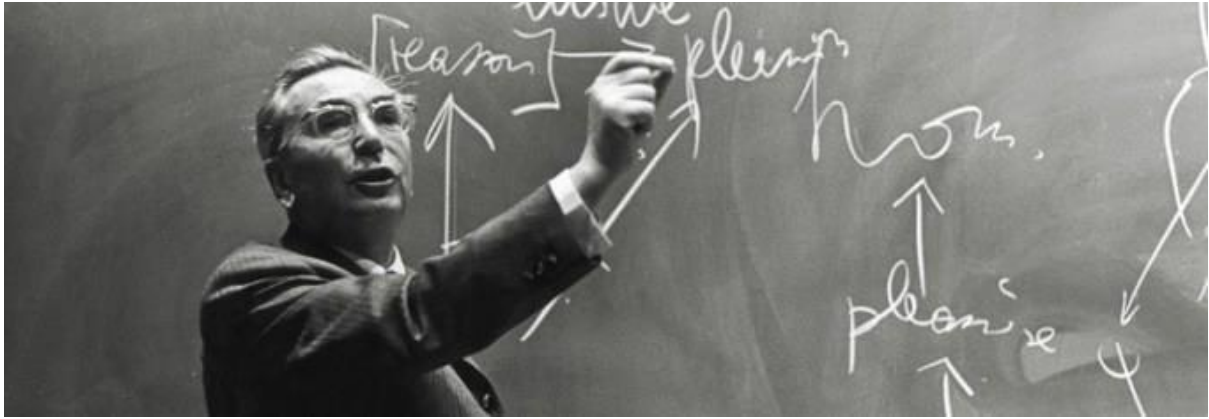
The second half of the book presents Frankl's singular style of existential analysis, which he termed "logotherapy" — a method of healing the soul by cultivating the capacity to find a meaningful life:

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.

This emphasis on responsibility is reflected in the categorical imperative of logotherapy, which is: "Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"

Frankl contributes to history's richest definitions of love:

Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true.



Frankl wrote the book over the course of nine consecutive days, with the original intention of publishing it anonymously, but upon his friends' insistent advice, he added his name in the last minute. In the introduction to the 1992 edition, in reflecting upon the millions of copies sold in the half-century since the original publication, Frankl makes a poignant meta-comment about something George Saunders recently echoed, noting:

In the first place I do not at all see in the bestseller status of my book an achievement and accomplishment on my part but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails. ... At first, however, it had been written with the absolute conviction that, as an anonymous opus, it could never earn its author literary fame.

In the same introduction, he shares a piece of timeless advice on success he often gives his students:

Don't aim at success — the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. 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. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring

about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it.

(Hugh MacLeod famously articulated the same sentiment when he wrote that *“The best way to get approval is not to need it.”*)

If there ever were a universal reading list of existential essentials, ***Man’s Search for Meaning*** would, without a shadow of a doubt, be on it.