

MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

VIKTOR FRANKL

“He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche

“In the early winter of 1942, Austrian authorities in Vienna rounded up and arrested hundreds of Jews, among them a young psychiatrist named Viktor Frankl. At the time Frankl was a rising figure in his field who was developing a new theory of psychological well-being. He and his wife, Tilly, had anticipated the roundup, so they took pains to preserve what was then their most important possession. Before the police marched into their home, Tilly sewed into the lining of Viktor’s coat the manuscript of the book he was writing about his theories. Viktor wore the coat when the couple was later dispatched to Auschwitz. He clung to it his first day in the concentration camp. But on day two, the SS guards stripped him down, confiscated all his clothing, and Frankl never saw the manuscript again. Over the next three years, at Auschwitz and later at Dachau, as his wife, brother, mother, and father perished in the gas ovens, Frankl worked to recreate his text by scratching notes on stolen scraps of paper. And in 1946, one year after Allied forces liberated the concentration camps, those crumpled bits of paper formed the basis of what would become one of the most powerful and enduring works of the last century—Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*.” From the Introduction



Viktor Frankl’s life story is a testament to the resolve of the human spirit. In his 1946 memoir, [Man’s Search for Meaning](#), Frankl reflects on how his horrific experience at Auschwitz informed him of life’s purpose.

These experiences of camp life demonstrated to Frankl that man does have a choice of action. There are many lessons we can learn from Frankl, which boil down to this one thing: “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.”

“There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that 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.

“Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone.”



Our goal should not be to seek pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see meaning in our life.

Frankl concludes that, "...any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him mentally and spiritually," a sentiment long echoed by the Stoics. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius, advises: "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment." And in *The Art of Living*, Epictetus reminds us: "...it is not enough to be hit or insulted to be harmed, you must believe that you are being harmed. If someone succeeds in provoking you, realize that your mind is complicit in the provocation."

Rather than focus on the pursuit of joy, Frankl believes that the human life is not complete without suffering. Through suffering, when we are no longer able to change a situation, we can change ourselves.

"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...this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.

"We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves."

Suffering ceases to be suffering when it finds meaning. Our goal should not be to seek pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see meaning in our lives.

"There is nothing in the world...that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life. In the Nazi concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive.

"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task."

Frankl quotes the words of Nietzsche several times throughout his memoir: "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How." Yet, the Why differs from man to man.

"For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed to a chess champion: "Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?" There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one's opponent. The same holds for human existence.

"One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.

"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!" It seems to me that there is nothing which would stimulate a man's sense of responsibility more than this maxim, which invites him to imagine first that the present is past and, second, that the past may yet be changed and amended."



...man is ultimately self-determining.

Every man has the freedom to change at any instant. According to Frankl, man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes, he has made from himself.

“Man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self-determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.

“A human being is not one thing among others; things determine each other, but man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes—within the limits of endowment and environment—he has made out of himself. In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.

“Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.”

ADDITIONAL READING

[Letters from a Stoic](#), Seneca

[Meditations](#), Marcus Aurelius

[Principles: Life and Work](#), Ray Dalio

[Stumbling on Happiness](#), Daniel Gilbert

[When Breath Becomes Air](#), Paul Kalanithi

[How Will You Measure Your Life?](#) Clayton M. Christensen

[Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage](#), Alfred Lansing

[The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph](#)

[Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man and Life’s Greatest Lesson](#)



FIND THIS INTERESTING?

[CLICK HERE](#) TO TAKE IN REGULAR VIEWS FROM THE BLUE RIDGE.

