



## Man's Search for Meaning - A Tribute to Hope

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### ABSTRACT

I was dumbfounded, shocked and surprised when I finished reading of "Man's Search For Meaning' by Viktor E. Frankl. It is the excellent classic which emerged from the Holocaust. It is the author's story of his struggle for survival in Nazi concentration camps. Victor Frankl, the neurologist and psychiatrist wrote about his experience in a concentration camp during the Second World War as he was a prisoner in it. It is written in an autobiographical style. In the beginning, the author gives explanation for writing the book. The main goal of this book is to answer the question, "what is the meaning of one's life?" The writer provides perspective and techniques to find meaning in one's life. He discusses many examples from his imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp. He gives a method for achieving personal fulfillment and a sense of meaning in life. Frankl creates a vivid and shocking image of this horrible ordeal with his powerful and descriptive narration. He begins the book by describing his reactions and observations at the outset of his imprisonment as well as other prisoner's behaviour in the camp. The book is divided into three parts. 1.Experiences in a Concentration Camp, 2. Logotherapy in a Nutshell, 3. The Case of a Tragic Optimism. He observed that those who retained a sense of control over their environment survived longest in concentration camps. Those who were physically strong but mentally weak couldn't survive in the camp.

The writer defines specific terms, while giving details of the conditions of the concentration camp. The facts, which are presented, are part of man's experience, and they provide the basis for understanding the psychology of individuals who face extreme suffering. Frankl provides a firsthand account of the thoughts and behaviors a person goes through when confronted with misery. He writes in a style that reflects the mindset of the individual prisoner, specifically the common and unknown person. Based on his imprisonment and his training in Psychiatry, Frankl identifies three significant periods for a prisoner: following admission into the camp; when well entrenched in camp routine; and following release and liberation. He narrates his experience of entering into the death camp at Auschwitz. How he and his comrades held the thin line of hope that they

would be rescued at the last possible moment. He relates this to a condemned man believing he will be saved before his execution. He refers to this feeling as the, "delusion of reprieve. After getting off the train they were brought to the death camp, where the men and women were stripped from their belongings. They were separated into two lines, one for men, and one for women. They approached a man who would either point left or right, the one lead to the direction to the crematories, the other to a cleansing station. During that day they bathed and stripped of everything they had. They had to shave every single hair on their bodies. "...the illusions some of us still held were destroyed one by one, and then, quite unexpectedly, most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor." (p.29). The prisoners tried hard to make fun of each other when they were

under shower altogether. They were relieved that they were under real water and not in the gas chamber. "Apart from that strange kind of humour, another sensation seized us: curiosity." (p.29). Curiosity became a means of protection.

The prisoners got small amounts of bread and watery soup. The prisoner's bodies started to devour without proper nourishment, which made it even harder for a prisoner to survive the camp. The prisoners were reduced to nothing but a number. They had nothing to release themselves from the emptiness. What little they could do, was to keep their sense of humour, and point out the natural beauty of a sunset.

Looking back over his entrance into Auschwitz, Viktor E. Frankl states, "if someone now asked of us the truth of Dostoevsky's statements that flatly defines man as a being who can get used to anything, we would reply 'yes, a man can get used to anything, but do not ask us how. (p.30)'" He also states that, "The thought of suicide was entertained by everyone, if only for a short time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situations, constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others....The prisoner of Auschwitz, in the first phase of shock, did not fear death. Even the gas chambers lost their horrors for him after the first few days-after all; they spared him the act of committing suicide. (p.31)" These lines depict how traumatic the entrance into Auschwitz must have been. We can imagine the trauma, shock and horror on the part of the prisoners who lost fear of death in a very few days. Frankl then talks about the prisoners in their second phase of imprisonment. After the initial shock had subsided, numbness overcomes a prisoner. He could watch a man be beaten to death without any feelings. The author himself recalls his experience of taking care of typhoid patients. He would experience no emotions, when people die horrible deaths hour after hour. This apathy, he states, is a self-defence mechanism which centres all of one's emotions on one task, to survive.

Frankl shares how a prisoner reacts after liberation. Even after the rescue, a prisoner had a hard time

escaping the apathy that had encompassed his whole life. Frankl shares an example, "We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized what they were, but had no feelings about them. (p.95)" The transition from a death camp into real life was hard. They had lost their feelings, emotions and emptiness ruled their minds. Prisoners had lost the ability to feel joy, relief and happiness. They had to relearn the ability slowly and gradually.

Frankl gave much more attention to first psychological phase characterized by shock. Frankl and every member imprisoned with him experienced the "delusion of reprieve" - a psychiatric term. It refers the state of mind of condemned men who intensely hold the notion that they will be reprieved immediately before execution. They believed that they would be saved, even though they saw many sent to the gas chambers. They also watched others die from malnourishment, lack of medical care, and frequent torture, but they were firm in their beliefs. Slowly and gradually, when reality began to eliminate the delusion of reprieve, suicide was a common thought. They were depressed due to the brutality and hopelessness of the situation. At this point, shock was replaced by the second phase of psychological reaction, apathy. Apathy became the necessary and effective way of coping with the constant abuse, torture and brutality.

The third phase occurs with release from the concentration camps. The prisoner had difficulty to accept somewhat unexpected liberation. The author narrates a difficult psychological condition of the prisoners. They couldn't grasp the idea of freedom, which is an almost dreamlike state of mind. We can feel their dilemma when we read the description, "The men timidly walk beyond the boundaries that had formerly held them prisoner, almost anticipating to be beaten for leaving the camp"( p. 95). Their emotion had been deadened by repeated exposure to atrocities and suffering in phase two, and they had a difficult time feeling pleased to be released.

Frankl quotes Nietzsche in the book, 'He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*'(p.7).

Frankl's admits that recollection of the thoughts of his life gave him the will to live. Mental images of his wife provided the only light in the dark days of the concentration camp. "But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise."(p.48) He also imagined himself in lecture halls after liberation, and also wanted to write down notes remembered from his lost manuscripts. In contrast, the prisoners who had lost hope and given up could be recognized by the smoking of their last cigarettes, which could otherwise have been traded for a scrap of food. "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."(p.82) the prisoner would refuse to get dress, wash or to go out on the parade ground. Nothing could affect him-entreaties, blows or threats. He just lay there without moving. He just gave up. He even didn't bother about lying in his own excreta. According to Frankl, we need a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We are not here to judge life according to what we expected from it and what it has delivered - rather, he realizes, we must find the courage to ask what life *expects of us*, day by day. Our task is not merely to survive, but to find the truth specific to us and our situation, which can sometimes only be revealed in the worst suffering. Frankl says that "Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."(p.85).

Before the outbreak of World War II, Frankl had been theorizing ideas, which helped him a lot to survive in the camp. He developed a new school of psychotherapy, Logotherapy, following Freud's Psychoanalysis and Adler's Individual Psychology. The psychoanalysis requires a person's introspection and self-centeredness to reveal the basis of his/her neurosis, logotherapy tries to take the person out of themselves and see their life in a broader perspective. Where psychoanalysis focuses on the 'will to pleasure', and Adlerian

psychology on the 'will to power', logotherapy sees the prime motivating force in human beings to be a will to meaning.

In logotherapy (from the Greek Logos, 'meaning'), existential distress is not neurosis or mental disease, but a sign that we are becoming more human in the desire for meaning. In contrast to Freud or Adler, Frankl chose not to see life simply as the satisfaction of drives or instincts, or even in becoming 'well-adjusted' to society. Instead, he believed that the outstanding feature of human beings is their free will. "Logotherapy tries to make the patient fully aware of his own responsibilities; therefore, it must leave to him the option for what, to what, or to whom he understands himself to be responsible." (p.114). If an individual has ability to make such psychological choices, meaning can be found even in grave circumstances. Conversely, Frankl provides examples that show how people who lost hope could not find meaning in the suffering of the concentration camp, and ultimately gave in to death. Frankl also admits that "love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality." (p. 116). A person can be aware of very essence of another person; can see essential traits and features, if he loves him. A person can see the potential in his beloved and make him aware of what he can be and of what he should become. Frankl realized this truth in the camp when he thought of his wife. "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." (p.49)

"The Case for a Tragic Optimism," the final section of the book talks about human capacity to remain optimistic in spite of the "tragic triad". According to logotherapy, meaning is a tangible down to earth concept. A triad consists of aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by pain, guilt and death. This chapter raises a question, "can life retain its potential meaning in

spite of its tragic aspects?" Frankl says that human is capable to turn negative aspects of his life into positive or constructive with his creativity. One should make best of any situation "...tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for, (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment: (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better: and (3) deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action." (p. 140)

One cannot command or order optimism. One can't be optimistic or happy in every tragic situation against all odds. A person needs reason to be happy or to laugh. But," once an individual's search for a meaning is successful, it not only renders him happy but also gives him the capability to cope with suffering." (p.141). Frankl discusses how to use logotherapy to help suicidal tendencies, aggression and addiction. . "Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work, in love and in courage in difficult times." (p. 8). He concludes the book by emphasizing the benefits of tragic optimism in managing the difficult moments in life as well as a means of finding the true meaning of one's existence.

Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* is a significant historical, literary, philosophical, psychological, and religious work. It can also be read for self-understanding. *Man's Search for Meaning* is a book that can be used in almost all content areas: English or language arts, philosophy, psychology, religion, social studies or Holocaust studies. After reading this book, the reader tries to analyze their own life's meaning evaluating which way and where they are headed. The readers explore for what, to what, or to whom they are responsible. There is a critical analysis of life's meaning, which can be viewed philosophically, psychologically, or religiously. The book is a highly intellectual , analytical and thought provoking

#### **Works cited:**

Frankl Viktor E., *Man's Search For Meaning*. Rider, Great Britain, 2008

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