

Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor E Frankl

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This landmark bestseller explains the importance of leading a life with meaning. After enduring years of suffering in Nazi death camps, psychologist Victor Frankl developed a revolutionary approach to psychotherapy known as logotherapy. The essence of this theory is that man's primary motivational force is his search for meaning.

Introduction

In this book, the famous psychologist, Viktor E Frankl argues that even during extreme stress and suffering, man can rise to the occasion and demonstrate character. In Nazi concentration camps, under the most inhuman conditions, the only human freedom which remained was the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances. Some prisoners proved their capacity to rise to the occasion. Others collapsed. The people who survived were clearly those who found meaning even in their suffering.

Experiences in a Concentration Camp

Frankl relates the experiences of prisoners in concentration camp in three phases – period of entry into the camp, the period during which the prisoner is well entrenched in camp routine; and the period following release and liberation.

During the first phase, prisoners experienced shock. In the second phase, the prisoners developed apathy. They became insensitive to daily and hourly beatings and developed a protective shell. Apathy became a necessary mechanism of self-defence. Due to severe undernourishment, the desire for food was the major primitive instinct around which mental life centered. With most of the prisoners, the effort of having to concentrate on just saving one's skin led to a total disregard of anything not serving that purpose.

After liberation, began the third phase. Apart from the shock resulting from the sudden release of mental pressure, bitterness and disillusionment threatened to damage the character of the liberated prisoners when they returned to their former life. On their return, they found that in many places they were met only with a shrug of the shoulders. They became bitter and started wondering why they had gone through all that they had. Hearing the same phrases nearly everywhere – "We did not know about," and "We, too have suffered," was naturally frustrating. Disillusionment came because fate itself seemed so cruel. A man who for years had thought he had reached the absolute limit of all possible suffering now found that suffering had no limits, and that he could suffer still more intensely.

The Importance of Love

Frankl emphasizes that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. The salvation of man is through love and in love. A man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his suffering in the right way, man can achieve fulfillment by filling himself with the right thoughts and images. Love goes far beyond the physical. It finds its deepest meaning in man's spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, or still alive at all, ceases to be of importance.

Some of the prisoners found a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of their existence, by escaping into the past. Their imagination played with past events, often not important ones, but minor happenings and trifling things. Their nostalgic memory glorified them and they assumed a strange character. In his mind the author took bus rides, unlocked the front door of his apartment, answered telephone calls and switched on the light.

Apathy

Many camp inmates, tended to freeze, overcome by the tough conditions. They were frightened of making decisions and of taking any initiative whatsoever, convinced that fate was one's master. Why try to influence it, but instead let it take its own course? In addition, there was a great apathy. At times, lightning decisions had to be made, decisions which spelled life or death. The prisoner would have preferred to let fate make the choice for him. This escape from commitment was most apparent when a prisoner had to decide whether or not to make an escape attempt.

Apart from its role as a defensive mechanism, apathy was also the result of other factors like hunger and lack of sleep which also contributed to the general irritability of the prisoners. The lack of sleep was due partly to the general lack of hygiene and sanitation and the non availability of coffee and cigarettes.

Many prisoners also suffered from inferiority complex. They had been important people before entering the camp. Now they were treated like complete non entities. Without consciously thinking about it, the average prisoner felt himself utterly degraded.

Not all is lost

Conditions in the camp were truly hostile - lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses. But even under such depressing circumstances, all was not lost. Indeed Frankl emphasizes, the experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. Apathy can be overcome and irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual

freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, which determined whether one would or would not safeguard one's self/ inner freedom; whether one would succumb to the circumstances and renounce dignity. In the final analysis, it became clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, any man could, even under such circumstances, decide what would become of him – mentally and spiritually. He could retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.

Misplaced Optimism can be dangerous

The prisoner who lost faith in the future was doomed. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to experienced camp inmates. It often began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. Entreaties, blows, and threats had no effect. He just lay there, hardly moving, simply gave up and remained, lying in his own excreta. Nothing bothered him any more.

Optimism is good but misplaced optimism can be dangerous. Indeed, as Frankl mentions, the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. The death rate in the week between Christmas, 1944, and New Year, 1945, increased suddenly. The explanation for this increase did not lie in the harder working conditions or the deterioration of food supplies or a change of weather or new epidemics. It was simply due to the naive hope among prisoners that they would be home again by Christmas. As the time drew near and there was no encouraging news, the prisoners lost courage and disappointment overcame them. This had a dangerous influence on their powers of resistance and many of them died. In his book, "Good to great", Jim Collins talks in a similar vein under the heading "the Stockdale effect."

The need for a change in attitude

The experience of the prison camps would indicate that what is really needed is a fundamental change in the attitude toward life. The answer lies in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

Life's tasks are 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. Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross.

Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.

When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.

Once the meaning of suffering has been revealed to us, we are less likely to harbor false illusions or entertain artificial optimism. Suffering becomes a task on which we do not want to turn our backs.

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, gives him ample opportunity to add a deeper meaning to his life. He may remain brave, dignified and unselfish, even under the most difficult circumstances. 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 man to make use of the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.

Logotherapy

Logotherapy focuses on the future. It attempts to break up the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic. In logotherapy the patient is confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life.

Man's search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium. But, such tension is desirable for good mental health. There is nothing in the world, that can so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life.

Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is indispensable to mental well-being. Man should not be hesitant about challenging himself with a potential meaning for him to fulfill. Only then he will evoke his will to meaning from its state of latency. Rather than avoiding tension completely, man should strive and struggle for a worthwhile goal. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.

Man's will to meaning can also be frustrated. Logotherapy speaks of "existential frustration." The term "existential" may be used in three ways: to refer to (1) existence itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the meaning of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the will to meaning.

The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century. The author attributes this to a historical process of evolution since the arrival of the human being. At the beginning of human history, man lost some of the basic animal instincts in which an animal's behavior is embedded and by which it is secured. In addition to this, however, man has suffered another loss in his more recent development. The traditions which buttressed his behavior are now rapidly diminishing. No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do. Sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism).

According to logotherapy, we can discover meaning in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love, and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.

A crucial point the author makes is that a forced intention makes impossible what one forcibly wishes. The more a man tries to demonstrate his sexual potency or a woman her ability to experience orgasm, the less they are able to succeed. Pleasure is a side-effect or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself.

Similarly, the fear of sleeplessness results in anxiety to fall asleep, which, in turn, makes sleep difficult. It is better to usually advise the patient not to try to sleep but rather to try to do just the opposite, that is, to stay awake as long as possible. In other words, the strong desire to fall asleep, arising from anxiety of not being able to do so, must be replaced by the paradoxical intention not to fall asleep, which soon will be followed by sleep.

A similar chain of events, can be observed in obsessive-compulsive cases in which the patient fights the ideas which haunt him. Thereby, however, he increases their power to disturb him. The symptom is only reinforced! On the other hand, as soon as the patient stops fighting his obsessions and instead tries to ridicule them by dealing with them in an ironical way - by applying paradoxical intention, the vicious circle is cut, the symptom diminishes and finally atrophies.

An active life gives man the opportunity to realize value in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art, or nature. But there is also a purpose in life which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in man's attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are denied to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death.

Logotherapy is quite different from psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis, patients are asked to tell things which they do not like to tell. In logotherapy, the patients must hear things that are disagreeable to them. Logotherapy focuses on the meanings to be fulfilled by patients in the future. The patients are confronted with and reoriented towards the meanings of their lives. Logotherapy focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for a meaning. Logotherapy believes man's main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts, or in merely reconciling the conflicting aims of id, ego and superego or in the mere adaptation or adjustment to society and environment.

Logotherapy tries to make patients fully aware of their own responsibilities. A logotherapist does not impose value judgments on patients. Logotherapy is not preaching. The role of a logotherapist is akin to that of ophthalmologists, not painters, who paint a picture of the world as they see it. The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. Frankl calls this the self transcendence of human existence. The more one forgets oneself and gives oneself to a cause to serve or another person to love, the more human one is and the more the actualization. Indeed, self actualization is possible only as a side effect of self transcendence.

The person who attacks the problems of life actively can reflect with pride and joy on all the life he has already lived to the fullest. Old age does not matter to him. He will have no reason to envy the young people who he sees, or wax nostalgic over his own lost youth. He will not envy a young person for the possibilities that lie ahead of him. "No thank you," he will think. "Instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past, not only the reality of work done and of love loved, but of sufferings bravely suffered. These sufferings are even the things of which I am most proud, though these are things which cannot inspire envy."

Conclusion

Man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes – within the limits of endowment and environment - he makes out of himself. In the concentration camps, some comrades behaved like animals while others behaved like saints. Man has the potential to be both; it depends on his own decisions, not on external conditions.

There can be optimism even 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.

Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to "be happy." Once the reason is found, one becomes happy automatically. Instead of trying to pursue happiness, one must search for a reason to become happy, by actualizing the potential meaning inherent and dormant in a given situation. In contrast, meaninglessness results when people have enough to live by but nothing to live for; they have the means but no meaning.

Frankl points to the mass neurotic syndrome so pervasive in the young generation: there is ample empirical evidence that the three facets of this syndrome – depression, aggression, addiction – are due to “the existential vacuum,” a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness. Aggressions will subside only when the youngsters dedicate themselves to a collective purpose.