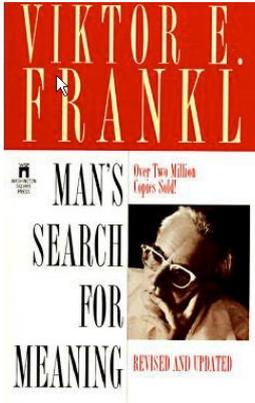


Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor E. Frankl



Reviewed by David Hanlon.

Even if you don't read much, this is one book that I suggest you take the time to read. It's influence on the world is the strength people take away from perhaps the greatest of his inspirations – 'we have the power to choose how things effect us'.

It describes Frankl's horrific journey through the Nazi concentration camps where in the period 1942 to 1945, Frankl was moved between four different camps, including Auschwitz, while his parents, brother, and pregnant wife perished.

Surrounded by terror, he asked: "How do you make sense of such madness?" Frankl found that many of the survivors had something to live for beyond the immediate horror.

Part I, *Experiences in a Concentration Camp*, isn't for the faint-hearted. For those who weren't sent to the gas chambers at the initial selection, the conditions in the camp were both physically and mentally extremely harsh. He writes about the psychological effects of being completely dehumanised; of losing even your name, and becoming simply a number. Also, he discusses the effects of not being able to contact loved ones, or even know if they are still living. Frankl describes how the prisoners who created dreams and plans for the future in order to stay sane, kindled their will to live in an environment where it was very easy to give up. Frankl would imagine himself teaching his students, walking in the forest with his wife and, using these powers of imaginary and mental and emotional resilience, he grew his influence.

This section, largely autobiographical, provides unique and strong evidence for some of the principles of logotherapy summarised in Part II.

Part II, *Logotherapy in a Nutshell*, provides details of Frankl's formal psychological theory he terms "Logotherapy". He says traditional psychotherapy looks into our past to find cures for current psychological problems. He describes the techniques used to put it into practice. The therapy deals with the search for meaning in a person's life and the lack of it in present society. His Logotherapy on the other hand he says helps people through finding hope for the future by getting in touch with the meaning in their lives.

Key principles of the book

People can choose their attitude

Human beings want to feel in control. Time after time we hear people say: "But I had no choice." Based on his experience in the death camps, Frankl maintains that there is always one final freedom. We can choose our attitude towards events. He wrote: "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

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

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."

People want to find and follow their personal sense of meaning

Human beings long for a sense of purpose, said Frankl. He believed there were three ways to create meaning in life: a) By doing a deed or creating a work; b) By appreciating the experience of someone or something; c) By choosing our attitude towards suffering.

Accordingly, Frankl summarises the status of love and work as sources of meaning like this: "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'."

However, it's with the third source of meaning that Frankl challenges us. This source is *suffering*. (Frankl stresses that he's talking about unavoidable suffering; suffering that is avoidable is simply masochistic.) There are two reasons why suffering can be a source of meaning. Firstly, because our inner freedom -- our "spiritual freedom", as Frankl occasionally calls it -- to choose the *attitude* we have to things is absolute, as it were, we can choose which attitude to take to suffering. Secondly, and closely related to this stoic view, we can choose to see suffering as our "task". This "task" of suffering, the 'task' of bearing one's cross, enables a human being to suffer "proudly".

Frankl experienced this drive himself after losing the manuscript that summarised his life's work. He had sewn it into his coat lining, but lost it when transferred to Auschwitz. During the terror he kept himself sane by spending nights reconstructing the book in his head, then on pieces of stolen paper.

People find 'happiness' as a by-product of following their meaning

"Ever more people today have the means to live," said Frankl, "but no meaning to live for." He saw that people were striving to achieve happiness through self-indulgence or gathering "outer" things – such as possessions or status. Writing in the preface to the 1984 edition of *Man's Search For Meaning*, he explained: "Again and again I admonish my students both in America and Europe: '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 personal 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.'"

Inspiration

Frankl has been an inspiration and mentor to many people. Stephen R Covey in the "*7 Habits of Highly Effective People*" draws heavily on Frankl. Raymond Ackerman in "*The Four Legs of the Table*" talks about how five mentors (Frankl was one of the five) significantly influenced the way Ackerman developed the Pick 'n Pay model in South Africa (see below for excerpts of what these two have said).

Stephen R Covey

Stephen Covey, refers to Frankl as his 'intellectual mentor' and he frequently recites the following piece.

Viktor Frankl, in the death camps of Nazi Germany was being tortured, put under the white lights, stripped naked, and ignoble sterilisation experiments done upon his body. And he discovered that between everything that happened to him and his response, was a space. And in that space he had the freedom and power to choose his response. He simply learned to change one question and it totally changed his life and he became one of the most powerful, intellectual leaders in the field of psychotherapy throughout the entire world. He changed his question from, "Why should I have to suffer so as a Jew, at the hands of these Nazis?" to this question: "What is life asking of me?" He would find a fellow prisoner ready to commit suicide and he'd ask them, "Why don't you?" "Because of what it would do to my wife." That gave his life its meaning.

The business man's mentor

Raymond Ackerman says Frankl's philosophies taught him to "understand and appreciate the possibilities of adversity.

For Raymond Ackerman the pivotal piece of advice that came from Frankl was "find out what it is you want to do, and do it to distraction". As Ackerman says, this piece "has a layer of meaning that goes deeper than the advice in a similar vein that has been given by leaders and achievers throughout history, where total commitment is emphasized as a prerequisite for success." Ackerman goes on to say "Frankl's philosophy sees the pursuit of a passion, an activity pursued to distraction, as starting point from which will flow answers to those enormous, seamless questions that all questing people ask at some stage of their life."

Contribution to the strengths approach

Frankl talked about "meaning" and "purpose", rather than strengths, and underlined we each have a mission to fulfil. This could mean, in some cases, fulfilling our duty to make full use of our talents. At the same time, he showed that people draw courage from pursuing their chosen path. (This aspect has since been developed through Martin Seligman's work on "character strengths".) So here are several ways that Victor contributed to what would later be known as the strengths approach.

- He emphasised the concept of choice. People can choose their attitude. They can also choose whether or not they want to use their strengths.
- He showed that each of us have something to give to the world. We may have a book to write, a legacy to leave, a talent to fulfil or whatever. We can do this by finding and following our vocation.
- He showed that people draw tremendous strength from doing something that provides a sense of meaning.

Frankl always got to the heart of the matter. Speaking towards the end of his life, he said that, for humanity to survive, we needed to coalesce around a common purpose. Faced by interviewers who asked what people should do when faced by the absence of faith, economic crises or global challenges, he went back to his famous saying. "Man is not free from his conditions, but he is free to take a stand towards his conditions." We can choose our attitude and, if we wish, pass-on a better world to future generations.

Viktor Frankl quotations

A human being is a deciding being.

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Challenging the meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human.

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.

Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.

Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated, thus, everyone's task is unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.

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

Fear may come true that which one is afraid of.

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.

I recommend that the Statue of Liberty be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the west coast.

Life can be pulled by goals just as surely as it can be pushed by drives.

Live as if you were living a second time, and as though you had acted wrongly the first time.

The last of human freedoms - the ability to chose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances.

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked.

What is to give light must endure burning.

When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves.

In summary

For me, the power of this short book is his narrative of survival in the concentration camps. What he witnessed and reports has its own power, but when he compounds it with an interpretation, that is, a search for meaning, Frankl's book has resounding merit.

Man's Search for Meaning is available in good bookstores, Amazon and also in audible form (www.audible.com).

There are also some very good interviews with Viktor Frankl on Youtube (www.youtube.com).

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