

Ideas from *Man's Search for Meaning*

by Viktor E. Frankl

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In the last few months several of my dearly loved ones have been going through various kinds and degrees of trauma. I began thinking of the work of Viktor Frankl and revisited it for solace. Since its publication in 1959, *Man's Search for Meaning* has been one of the most quoted and referenced books on the topic of the human condition.

After surviving years of denigration and suffering at Auschwitz and other concentration camps, Frankl learned that most of his family, including his wife, was killed. After the war he became a professor at the University of Vienna Medical School and was a visiting professor at Stanford University. He developed an existential based theory and therapy, having to do with the meaning of existing or living. The existential philosopher Nietzsche wrote, "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*."

Frankl noted that those prisoners who had a will and a *why* to live were able to better support themselves by choosing to:

- Utilize humour. Yes, they did. One exercise was imagining themselves in the future with concentration camp behaviours in a more gentle environment.
- Experience joy. Whether it was realizing their new concentration camp had no gas crematorium or inviting one another to view a sunset.
- Gather with songs, poems and other distractions. Creating a diversion can provide a break from painful situations and is an example of accepting responsibility for creating our own pleasure.
- Connect to a spiritual source. Services were secretly held.
- Remember loved ones. Frankl often imaged his wife smiling at him in the most humiliating of circumstances.

Some of Frankl's conclusions include:

- We should *not* judge another until we question whether in a similar situation we might do the same.
- We are not crazy when we act abnormally in abnormal situations.
- There are situations in which numbing our emotions is natural self protection.
- We can maintain independent thinking with a sense of spiritual connection.
- We can turn our life challenges into inner victories.
- Suffering is diminished by finding its meaning. Again to quote Nietzsche, "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger."
- We will naturally experience a certain amount of personal tension—between what we have already achieved and what we want to accomplish.

- Our purpose is not necessarily made by us but more noticed or discovered. Being responsible to our values and conscience leads us to our life meaning. It is important that we act and reach accomplishments that mirror our values.

Gordon Allport in the preface to *Man's Search for Meaning* sums up Frankl's main survival discovery: "The last of human freedoms"—is the capacity to "choose ones' attitude in a given set of circumstances."

When our loved ones are journeying through tough times we can choose to caringly witness with Frankl's viewpoints in mind. When life hands us our share of troubles may we provide a model of choosing to focus on the available moments of joy and love while letting the meaning unfold. (526 w)

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