

BOOK SUMMARY

# Man's Search for Meaning

by Viktor E. Frankl

A psychiatrist's account of surviving the Nazi camps, and the idea that meaning — not pleasure or power — is what keeps us going.

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# Key ideas

1. **The last freedom.** Even when everything else is taken, we keep the freedom to choose our attitude.
2. **Meaning over pleasure.** People can endure almost any “how” if they have a “why”.
3. **Three sources of meaning.** Creating a work, loving someone, and facing suffering with courage.
4. **Suffering can have purpose.** Pain we cannot avoid can still be given meaning by how we bear it.
5. **Life asks the question.** Instead of asking what we expect from life, ask what life expects from us.

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## Foreword and Preface to the 1992 Edition

The book opens with a dedication to the memory of Frankl's mother and a foreword by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, written for the 1992 edition. Kushner calls it one of the great books of its time. Most books, he says, are worth reading for a single passage that can change a life. This one has several. It is first a book about survival. Frankl, like many German and East European Jews who felt secure in the 1930s, was thrown into the Nazi network of concentration and extermination camps and lived. Yet Kushner stresses that the book is less an account of suffering and loss than an account of the sources of strength that let people survive. Frankl's question was not why so many prisoners died. It was why anyone survived at all.

Kushner points to a line from Nietzsche that Frankl quotes again and again: "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How." Prisoners who gave up hope often died, not mainly from lack of food or medicine, but from lack of something to live for. Frankl kept himself going by picturing his wife and by imagining that one day he would lecture on the psychological lessons of Auschwitz. Kushner then sums up the book's central thesis. Life is not mainly a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. Meaning can come from work, from love, and from courage in hard times. Suffering in itself is meaningless. We give it meaning by the way we respond to it.

Kushner calls Frankl's most lasting insight the idea that outside forces can take away everything except our freedom to choose how we respond. He contrasts this with a scene from Arthur Miller's play *Incident at Vichy*, in which a Nazi officer throws away a professional man's credentials and tells him that now he has nothing. Frankl would say we are never left with nothing while we keep that freedom. Kushner also notes that the 1962 foreword was written by the psychologist Gordon Allport, while this one is written by a clergyman, a sign that this is a deeply religious book. He quotes its famous closing thought: man is the being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and also the being who entered them upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.

In his own preface, Frankl reflects on the book's success. It had seen nearly one hundred printings in English, appeared in twenty-one other languages and sold more than three million copies in English alone. He does not treat this as a personal achievement. He reads it as "an expression of the misery of our time." If hundreds of thousands of people reach for a book whose title promises an answer about life's meaning, the question must be burning for them. He wrote the book in nine successive days, determined to publish it anonymously so it could never

bring him fame. He yielded only at the last moment and let his name appear on the title page. It is remarkable to him that, of all his books, this one became the success.

That paradox leads to the advice he gives his students: do not aim at success. The more you make it a target, the more you will miss it. Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued. It must ensue, as the side effect of dedication to a cause greater than yourself or of surrender to another person. Listen to what your conscience commands and carry it out as well as you can, and in the long run success will follow because you forgot to think about it. Frankl closes the preface with the decision that shaped his life. Shortly before the United States entered the war, he was invited to collect an immigration visa at the American Consulate in Vienna. His parents were overjoyed, but he hesitated. Could he leave them alone to face the camps? At home he found a piece of marble his father had taken from the ruins of Vienna's largest synagogue, burned by the National Socialists. It bore a Hebrew letter from the Ten Commandments. His father told him it stood for "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land." Frankl stayed and let the visa lapse.

## Arrival at Auschwitz

Part I, “Experiences in a Concentration Camp,” is not an account of facts and events, Frankl explains, but of personal experiences. He is less interested in the great horrors, which others have described, than in “the multitude of small torments,” the way everyday camp life looked in the mind of the average prisoner. Most of what he describes happened in the small camps, where much of the real extermination took place. His subject is the great army of unknown and unrecorded victims, not heroes, martyrs or the privileged Capos. The Capos were prisoners given special power, often chosen precisely for their brutality. Many fared better in camp than they ever had in their lives, and they frequently beat prisoners more cruelly than the SS did. He sorts the prisoner’s mental reactions into three phases: shock after admission, apathy once camp routine set in, and the period after liberation.

Frankl is blunt about the struggle among prisoners themselves. When a transport was announced, likely bound for the gas chambers, a free fight broke out as men tried to get their own names and their friends’ names crossed off the list, knowing someone else would have to take each place. Prisoners were reduced to numbers. Frankl was Number 119,104, and guards glanced at numbers, never names. A kind of negative selection operated: those who lost all scruples and were ready to use brute force, theft or betrayal of friends had the best chance of staying alive. His conclusion is stark: “the best of us did not return.” He also admits the difficulty of his task. An outsider has distance but too little knowledge, while an insider knows but lacks objectivity. He considered publishing under his prison number but decided the book would lose half its value without open conviction.

The first phase begins on the train. Fifteen hundred people traveled eighty to a coach, lying on top of their luggage. Then came the cry “There is a sign, Auschwitz!” and the sight of barbed wire, watchtowers and columns of ragged grey figures. Frankl describes the “delusion of reprieve,” the condemned man’s belief that he might be spared at the last minute. The new arrivals clung to scraps of hope, such as the healthy look of the prisoners who met the train. These turned out to be a chosen elite who profited from the valuables taken from new arrivals. In a shed built for 200, 1,500 captives were packed together with one five-ounce piece of bread over four days, while senior prisoners bargained over jewelry.

Then came the first selection. An SS officer pointed right or left at each prisoner. Frankl, hiding his haversack under his coat, was sent to the right. About 90 percent of his transport went left, straight to the crematorium, a building marked “bath” in several languages. He later learned

that a friend who had been sent left was already “floating up to Heaven” in the smoke from the chimney. Everything was taken. Prisoners were stripped, shaved of all body hair and showered. When Frankl tried to keep the manuscript of his scientific work, an old prisoner answered him with contempt, and Frankl says he struck out his whole former life. Standing naked, the men had nothing left but their bare existence.

Frankl notes two unexpected reactions to this first shock: grim humor and a cold, detached curiosity. He compares his state to a climbing accident in which he felt only curiosity about how it would turn out. The detachment worked as a protection, letting the mind look at its surroundings almost objectively. Prisoners also discovered that “textbooks tell lies.” Men slept nine to a tier on bare boards without catching cold. Despite severe vitamin deficiency their gums were healthier than before. They wore the same shirts for half a year and slept through a neighbor’s loud snoring. Frankl recalls Dostoevski’s definition of man as a being who can get used to anything, and agrees, while noting that they had not yet reached that stage in their minds. Thoughts of suicide were almost universal in this early phase, born of hopelessness. Frankl made a decision on his first evening never to “run into the wire,” the electrified fence. Given how short the average prisoner’s life expectancy already was, he reasoned, suicide was pointless. He also observes that the new prisoner did not fear death. After the first days even the gas chambers lost their horror, since they spared a man the act of suicide.

The morning after the first night, a veteran prisoner slipped into the hut with advice. Shave every day, even with a piece of glass, because looking younger meant looking fit for work. Never limp. Any visible weakness marked a man as a “Moslem,” camp slang for a prisoner who had given up, and every “Moslem” went to the gas chambers sooner or later. He then told Frankl frankly that he alone had to fear the next selection. Frankl smiled, and defends that smile with a line from Lessing: “There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose.” From this comes a principle that runs through the book: an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.

## Apathy and the Struggle to Survive

The second phase was relative apathy, a kind of emotional death. At first the new prisoner felt a boundless longing for home and family and disgust at the ugliness around him: rag uniforms that would make a scarecrow look elegant, filth between the huts, latrine duty where a man was beaten if he tried to wipe excrement from his face. Within days or weeks these reactions died. Men who once looked away from punishment parades watched them unmoved. Frankl stood in the sick-bay line while a twelve-year-old boy's gangrenous toes were pulled off with tweezers and felt nothing. He watched prisoners strip a still-warm corpse of potatoes, wooden shoes, a coat and string. Once he sipped hot soup while the glazed eyes of a man he had spoken to two hours earlier stared in at him through the window as the body was dragged out. His own lack of feeling surprised him as a professional, which is why he remembered it.

Frankl argues that the worst part of a beating was not the pain but the mental agony of injustice and, above all, the insult. He was once struck on the head twice for another man's lack of symmetry in the bread line. A guard once threw a stone at him, the way one calls an animal back to work, and that felt more degrading than blows. In 2°F cold a brutal foreman threatened to kill him and demanded to know what he had been in his former life. When Frankl said he was a doctor who mostly worked without pay in clinics for the poor, the foreman attacked him. What stirred indignation even in a hardened prisoner was being judged by a man so vulgar that a nurse would not have let him into a hospital waiting room.

Apathy was a necessary defense. Reality dimmed, and all energy went into one task: keeping oneself and one's friends alive. The usual evening feeling was relief: "Well, another day is over." The inner life sank to a primitive level that Frankl's psychoanalytically trained colleagues called regression. Prisoners dreamed of bread, cake, cigarettes and warm baths. Once Frankl reached out to wake a man from an obviously terrible nightmare and then drew back his hand, realizing no dream could be worse than the reality he would be waking him into. Whenever the guards were not watching, men swapped recipes and planned menus for reunions after liberation, until the whispered warning "The guard is coming." Frankl thought these talks were risky, stirring a body that had adapted to almost nothing.

The daily ration in the later period was watery soup once a day, a small piece of bread and an "extra allowance" of about three-fourths of an ounce of margarine, poor sausage, cheese, synthetic honey or jam. It was nowhere near enough for heavy labor in the cold. Bodies turned into "skeletons disguised with skin and rags," and prisoners could predict who in the hut would

die next. During the nightly search for lice, Frankl looked at his body and thought, “This body here, my body, is really a corpse already.” The worst moment of each day was the whistle before dawn, the struggle with wet, swollen feet and wire shoelaces that snapped. He saw a brave, dignified man cry like a child because he had to march barefoot in the snow.

Some things survived this hibernation. Frankl’s Capo favored him because he listened to the Capo’s love stories and gave psychotherapeutic advice, which earned him a place in the first rows of the work detachment. When Frankl was moved from Auschwitz to a camp linked to Dachau, the train passed through Vienna at midnight, past the street where he was born. He felt like a dead man looking down on a ghostly city, and the younger prisoners refused to let him look through the peephole, saying he had seen enough in all those years. Two interests stayed alive in the camp: politics, driven by rumors that became a war of nerves, and religion, which was the most sincere imaginable. Improvised prayers in hut corners and locked cattle trucks deeply moved new arrivals. In the winter and spring of 1945, typhus infected nearly everyone.

## Love, Beauty and Humor in the Camp

Frankl's central observation about inner life is surprising. Sensitive people used to a rich intellectual life suffered greatly, but their inner selves were less damaged. They could retreat from the horror into a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. This explains why prisoners of a less hardy build often survived better than robust ones. Frankl himself fought off fever and delirium by composing speeches in his head and reconstructing his lost manuscript in shorthand on tiny scraps of paper.

The most famous passage in this part comes on a march to a work site in the dark early morning. The man beside him whispered, "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps." Frankl's mind filled with the image of his wife. For the first time he understood that love is the ultimate and highest goal a person can aspire to, and that "the salvation of man is through love and in love." A man with nothing left can still know bliss in thinking of the one he loves. He did not know whether she was alive, since there was no mail, and he realized it did not matter. Love goes beyond the physical person and finds its deepest meaning in the beloved's inner self. He quotes the Song of Songs: "Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death."

Inner life also opened prisoners to nature and art as never before. Through the bars of a transport car they gazed at the mountains of Salzburg glowing at sunset. One evening a prisoner ran into the hut and called exhausted men outside to see clouds turning from steel blue to blood red over the grey huts, and one man said, "How beautiful the world could be!" In a grey dawn at a trench, Frankl felt his spirit break through the gloom and heard a "victorious Yes" to his question about ultimate purpose, just as a light came on in a distant farmhouse. There was even a makeshift cabaret, so valued that some skipped food to attend. On his second night in Auschwitz a violin played a sad tango, and he wept, because it was his wife's twenty-fourth birthday.

Humor, Frankl writes, is "another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation." It gives a moment of distance from any situation. He trained a friend, a surgeon, to develop it by promising to invent at least one funny story a day about life after liberation. In one, the surgeon is back in the operating room and reacts to "Action! Action!" like a laborer on the building site. Others joked about asking a future hostess to ladle the soup "from the bottom," where the peas were.

He also describes the relativity of suffering. Like gas that fills any chamber completely, whatever its size, suffering fills the whole soul whether it is great or small. So trivial things could bring huge joy. When a transport from Auschwitz failed to cross the Danube bridge toward Mauthausen, prisoners danced for joy at going “only” to Dachau. Learning the new camp had no gas chamber put everyone in a good mood, even while they stood all night in freezing rain as punishment. Frankl calls these pleasures a “negative happiness,” Schopenhauer’s freedom from suffering. He remembers lying in the sick quarters with seventy others, grateful to be ill and exempt from work. When volunteers were asked for a typhus camp, he went against his friends’ advice, reasoning that if he had to die, it would be better to die helping as a doctor. He called it “simple mathematics, not sacrifice.”

## **Fate, Decisions and the Final Days**

The camp taught prisoners to hide in the middle of the herd. Like sheep, they crowded into the center of marching columns to avoid blows and wind. The first law of self-preservation was “Do not be conspicuous.” Yet enforced communal life also made them crave solitude. At one camp Frankl found a few moments alone sitting on the wooden lid of a water shaft behind a hut of fifty delirious typhus patients, looking past corpses toward the Bavarian hills. That shaft later hid three prisoners from a transport while Frankl sat on the lid tossing pebbles at the wire. As the only doctor, he divided five or ten aspirin tablets among fifty patients.

Human life counted for almost nothing. When sick convoys were put together, bodies were thrown onto carts dead or alive because “the list had to be correct.” When a young prisoner’s brother was missing from a list, the warden simply had him swap numbers with another man. Those who stayed behind looked over departing prisoners with open curiosity, eyeing their coats and shoes. Frankl adopted a rule in Auschwitz: answer every question truthfully, but volunteer nothing. On his first morning he was shuffled between groups and huts and felt that fate had passed him in many forms within minutes.

Two decisions stand out. When a transport to a supposed rest camp was organized and Frankl was listed, the chief doctor offered to take his name off. Frankl refused, saying he had learned to let fate take its course and would stay with his friends. Before leaving he asked his friend Otto to tell his wife that he had talked of her daily and hourly, that he loved her more than anyone, and that the short time of their marriage outweighed everything. The transport really did go to a rest camp. In the camp he left behind, famine grew so severe that cannibalism broke out. Frankl tells the parable of Death in Teheran, in which a servant flees to Teheran to escape Death and finds Death waiting for him there.

Prisoners came to fear making decisions at all, convinced that fate was their master. Frankl felt this torment when a chance to escape appeared as the front drew near. He planned to flee with a friend, but when a dying countryman he was treating looked at him with a hopeless gaze, he decided to stay with his patients. He felt a peace he had never known. On the last day, as the SS fled, a Red Cross delegate arrived and placed the camp under his protection. That night the SS returned with trucks, promising to take the remaining prisoners to Switzerland. Frankl and his friend were among thirteen left behind because the chief doctor miscounted. The next morning a white flag flew over the gate. Weeks later he learned that those on the trucks had been locked in huts at a nearby camp and burned alive. The miscount that had angered him saved his life.

## The Last of the Human Freedoms

Frankl looks beyond apathy as a defense to its causes. Hunger, lack of sleep caused by vermin, and the absence of nicotine and caffeine all fed irritability. So did a kind of inferiority complex. Men who had once been somebody were treated as nobodies. The privileged prisoners, the Capos, cooks, storekeepers and camp police, felt promoted rather than degraded, and some developed small delusions of grandeur. One prisoner joked about a Capo: "Imagine! I knew that man when he was only the president of a large bank. Isn't it fortunate that he has risen so far in the world?" Clashes between this favored minority and the starving majority were explosive.

Then Frankl asks the book's key question. Is a person completely shaped by his surroundings, a product of biological, psychological or social conditions? His answer, from experience and principle, is no. There were enough examples, often heroic, of men who overcame apathy and held back irritability. He remembers the men who walked through the huts comforting others and giving away their last piece of bread. They were few, but they proved that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. Every day and every hour offered the chance to make that decision.

The kind of person a prisoner became was therefore the result of an inner decision, not only of camp conditions. Frankl quotes Dostoevski: "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." He describes three kinds of life. One realizes values through creative work. One finds fulfillment in beauty, art or nature. A third, almost stripped of both, still offers the chance for high moral behavior in the attitude one takes toward an existence restricted by outside forces. If life has meaning at all, suffering must have meaning, since suffering, like fate and death, is part of life. A person may stay brave, dignified and unselfish, or forget his dignity in the fight to survive.

He tells of a young woman who was dying in the camp. She was cheerful and grateful that fate had hit her so hard, because her former spoiled life had not taken spiritual things seriously. She pointed at a chestnut branch with two blossoms outside the window and said she often talked to the tree. When Frankl asked, uneasy, whether it answered, she said: "It said to me, 'I am here, I am here, I am life, eternal life.'"

The most depressing force in camp was not knowing how long it would last. Frankl calls it a "provisional existence of unknown limit." The Latin *finis* means both end and goal, and a man

who cannot see the end of his provisional existence cannot aim at a goal. He stops living for the future, and his inner life decays. Time warped: a day seemed longer than a week. Many retreated into the past and treated the present as unreal, missing the chance to grow spiritually beyond themselves. Only a few reached great heights, but even one example proves that man's inner strength can raise him above his outward fate. The conclusion is practical: anyone trying to help a prisoner had to give him a future goal to look forward to.

## A Why to Live For

Frankl gives a personal example. Limping on sores from torn shoes, in bitter wind, sick of endless small calculations about trading sausage for bread or finding wire for a shoelace, he forced his thoughts elsewhere. He pictured himself in a warm, bright lecture hall, giving a talk on the psychology of the concentration camp. Seen this way, as if from the distance of science and as if already past, his suffering became something he could rise above. He cites Spinoza: “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.”

The prisoner who lost faith in his future was doomed. The loss of hope led to mental and physical collapse, often in a sudden crisis in which a man simply refused to get up, wash or go to the parade ground, no matter the pleas, blows or threats. Frankl’s senior block warden, a well-known composer and librettist, dreamed in February 1945 that a voice told him the war would end for him on March 30. As the day came near and the news stayed bad, he fell ill with a high fever on March 29, lost consciousness on March 30 and died on March 31. Frankl believes the real cause was the sudden loss of hope, which weakened his resistance to typhus. The camp’s chief doctor saw the same pattern on a larger scale. Deaths in the week between Christmas 1944 and New Year’s 1945 rose beyond anything seen before, because so many prisoners had hoped to be home by Christmas.

From this Frankl takes Nietzsche’s words as the motto for any help given to prisoners: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.” What was needed was a basic change of attitude. We must stop asking what we expect from life and realize that life is asking something of us, daily and hourly. The answer lies not in talk or meditation but in right action and right conduct. Because each person’s tasks differ from moment to moment, the meaning of life cannot be defined in general terms. Sometimes a situation calls for action, sometimes for contemplation, sometimes for accepting fate. When a person’s destiny is to suffer, that suffering becomes his unique task, and his opportunity lies in how he bears it. Tears are nothing to be ashamed of, since they show the courage to suffer.

Two men in the camp who were thinking of suicide both said they had nothing more to expect from life. Frankl helped each see that life still expected something from them. For one it was a child he adored, waiting in a foreign country. For the other, a scientist, it was a series of books only he could finish. A person who knows his responsibility to someone waiting for him, or to unfinished work, cannot throw his life away. He knows the why, and can bear almost any how.

One evening, after 2,500 men had chosen to fast for a day rather than give up a prisoner who had stolen potatoes, the hut sat in darkness and low spirits. The senior block warden asked Frankl to speak. Cold, hungry and exhausted, he began with small comforts. Even in the sixth winter of the war things were not as bad as they could be. Health, family, work and position could all be regained. He admitted he put his own chances at about one in twenty, yet said he did not intend to give up hope, since no one knew what the next hour might bring. He reminded them that the past cannot be taken away: "What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you." Someone, a friend, a wife, the living or the dead, or God, was watching each of them and would not want to be disappointed. When the light came back on, men limped toward him in tears to thank him.

## **Guards, Liberation and the Return Home**

How could men of flesh and blood treat others so brutally? Frankl sorts the guards into groups. Some were sadists in the clinical sense, and these were often deliberately chosen for the harshest duties. Most had their feelings dulled by years of brutality and did not take part in sadism, but did not stop it either. And some took pity. One camp commander, it turned out after liberation, had secretly paid out of his own pocket for medicine for the prisoners, while the senior camp warden, a prisoner himself, was harder than any SS guard. A foreman once secretly gave Frankl a piece of bread saved from his own breakfast, and what moved Frankl so deeply was the human word and look that came with it.

From this he concludes that there are only two races of men, the decent and the indecent, and both are found in every group. No group is made up only of one kind. The camp tore open the human soul and showed that the line between good and evil runs through every person, even at the bottom of the abyss.

The third phase began with liberation. When the white flag went up, there was no wild joy, only total relaxation and a strange inability to take in freedom. Prisoners walked out repeating the word “freedom” but could not feel it. They looked at flowering meadows and felt nothing. The first spark of joy came at the sight of a rooster with bright feathers. That evening men admitted to each other that they were not really pleased, and discovered everyone felt the same. They had to relearn pleasure slowly. Frankl calls this depersonalization. The body, less inhibited than the mind, ate for hours and days, and men talked for hours once the pressure was released. Days later, walking alone through a meadow full of larks, Frankl fell to his knees and repeated one sentence: “I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.” That, he says, was where his new life began.

Sudden release carried its own danger, like the bends in a diver who comes up too fast. Some men who had been oppressed now became oppressors, justifying cruelty by what they had suffered. When Frankl walked around a field of young crops, a friend dragged him through it and exploded that his wife and child had been gassed, so who could forbid him to tread on a few stalks of oats? Such men had to be led back to the plain truth that no one has the right to do wrong, even if wrong has been done to them. Another man thrust his hand under Frankl’s nose and swore it should be cut off if he did not stain it with blood on the day he got home. Frankl insists he was not a bad man. He had been the best of comrades, in camp and afterward.

Two more experiences threatened former prisoners: bitterness and disillusionment. At home they met shrugs and phrases like “We did not know about it” and “We, too, have suffered.” Worse, some found that the person whose image had kept them alive was gone. Frankl describes a man who takes the trolley to the home he has seen in his mind for years, rings the bell as he dreamed of doing thousands of times, and finds that the person who should open the door is not there and never will be. They had not hoped for happiness, but they were not prepared for unhappiness. Still, Frankl ends Part I on a hopeful note. For every survivor there comes a day when, looking back, he can no longer understand how he endured it all.

## Logotherapy in a Nutshell: The Will to Meaning

Part II explains the theory behind the story. Logotherapy, sometimes called the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy, takes its name from the Greek *logos*, meaning “meaning.” Freud’s psychoanalysis centers on the will to pleasure and Adler’s psychology on the will to power. Logotherapy centers on the will to meaning. Frankl jokes that in psychoanalysis the patient lies on a couch and says things that are disagreeable to say, while in logotherapy he sits upright and hears things that are disagreeable to hear. More seriously, logotherapy looks less at the past and less inward. It focuses on the future, on meanings the patient has yet to fulfill, and it breaks up the self-centeredness that feeds neurosis.

The search for meaning, Frankl argues, is the primary motivation in life, not a rationalization of deeper drives. He cites a French poll in which 89 percent of people said man needs “something” to live for and 61 percent said there was something or someone they would die for. His own poll at his Vienna hospital department differed by only 2 percent. A Johns Hopkins survey of 7,948 students at forty-eight colleges found that only 16 percent rated making a lot of money as very important, while 78 percent said their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.”

When the will to meaning is blocked, the result is existential frustration. Frankl insists this is not mental illness. Despair over whether life is worthwhile is existential distress, not a disease. When it does lead to neurosis, he calls it a *noögenic* neurosis, one that grows from existential problems rather than conflicts between drives. He describes an American diplomat who had spent five years in psychoanalysis in New York, where his dissatisfaction with his career was read as hatred of his father. Frankl saw instead that his work left his need for meaning unmet. The man changed professions and stayed content for more than five years. He had never really been a patient. Not every conflict is neurotic, and suffering can even be an achievement.

Mental health, Frankl argues, depends not on a tensionless balance but on healthy tension between what one is and what one should become. He calls this *noö-dynamics*. Architects strengthen a weak arch by adding load to it, and therapists should not fear giving patients a meaningful task. He points again to the camps, where he believes reconstructing his confiscated manuscript while sick with typhus helped him survive, and to studies of prisoners of war in Japan, North Korea and North Vietnam, where those with a task waiting for them were most likely to survive.

The opposite condition is the existential vacuum, a feeling of total meaninglessness and inner emptiness. People have lost the instincts that guide animals, and more recently the traditions that once guided behavior. Without either, they do what others do or what others tell them. Frankl found a marked existential vacuum in 25 percent of his European students and 60 percent of his American students. It shows up mainly as boredom and as “Sunday neurosis,” the depression that comes when the busy week stops and the emptiness shows. Depression, aggression and addiction often trace back to it, and a frustrated will to meaning is often replaced by a will to power, money or pleasure.

## **Logotherapy in a Nutshell: Suffering, Technique and Freedom**

Logotherapy teaches that meaning can be found in three ways: by creating a work or doing a deed, by experiencing something or encountering someone, and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. Frankl illustrates the third with an elderly doctor who could not overcome his despair after his wife's death. Frankl helped him see his suffering as a sacrifice: by outliving her, he had spared her the pain of losing him. The fate could not change, but the attitude could, and the grief took on the meaning of a sacrifice. Frankl is careful to add that suffering is not necessary for meaning. Meaning is possible in spite of suffering, and only when it cannot be avoided. If its cause can be removed, removing it is the meaningful thing to do. To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic, not heroic.

He then tells what he calls his deepest experience in the camps. His odds of survival were one in twenty-eight, and he had lost his manuscript, his "mental child." Did his life have meaning at all? At Auschwitz he had been given the clothes of a man sent to the gas chamber, and in the coat pocket he found a single page torn from a Hebrew prayer book with the Shema Yisrael. He took it as a challenge to live his thoughts rather than only write them. Most of his comrades asked whether they would survive. His question was whether the suffering had meaning, since a life whose meaning depends on surviving would not be worth living.

Many modern patients bring psychiatrists questions once asked of clergy, such as "What is the meaning of my life?" In one group session, a mother who had tried to kill herself after her eleven-year-old son died, leaving her with a disabled older son, imagined herself at eighty looking back. She saw that she had made a fuller life possible for her son and helped him become a better person, so her life was not a failure. Frankl then asked whether an ape used in polio experiments could understand its suffering. It could not. Might there be a dimension beyond ours where human suffering finds its answer? He calls this super-meaning: "Logos is deeper than logic."

Frankl also answers the charge that life's shortness makes it meaningless. Only possibilities pass away. Once realized, they are stored forever in the past, where nothing is lost. The pessimist watches his wall calendar grow thinner each day. The active person files each torn-off page away with notes on the back and can look with pride on what he has lived: work done, love loved and suffering bravely borne.

Then comes technique. Anticipatory anxiety produces what the patient fears; “the fear is mother of the event.” In paradoxical intention, which Frankl described as early as 1939, the patient is asked to intend, even for a moment, the very thing he dreads. A young doctor afraid of sweating resolved to show people how much he could sweat, “at least ten quarts,” and was free of a four-year phobia within a week. A bookkeeper with severe writer’s cramp was advised by Dr. Eva Kozdera to write the worst scrawl he could, and found he could not. A stutterer recalled the one time he could not stutter: at twelve, caught without a ticket on a streetcar, he tried to stutter to win pity. The method breaks the loop in which symptom and fear feed each other, and relies on the human ability to laugh at oneself.

Frankl warns against pan-determinism, the view that people are “nothing but” products of heredity and environment. Freedom is limited, he admits, but it is freedom to take a stand toward conditions. Dr. J., the “mass murderer of Steinhof,” a Nazi who tried to send every psychotic patient to the gas chambers, later proved the best of comrades while dying in Moscow’s Lubianka prison. Freedom must be paired with responsibility, which is why Frankl proposes a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast to match the Statue of Liberty on the East. In the camps he saw some men behave like swine and others like saints, and which one a person becomes depends on decisions, not conditions. Man is the being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and also the being who entered them upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.

## The Case for a Tragic Optimism

This postscript began as a lecture at the Third World Congress of Logotherapy at Regensburg University in 1983. Its question is how anyone can say yes to life in spite of what logotherapy calls the tragic triad: pain, guilt and death. Tragic optimism means making the best of any situation, turning suffering into achievement, drawing from guilt the chance to change for the better, and drawing from life's shortness an incentive to act responsibly. Optimism cannot be ordered, any more than hope, faith or love. Nor can happiness. It must ensue from having a reason to be happy, just as laughter follows a joke rather than a command.

Frankl ties the loss of meaning to what he saw in the camps. A prisoner who gave up would refuse to get up for work and smoke a hidden cigarette, and he was usually dead within about forty-eight hours. He sees a parallel in the "no future" generation turning to drugs. He cites Irvin D. Yalom's finding that 30 percent of psychiatric outpatients had major problems with meaning, and figures showing 29 percent of Viennese felt meaning was missing from their lives. Decades earlier he had studied "unemployment neurosis." Unemployed patients equated being jobless with being useless, and being useless with a meaningless life. When they volunteered in youth groups, adult education or public libraries, their depression lifted even though they were just as poor and hungry. Man does not live by welfare alone.

He describes the feeling of meaninglessness as a sign of being human, not an illness, though it can lead to a mass neurotic triad of depression, aggression and addiction. From four years with severely depressed patients in Austria's largest state hospital, about twelve thousand cases, he told suicidal patients that survivors of failed attempts often say they are glad, because a solution came in time. In Carolyn Wood Sherif's experiment with boy scouts, aggression between groups faded only when the boys worked together to pull a food cart out of the mud. Annemarie von Forstmeyer found 90 percent of alcoholics studied felt deeply that life was meaningless, and Stanley Krippner found 100 percent of drug addicts studied believed things seemed meaningless.

Meaning, Frankl says, is found in each concrete situation, like the frames of a film whose full meaning appears only at the end. Conscience acts as a prompter. The third path to meaning, the attitude toward unavoidable suffering, is the most important. He cites Vietnam prisoners of war who said captivity had been a growth experience, and Jerry Long, paralyzed from the neck down after a diving accident at seventeen, who typed with a mouth stick and wrote: "I broke my

neck, it didn't break me." Austrian polls found that people most admire not great artists or scientists but those who master a hard lot with their heads held high.

On guilt, Frankl argues a crime can never be fully explained, because explaining it away would reduce a person to a machine. He told prisoners at San Quentin that they were responsible for overcoming their guilt by changing. An ex-prisoner started a logotherapy group for former felons that grew to 27 members, only one of whom went back to prison. He rejects collective guilt. When an American woman asked how he could write in German after Hitler, he asked whether she still used kitchen knives after killers had used them. On death, he offers this imperative: "Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now." The past is irrevocably stored, so the old should be envied, not pitied.

Every person has unconditional value, and dignity must not be confused with usefulness. If worth depends only on usefulness, logic leads to euthanasia along the lines of Hitler's program. Frankl blames a nihilism taught on campuses and couches and calls for training therapists to resist it. Citing Elisabeth S. Lukas, he calls logotherapy the most undogmatic school in the history of psychotherapy, wants no gurus and would rather pass the torch to independent minds than raise parrots. At Auschwitz, he notes, hunger did not make people alike, as Freud expected; they became more different, some swine and some saints, like Father Maximilian Kolbe, starved and murdered there and canonized in 1983. Decent people will always be a minority, which is the challenge to join them. His final warning: since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of, and since Hiroshima we know what is at stake.

## Afterword

The afterword, by William J. Winslade, places the book in history. It first appeared in German in 1946 as *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*, was translated into English in 1959 and has sold more than 12 million copies in twenty-four languages. A 1991 survey by the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club named it one of the ten most influential books in America, and it is taught in courses from psychology and philosophy to Holocaust studies and theology. Winslade first read it in the 1960s on the advice of a Norwegian colleague who had survived a Nazi camp himself.

Frankl was born in 1905 and decided at three to become a physician. As a teenager he corresponded with Sigmund Freud, who sent one of his manuscripts to the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. At sixteen he gave a lecture on the meaning of life, saying that it is we ourselves who must answer the questions life asks of us, and we can do so only by being responsible for our existence. He founded Vienna's first private youth counseling program, worked with suicidal patients at the University Clinic and by 1939 headed neurology at Rothschild Hospital, Vienna's only Jewish hospital. Winslade stresses that Frankl had formed his ideas about meaning and mental health before the camps.

In 1942 Frankl let his visa lapse to stay with his parents. He was arrested that September and spent three years in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kaufering and Türkheim. Winslade credits his survival to luck, decency, shrewdness and will, and to optimism, humor, detachment, inner freedom and a refusal to give up. He links Frankl's emphasis on attitude to later research on positive emotions and the immune system, and tells of a young Israeli soldier who lost both legs in the Yom Kippur War and moved from suicidal despair to hope after reading the book. Frankl called this "autobibliotherapy," healing through reading.

Frankl returned to Vienna in August 1945, after nearly dying of typhus at Türkheim, and learned that his pregnant wife Tilly had died at Bergen-Belsen and that his parents and brother had also died in the camps. He stayed in Vienna anyway, committed to his patients and to reconciliation over revenge: "I do not forget any good deed done to me, and I do not carry a grudge for a bad one." He rejected collective guilt and believed even a Nazi criminal could still choose to transcend evil. In 1948 he married Eleanore Schwindt, a Catholic nurse. He kept psychiatry's aim as the healing of the soul, leaving its salvation to religion. Logotherapy, he said, is offered like a supermarket, where people take what they find useful, not like a bazaar where they are talked into buying.

# About Viktor E. Frankl

Viktor E. Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist and the founder of logotherapy, often called the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. He was born in Vienna in 1905 and decided as a small child to become a physician. As a teenager he corresponded with Sigmund Freud, and at sixteen he gave a lecture on the meaning of life whose central claim, that we must answer the questions life asks of us by being responsible for our existence, became the foundation of his work.

Before the war he founded Vienna's first private youth counseling program, worked with suicidal patients at the University Clinic and headed the neurology department at Rothschild Hospital. When he had the chance to emigrate to the United States, he let his visa lapse to stay with his aging parents. He was arrested in 1942 and spent three years in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kaufering and Türkheim. His pregnant wife Tilly, his parents and his brother all died in the camps.

After liberation Frankl returned to Vienna, where he chose to stay and rejected the idea of collective guilt. He reconstructed his book *The Doctor and the Soul*, wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* in nine days and later married Eleanore Schwindt. He became a professor of neurology and psychiatry, led the neurology department at the Vienna Polyclinic and lectured widely in Europe and America.

Frankl wrote dozens of books, but *Man's Search for Meaning* became by far the best known, translated into many languages and read by millions. He died in Vienna in 1997. His ideas are carried on by logotherapists, in keeping with his wish that it be carried on by independent minds rather than followers.

Listen to this summary, or turn the book into a podcast or course, at [webapp.sunapp.ai/books/mans-search-for-meaning-by-viktor-e-frankl](https://webapp.sunapp.ai/books/mans-search-for-meaning-by-viktor-e-frankl)

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