

# Reflections On Reading

## *Man's Search for Meaning, An Introduction to Logotherapy*

by Victor E. Frankl

On a visit to my son's home, to be there for his daughter's wedding, (our first grandchild to be married!) I found on his bookshelf a copy of *Man's Search for Meaning, An Introduction to Logotherapy* by Victor E. Frankl (Third Edition, Touchstone, New York, 1984). I read it in one day, finishing it at 3 AM, in the closet with a light, so my wife could sleep. So, what did I learn from this book? A lot of insights were both gained and confirmed through reading this book.

### A. The main autobiographical portion of the book.

From this part of the book I learned more than I ever wanted to know about life, or what masquerades as life, in a Nazi concentration camp. Rightly, Frankl, on page 17 says he will not, and then does not focus on that aspect of his experience. It is a necessary backdrop for the more psychologically meaningful observations he is trying to convey, of course, so a minimum amount of description is required. As I read I wondered if I would have been able to survive 3 years in hell as he did, and fervently hope to never find out.

But the book promises to distill this horror into some meaningful observations on the nature of human life, and it does. Here are the few things that struck me in my reading:

## **1. The role of politics and religion in survival.**

**As we read on it becomes obvious that Frankl's book title gives away the essence of what made survival possible for many: meaning, which in this case means hope for a future. Hence the secret trading of essentially political information: progress of the war 'news' (pages 45-46). Surprisingly, but only because of the risk being taken, there were religious observations and make-do services, prayer groups, even seances for the spiritualists (pages 46-47).**

**Frankl observes that (page 47):**

**In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were 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 makeup seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature.**

**Frankl illustrates this from his own and very personal experience, which I will discuss next under the second heading.**

## **2. The importance, even primacy, of love.**

**On his pages 48 through 50, Frankl describes how one day he and a fellow prisoner wondered to each other how their wives were doing in their camps. This started an impression within him of his wife's nearness, and he saw her image, heard her voice, and her brightness was evident in the natural setting they were trudging through in extreme pain on frozen feet. He had no idea about his wife, whether she was dead or alive**

at the time (turns out she had been dead a long time). His thoughts at that time of feeling such nearness to his wife were (page 48-49):

**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 may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.**

**Frankl continues with this theme, adding that, also for the first time in his life, he could now understand why it is said that angels are content with contemplating God (“infinite glory”) forever.**

**He discusses his not knowing whether his wife was dead or alive several times, concluding that (pages 49-50):**

**I only knew one thing---which I have learned well by now: Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self.**

### **3. The role of the past, nature, art.**

**From this discourse on love, Frankl recognizes that for those contemplating their memory and love for their wives in the camp, it was the past that was bringing this inner hope and light. On page 50 he also admits that trivial memories of a past life like unlocking a front door could also bring one to tears. Remembering the past was part of keeping alive a hope for a future, Frankl later explains. But the part I was more**

interested in was his description of the role of nature's beauty in keeping spirits and life-awareness fed. Apparently (pages 51-52) the men were hungry for views of woods and sunsets, A farm light coming on in the early morning, a bird coming to light on earth he had just dug up, these things kindled the type of love-reaction that then led him back to contemplating his wife.

Of course this caught my interest because I know from my own privileged and cushy life that when I feel love within, all of nature as well as my wife, family and friends seem almost magically luminous to me. So when stripped of everything and made into subhuman numbered tools, this human/spiritual fact still remained alive. And a sunset or sunrise could still move men to tears of joy, as could hearing a melody of music, a work of art.

Frankl explains that art in a camp consisted only of a song or poem. The hunger in these men was such that great pleasure and joy was derived from occasions when there was space and time and opportunity for the performing of some form of unpolished, homemade art or other. It was, obviously, the opportunity to create as well as the opportunity to enjoy the creativeness of others that lightened the load weighing on these souls temporarily.

#### **4. Camp psychology and spirit.**

Frankl, on page 72, begins to generalize somewhat, in discussing complexes evident in the camp. With the removal of all clothing, hair, rank, status, even names, it is no wonder the inferiority complex was nearly universal. The opposite, illusions of grandeur, were observed among the prisoners who had become camp police and held other posts of "authority" forgetting that their turn would eventually come for being killed. But the lowness of the average prisoner was well illustrated by Frankl's quote from one who saw the collaborating prisoner who could, at will, beat and destroy his

**fellow inmates as being a lofty position: “Imagine! I knew that man when he was only the president of a large bank. Isn’t it fortunate he has risen so far in the world?” How utterly sad if it was said in earnest as Frankl attests! Frankl concludes from his observations, in a parenthetical thought, that:**

**(The consciousness of one’s inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life. But how many free men, let alone prisoners, possess it?)**

## **5. Psychopathology and choice of action.**

**On page 74 Frankl wants us to know that there is always choice of action, even when all circumstances governing our life or even whether we have a life seem to be or actually are in the hands of others. A “vestige of spiritual freedom” an “independence of mind” can be preserved against all odds, says Frankl. He hints (page 75), however, that this freedom was given up by the typical inmate who became instead of a human being a “plaything of circumstance” without dignity or any inner freedom. He writes about the necessity of finding oneself “worthy” of the extremes of suffering being experienced. He calls this “a genuine inner achievement” and makes a very important statement in this context that gets at the heart of the book’s purpose (pages 75-76):**

**It is this spiritual freedom--which cannot be taken away--that makes life meaningful and purposeful.**

**He observes that “Of the prisoners, only a few kept their full inner liberty” and goes on to generalize this as an important point to remember for life outside the concentration camp, every life entails suffering, and in every life this suffering brings the opportunity “of achieving something”. . . . He gives examples on page 77, but I am not moved by them. A terminally ill person awaiting death with courage and dignity**

are perhaps lofty goals, but I cannot connect this with “great destinies and great men” as Frankl does.

He gives another illustration from within the camps, where towards the end of his three years he was finally being used as a doctor and a dying young woman expressed to him her gratitude for fate having taken her from a shallow life of privilege and thrown her into this situation. Now, as she was dying her only companion was a tree she could see from her death bed which conversed with her. Frankl didn't understand her state and thought she may be delirious, but asked her if the tree spoke to her. She said it did, but the tree's words to her showed him she was in her right mind: “It said to me, ‘I am here---I am here---I am life, eternal life.’” (page 78)

Frankl now dives deeper into this spiritual freedom.

#### 6. The “inner hold.”

We have stated that that which was ultimately responsible for the state of the prisoner's inner self was not so much the enumerated psychophysical causes as it was the result of a free decision. Psychological observations of the prisoners have shown that only the men who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the camp's degenerating influences. The question now arises, what could, or should, have constituted this “inner hold”?

On the next page, 79, he untangles the various causes of losing one's inner hold and spotlights one as primary: living a “provisional existence” with no end in sight closed the door to hope for a future. “He ceased living for the future . . . . Therefore the whole structure of his normal life changed; signs of decay set in” . . . . Frankl acknowledges this is also true for people thrown out of jobs without warning and some

**terminally ill patients. Degree of hopelessness comes into play, but the point is made that this is a normal human reaction.**

**I recall being told on a visit to Copper Canyon in Mexico that the older (not modernized at heart, in other words) Tarahumara Indians who still lived in the Stone Age there would die when confined in a jail because they had no concept of time. In their hearts and minds they had no way to visualize the present state of confinement ever ending, so they got sick and died because they felt life had already ended. Frankl tells a similar story of a man in his camp, on page 80, who felt as he entered the camp that he was “marching at his own funeral.”**

**As I read this I thought of the role that memories of the past played in making the present bearable, and Frankl is apparently aware that this discussion from a few tens of pages back will occur to readers (p. 80):**

**A man who let himself decline because he could not see any future goal found himself occupied with retrospective thoughts. In a different connection, we have already spoken of the tendency there was to look into the past, to help make the present, with all its horrors, less real. But in robbing the present of its reality there lay a certain danger. It became easy to overlook the opportunities to make something positive of camp life, opportunities which really did exist. Regarding our “provisional existence” as unreal was in itself an important factor in causing the prisoner to lose their hold on life; everything in a way became pointless.**

**Frankl makes several more important observations of this nature, basically saying that there was an opportunity for growing “spiritually beyond oneself” and instead seeing ones life as “meaningless.”**

**Lest we think upon reading this that Frankl felt he was part of**

the elite who saw the camp's cruelties "as a test of their inner strength" he coyly throws himself in with "the mediocre and half-hearted" on page 81. He said there was a choice of making "life into an inner triumph" or "simply vegetate" and unfortunately most prisoners chose the latter route. On that page he reiterates a theme we have noted before:

**It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future---*sub specie aeternatis*. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task.**

He continues with a pathetic personal experience giving insight into this truism, and then for several pages discusses illustrations from others, including a man who saw in vision when the war would end and then died that day. It ended for him, true. But the point is (page 82):

**The prisoner who had lost faith in the future---his future--was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.**

Frankl makes a few more observations to illustrate this point, then moves onto just what the meaning of life is on page 85.

## **7. Meaning of life.**

On pages 85 and 86 Frankl makes it perfectly clear that the meaning of life is an individual thing that changes with time and circumstances:

**Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. . . . "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.**

**Frankl goes on to suggest that sometimes life requires action, sometimes contemplation, and sometimes the simple acceptance of one's fate. Frankl has a more general discussion of 'meaning' before the foregoing statements are made, but I like them as an afterthought better, this way you already know the context for these words:**

**We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from this life, but rather what life expected from us.* We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead 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 right conduct. Life ultimately means the taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill its tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.**

**Lest you see a problem with the acknowledgement that sometimes contemplation is important and here the statement that action and conduct are important, note that I purposely reversed the sequence of these thoughts. I have first given you the general context, for all of our lives, and then a very specific context of prisoners in a concentration camp.**

**I was struck by the similarity of this counseling being done secretly in the camp by Frankl and a few of his colleagues, and the advice given by the prophet Zarathustra or Zoroaster. The latter admonished his people that all God required of a person's life was that it be lived to produce good thoughts, good words, and good actions.**

## **8. Camp psychotherapy.**

**In the above observations we already moved into Frankl's discussions of what was being done, psychotherapeutically speaking, to help prisoners retain their "inner hold." I recommend reading the pages where this is discussed with some examples on pages 87-91 and I will only mention one statement of a general nature made with reference to suicides (87-88):**

**A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how."**

**This statement made me return to page 68 where Frankl tells of his decision to not escape, as he and a friend had planned to do. He was torn between his feeling for freedom and his feelings for a countryman, therefore a "comrade," whom he had been trying to save from death due to typhus. I was quite touched by it, and to me it is a good basis for the above quotation:**

**I had to keep my intention to escape to myself, but my comrade seemed to guess that something was wrong (perhaps I showed a little nervousness). In a tired voice he asked me, "You, too, are getting out?" I denied it, but I found it difficult to avoid his sad look. After my round I returned to him. Again a hopeless look greeted me and somehow I felt it to be an accusation. The unpleasant feeling that had gripped me as soon as I had told my friend I would escape with him became more intense. Suddenly I decided to take fate into my own hands for once. I ran out of the hut and told my friend that I could not go with him. As soon as had I told him with finality that I had made up my mind to stay with my patients, the unhappy feeling left me. I did not know what the**

**following days would bring, but I had gained an inward peace that I had never experienced before. I returned to the hut, sat down on the boards at my countryman's feet and tried to comfort him; then I chatted with the others, trying to quiet them in their delirium.**

**Is it any wonder I was touched by this? His unfinished work, including this person for whom, and from whom, he obviously felt affection, were of more worth to him than his free life. Listening to his heart and intuition was what gave him this temporary state of euphoria, validating his choice, I believe.**

#### **9. Final observations: psychologies of the actors in this horror, and reactions to release from the camps.**

**I found this last section of Frankl's autobiographical account rich in terms of his observations on the psychologies of prisoners, collaborators and even the Germans running the ghastly camps. I like his point that there are no good or evil races, but that the prison camps showed at our very roots we were all capable of both, and some chose to lean in one or another direction. His detailing the different ways people adjusted to reality was also interesting to me. But I felt the main points already discussed above captured the items of particular interest to me in my current readings on life and what it is.**

### **B. "Logotherapy in a Nutshell"**

**Frankl next launches into materials written after the autobiography was done when he had established his new therapeutic approach based on his life experience. I found the matter interesting, and where it touched back on items of interest to me in the autobiography section I took notes.**

#### **10. The 'will to meaning'**

**On page 106 Frankl says that a person's "will to meaning" can**

**frustrated, and he discusses this under the title "Existential Frustration." What I found of interest here is his definition of 'existential,' which is a bit different from the usage I have always made of the term. He says the definition can refer to existence itself (kind of where I put it); it can refer to the 'meaning' of existence (how would you otherwise describe existence?); but it can also refer to the 'will' to meaning. It is this latter definition he then follows into certain neuroses. Frankl's "Logotherapy" has as its objective "assisting the patient to find meaning in his life." (page 108). What is he trying to cure? (pages 110-111):**

**. . . the feeling of the total and ultimate meaninglessness of their lives. They lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the "existential vacuum."**

**He goes on to describe this vacuum in terms of causes and symptoms, using words like 'boredom' to describe the latter and then moving on to ways of compensating unhealthily by substituting a will to power, often meaning money or sex, for an unattainable will to meaning.**

**His cure? I am up to page 113 now, where he goes over a description of the meaning of life rewritten from what is in the autobiographical section. He ends with the statement already made there that it is life asking us for meaning, and that it is our acting responsibly that answers that question. (pages 114-115) A Logotherapist will try to awaken a patient to his own unique responsibilities, never assign responsibilities. Frankl hints at the problem being essentially similar for the irreligious and the religious:**

**It is, therefore, up to the patient to decide whether he should interpret his life task as being responsible to society or to his own conscience. There are people,**

however, who do not interpret their own lives merely in terms of a task assigned to them, but also in terms of the taskmaster who has assigned it to them.

Logotherapy is neither teaching nor preaching. It is as far removed from logical reasoning as it is from moral exhortation. To put it figuratively, . . . . The logotherapist's role consists of widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him.

All of this is well and good, but it requires more explanation so as to not seem simplistic, the description given above also describes a vocational counselor! But back on page 108 he speaks of making a patient “aware of the hidden *logos* of his existence, it is an analytical process.” So, on page 115 he elaborates:

. . . the true meaning of life must to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic “the self-transcendence of human existence. It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. 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. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.

I found Frankl descriptions of the various paths to self-transcendence of interest. He again pulls in his insights mentioned in the autobiography part of the book about the roles of art, nature, and loving others. Despite his

**protestations that logotherapy is not preachy, here is a sermon I liked and agreed with, on the relation of sex and love (page 116):**

**Love is as primary a phenomenon as sex. Normally, sex is a mode of expression for love. Sex is justified, even sanctified, as soon as, but only as long as, it is a vehicle of love. Thus 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.**

**Again reaching back to his life in a camp, as well as his experience as a physician before, during and after, he explains that suffering is also a way to meaning. Suffering voluntarily is masochism, of course, and Frankl emphasizes that he is talking about the unavoidable suffering life deals out to every participant in it. (page 117)**

**Under the heading of “The Super-Meaning” on page 122 I found a gem of an insight that mirrors the conclusion I have slowly been coming to in this review of books on the nature (meaning) of existence:**

**This ultimate meaning necessarily exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man; in logotherapy, we speak in this context of a super-meaning. 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.**

**After that pearl of great price, everything else remaining in this section seemed to lack luster even though its discussion of death and general therapeutic considerations was interesting enough to keep reading to the very end in the middle of the night.**

### **C. 1984 Postscript: The Case for a Tragic Optimism**

**Frankl's 1984 addition to this book discusses the current world situation and the questions about meaning being asked in the face of the tragic aspects of life that were so evident to the newer generations making up the world's population at the time. It repeats some insights from the previous two parts of the book. I could quote them here but just haven't the energy, neither do I think it necessary: I have pulled from the book the points most interesting to me in my current review quest. His last words are meaningful and poignant, however. The context is a call to join the minority that seems willing to be 'decent' even when it is inconvenient, and who work for the betterment of the world situation (page 154):**

**For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best.**

**So, let us be alert—alert in a twofold sense:**

**Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of.**

**And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake.**