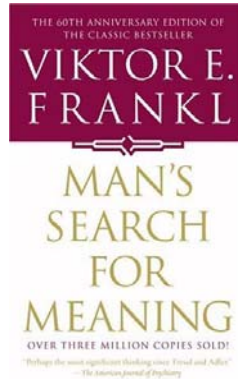


Man's Search for Meaning



Author: Victor E. Frankl
Publisher: Pocket Books
Date of Publication: 1997
ISBN: 978-0-671-02337-9
Number of Pages: 221 pages

■ The Big Idea

Internationally renowned psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl endured years of unspeakable horror in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. This first-hand experience with one of the darkest chapters of human history taught him that man's primary motivational force is the search for meaning.

Dr. Frankl emerged as a victor in more ways than one. His discovery led to the development of the revolutionary approach to psychotherapy known as *logotherapy*, Dr. Frankl's own version of modern existential analysis. This study has as its object "to weave the threads of a life into a firm pattern of meaning and responsibility" – or to understand why and how people can survive and cling to life given such apparently frail or simple reasons as love for one's children, talent to be used, or even just simple memories.

Why You Need This Book

This simply-written little book contains a very great truth that is eminently usable by anyone and everyone who cares to internalize it. The book attempts to communicate, through the use of a very true-to-life, solid, and quite remarkable examples, the lesson that *life holds a potential meaning under any conditions whatsoever, even the most miserable ones*. It teaches that we must always say yes to life, in spite of all the tragic aspects of human existence.

Experiences In A Concentration Camp

This is the inside story of a concentration camp, as told by one of its survivors. It is not concerned with the great horrors which have already been covered in many other such books, but with the relatively smaller torments.

Thus it tries to answer the question: how was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?

This story is not about the suffering and death of great heroes and martyrs; it is about the sacrifices, suffering, and deaths of the unknown and unrecorded victims of this most painful period.

Here are some valuable points:

- Life in a concentration camp was an unrelenting struggle for both daily bread and life itself, whether one's own or that of a good friend. The selection process, for instance, of the next batch of victims for the infamous gas chambers and/or crematoria would often touch off a free fight between individuals or groups, who would fight to be left behind and not be included in the groups sent to the gas chambers and ovens.
- Every man was controlled by one thought only: one of self-preservation. He sought to keep himself alive for his family's sake, and try to save his friends as well from suffering and death.
- On the average, only those prisoners who, after years of being assigned from camp to camp, had lost their scruples and had thus done whatever they could to survive, could keep alive. They had lost their inner moral compass and would either cozy up to those in power, or would trade in even their closest friends, if it meant increasing their chances of survival in those places.

- For those who had given up faith in their strength to carry on and/or in the chance that they would be liberated and would be able to return to their old lives and loved ones again, the will to live seldom returned and they were either simply wasted away, gave up living, or became susceptible to fatal diseases.
- Three phases of an inmate's reactions to camp life became evident in those concentration camps:
 - The period following his admission to the camps, characterized by shock, longing for those he left behind, and disgust for all the ugliness, suffering and pain that surrounds him.
 - The period during which he becomes entrenched in camp routine, characterized by a state of relative apathy in which he achieves a kind of emotional death due to having seen so many horrible scenes that he gets used to them. This is a very necessary protective shell to prevent emotional overload. (But it can be overcome still, as will be discussed in a succeeding section).
 - The period following his release and liberation, characterized by an initial period of depersonalization (stemming from subconscious disbelief) and sometimes followed by a moral deformity stemming from a sudden release of pressure – and sometimes bitterness and disillusionment with his new life outside of the camps (caused by a disconnect between what was expected from the return and its sad reality).
- In a prison camp one learns one of the most imperative laws of self-preservation: *do not be conspicuous!* Stand out from the rest and you could very well suffer the attentions of the supervisors. And that would almost always lead to more suffering – or death.
- Prison camps can be dehumanizing in the extreme – not only for the prisoners, who must quickly learn the basic tenets of survival and many of whom become almost akin to animals, but also for the guards and supervisors, who believe themselves so far above those they supervise that they can do almost as they please with them (and abused them horribly).

- The soul can make use of various weapons in its fight for self-preservation:
 - The use of comforting or soothing images of the past
 - The appreciation of beautiful images of nature
 - The use of humor to try to make light of the situation
- One discovers that, despite all the pains one has to go through, *the salvation of man is through love and in love*. The image of a loved one, of one's old occupation, or one's old home can easily sustain one and inspire one to get through even the most painful times and situations.
- At times, prisoners had to make decisions on the spot, decisions that may spell the difference between life and death. But those that did make good decisions were few and far between. The prisoners typically yearned to escape from commitment and often wished to let fate make these decisions for them.
- Those involved in camp life may end up exhibiting certain mental complexes – an inferiority complex for the prisoners as they are constantly being denigrated by their overseers, and a superiority complex for the guards and overseers for their capacity to inflict pain and suffering freely upon the prisoners.
- Everything can be taken away 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 way*. The way suffering can be borne is a genuine inner achievement, and this makes life meaningful and purposeful.
- The prisoner who lost faith in the future is doomed, plain and simple. His loss of belief in the future leads to a loss of his spiritual hold upon his life; consequently, he becomes subject to mental and physical decay, and his life falls apart as a result.
- If there is meaning in life, there must therefore also be *meaning in suffering*. The way a man accepts his fate and all his suffering gives him ample opportunity to add a deeper meaning to his life. Far too often, people facing terribly tough situations end up despising their lives and thus their lives simply become meaningless – to both them and to everyone else. The better way is to find meaning in what you are going through and provide a salutary example for everyone, even those who do not know you.

- *It does not really matter what one expects from life; what matters far more is what life expects from us. One needs to stop asking about the meaning of life, and should instead conceive of oneself as being questioned by life instead – what do I want to achieve and how do I want to achieve it?*
- And one's answer should consist in right action towards attaining one's goals and in right conduct to moderate those actions.
- *Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to problems and to fulfill the tasks it sets for each individual. We have the freedom to do whatever we want to do, but in order to use what we have in the best possible way, we must find the one right answer to every problem.*
- When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he has to accept his suffering as his single and unique task. He must acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is alone and unique in the entire universe. *His unique opportunity lies in the way he bears his burden.*
- There was no need for any man in the concentration camps to be ashamed of tears. Tears bore witness to the greatest courage – no less than the courage to suffer openly, without fear of shame or censure.

Logotherapy In A Nutshell

Logos is the Greek word for meaning. *Logotherapy* focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning. This striving to find meaning in one's life is, as has been brought up and discussed earlier, no less than *the primary motivational force in man*.

In stark contrast with psychoanalysis, logotherapy is less retrospective and less introspective. It is a meaning-centered psychotherapy, focusing as it does on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future.

The will to meaning

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life; it is not merely a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives.

This meaning can be discovered, fulfilled, and realized by him and him alone – only then will it be significant enough to satisfy one man's own will to meaning.

Existential frustration

Man's will to meaning can also be frustrated, which is where existential frustration comes in. It can result in neuroses, which in this sense are referred to as *noogenic neuroses* in contrast to the more traditional psychogenic neuroses.

These types of neuroses result not from conflicts between drives and instincts, but rather, between existential problems. Among these problems, the frustration of the will to meaning plays a very large role.

Suffering, which is usually seen as a pathological phenomenon, may well be an achievement, especially if it grows out of existential frustration.

A man's concern, even despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an "existential distress" but by no means a "mental disease".

The assignment of logotherapy is to assist the patient to find meaning in his life. Analysis tries to make the patient aware of what he actually longs for in the very depths of his being.

Logotherapy considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a *meaning*, rather than merely gratifying and satisfying drives and instincts.

Noodynamics

Man's search for meaning may well arouse inner tension – between what one has achieved and what one needs to accomplish, or between what one is and what one should become - but this tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health.

There is nothing in the world that can help one quite like the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life.

Some may think that this means that a tensionless state is best. But this is not so. In the Nazi concentration camps, those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive their hardships.

What is needed, then, is the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task!

What a man needs, then, is *noodynamics* – the existential dynamics in a polar field of tension between two poles; one being the meaning that has to be fulfilled and the other, the man who needs to fulfill it.

The existential vacuum

This is a widespread phenomenon; neither instinct nor tradition can tell modern man what to do with himself these days, so many men nowadays do not know what they wish to do. Instead they simply conform to what others think is best (conformism), or do what other people wish them to do (totalitarianism).

This vacuum usually manifests itself as a state of boredom. Especially given the high and further increasing rate of automation and ease in today's society; many people now do not know what to do with all the time they are saving for themselves.

However, it can also manifest as a will to power, money, or pleasure – base and primitive substitutes for a true purpose.

Life, love and suffering

There exists no abstract meaning for life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission to carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment.

Everyone's task is unique – as is his opportunity to implement it. Life is finite and we are all responsible to do the best we can, as there is a finality regarding what we make out of both our lives and ourselves.

We can discover the meaning of life in three different ways.

- The first is to create a work or do a deed, which requires no further explanation.
- The second is to experience goodness, beauty, truth or another human being – and loving him or her.
- The third is about our attitude towards unavoidable suffering.

Love is the only way we can grasp any other human being in the innermost core of his personality. By loving him we can see essential traits and features in him; and even more, we see a potential in him that is not yet actualized. Thus we have a chance to help them make those potentialities come true.

The third way to discover the meaning of life is by virtue of the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering. If we cannot do anything about such suffering – when we are no longer able to change a situation – we are challenged to change ourselves instead.

By doing so, we change a personal tragedy into a triumph, which is the human condition at its utter best. And this means that our transitory existence is in no way meaningless.

The Case For A Tragic Optimism

A 'tragic optimism' means that one is and remains optimistic in spite of those aspects of human existence that may be circumscribed by pain, guilt, and death. Life is always potentially meaningful under any and all conditions – even the most miserable ones.

This is optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential that at its best always allows for:

- Turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment
- Deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better
- Deriving from life's transitoriness the incentive to take responsible action

Optimism is nothing to be commanded or ordered or forced – not even by oneself.

Once an individual's search for meaning is successful, it gives him the capacity to cope with suffering. And if one's groping for a meaning has been in vain, this will most certainly lead to a fatal condition or something like it.