

Man's search for Meaning

By

Victor E. Frankl

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Reviewed by

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So, when was the last time you asked or tried to answer the question “what is the meaning of my life?”

For many of us, while this may not be the kind of question we would like to delve upon for long, for the rest of us it remains to be a perennial quest. No denying that is one is not an easy question either to raise or to answer. But here is a book which explores the depth and breadth of this question. Viktor Frankl's *Man's search for Meaning* is a magnificently crafted book which ties the slender threads of his experience and philosophy with scientific facts. This book, hence, according to me qualifies to be as much as an autobiography as probably a work of non-fiction.

I would like to review this book in the following way: at first I will highlight its central thesis emerging from his powerful narration of the heart wrenching experiences he endures as a prisoner in the concentration camp. I shall then try to draw out his central philosophy for which the book is qualified as a non-fictional reading, and at the same time defend possible charges of dubbing it as a self-help book. Traces of my own feelings will make occasional entry into my review. I have rather allowed my feelings to be a part of this review as I believe that some books hold such a sway on you that it would be a felony not let your feelings have a life of their own. Towards the end I share with my reader some spectacular insights that made me admire the dexterity with which the author chisels out the most incisive sentences *of* and *for* life.

The central theme of the book is the explication and development of Frankl's theory called 'Logotherapy' – logos is a Greek word denoting 'meaning'. According to Logotherapy, the one primary motivational force which helps a person survive any devastating crisis or dire circumstance is his/her incessant search for meaning in life. Being a practicing psychiatrist, the author often oscillates into giving details about how his theory is different from other dominant forms of therapy available, like psychotherapy that also addresses how individuals cope with abysmal challenges of life. The one basic distinction that significantly made a dent in my understanding of the difference between Logotherapy and Psychotherapy is that while psychotherapy is retrospective, Logotherapy is futuristic. This is to say, the former tries to

address human concern by seeking linkages into the past or 'life- lived', the latter tries to help individual discover what will make his/her life meaningful or 'life-to-be-lived'.

Since Frankl's theory principally makes a departure from the then prominent and established Psychotherapy, it seems imperative for him to also offer numerous examples about how Logotherapy has equally or rather more therapeutic value in treating not only everyday human concerns but also neurotic conditions like agoraphobia or OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) behavior. As such, while he explicates his theory of Logotherapy, in the latter half of his book, Frankl consistently narrates cases where he or other practicing logotherapist have treated patients with neurotic conditions as well.

A pertinent question at this juncture would be about how or what is it that a practicing logotherapist do? In Frankl's words the logotherapist's role consists in "widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him". As such the logotherapist makes one aware of the hidden logos of his/her life. Unlike his predecessors Sigmund Freud, the father of psychotherapy, who considered that man's basic concern is the immediate gratification of his drives and instincts, logotherapy considers man to be a being whose main concern is to discover the meaning of his life.

But what is Frankl's premise of Logotherapy based on? More importantly, how can one ever discover this meaning? To answer this question let us look at what preceded before Frankl arrived at his theory.

The book does not begin with the explication of Logotherapy. Rather, the first ninety odd pages is a dramatic and powerful narration of the life he spent in the Nazi death camp. The narrative is very poignant and makes us wonder in amazement as to how could anyone survive such bestial situations as described by him. With every family member and possession lost in the horror of the concentration camp the story of Viktor Frankl is one of courage, determinism and optimism. Being a victim and then the survivor of the horrific concentration camp, what kept Frankl from losing his last possession – his life, is his incessant will to complete his manuscript which was destroyed when he was brought to the concentration camp. For Frankl, completing his manuscript was the most meaningful facet of his life. To see his manuscript completed is what helped him endure every unimaginable torture and suffering inflicted upon him in the Nazi death camps. To that effect, the meaning of his suffering in concentration camp surfaces as the existential validation of his theory of Logotherapy. Small wonder why all elements in the orbit of the book revolve around the ever reverberating and indispensable question: For someone who has lost everything and is incessantly confronted with suffering of the highest degree, why would life still be worthy of preserving?

The theory of Logotherapy is an answer to this question – beneath man's endurance of the unspeakable suffering lies his primary motivation – the *will to meaning*.

According to Frankl while meaning of life always changes, it never ceases to be. Hence at given point in time we may find that we can discover meaning in life in three different ways:

1. By creating a work or doing a deed
2. By experiencing something or encountering someone(e.g., goodness, truth, beauty, another human being)
3. By the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.

Of this three, the one that I found to be most piercing is the last one. What intrigued me most about his idea of finding meaning in suffering is that when faced with an unavoidable hopeless situation, man witnesses the uniquely human potential in himself – the potential to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph. Every individual, when faced with a situation that he has no control over, the only thing that is within his means is the change he can make in himself. A beautiful example cited by Frankl here is that of a doctor who is widowed. The doctor loved his wife immensely and could not, even after 2 years, overcome the loss of his wife. Frankl asks this doctor this question: “what would have happened if your wife had to survive you?”. The doctor’s reply was “this would have been terrible, how she would have suffered!” To this Frankl replies “You see, Doctor, such suffering has been spared her, and it is you who have spared her this suffering – to be sure, at the price that now you have to survive and mourn her.”

This piece, in my reading, deserves the highest praise for the sheer beauty of perspective it offers towards suffering and sacrifice. My own learning from this small incident narrated by the author is that while I cannot at any time alter my devastating fate, I can surely see a meaning in my suffering. Let me hasten to add here that do not be misled - suffering is not necessary to find meaning – rather meaning is possible even in spite of suffering.

A prospective reader of this book, and all those averse to self-help books, may understandably question: in what way is this book not like any other self-help book? Doesn’t it talk about helping ourselves by reversing our perspective in times of crisis? Well, pick any self-help book and you will see how the authors of these self-help books wear the ‘fix-it’ hat. Furthermore, most self-help books do not concern itself with discovering and understanding the root cause of any mysterious human act or episode. Rather they are books with therapeutic value loaded with remedies to symptoms, something like ‘10 best ways to ...’. Frankl’s book inherits neither of these traits. What it does is answers a fundamentally valuable existential question about what keeps us going; what makes us treasure life even when there seems to be nothing available for us to hold on to. For those of us who want to know what keeps us going and understand in its final analysis what is that ultimate silver lining in our lives – well it is our *search for meaning – about becoming aware of possibilities against the background of realities.*

Before I end this review, as promised, let me share with you some of the most unforgettable and intensely profound sentences I came across in the book. The beauty of these sentences lies in the

fact that despite having plucked them from their context, they still dazzle. I am confident you will not disagree with me....

In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost but everything is irrevocably stored.

God preserves all you tears, so perhaps none of your sufferings were in vain.

Nothing can be undone, and nothing can be done away with.

Pleasure is, and must remain a side-effect or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself.

I know that without the suffering, the growth that I have achieved would have been impossible.

Everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find.

He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how* (This quote, by one of the most controversial philosopher Nietzsche, is Frankl's basic philosophical position of Logotherapy)

Hope we discover your own meaning in life!

Rajshri