

Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor Emil Frankl

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Foreword by John Boyne

"When I was 15 years old, my English teacher came into school on the last day before our summer holidays & read out a list of about 40 books. "I want you to read some of these over the break," he told us. "I won't test you on them afterwards. I won't ask you what you read or tell you to write any book reports. But each one is a powerful work of literature that has meant a lot to me over the years, & if you give them a chance, if you let these stories & voices into your lives, then they might make you view the world in a different way. & they might change you."

I was unfamiliar with most of the titles, for although this was a point in my development where I was beginning to discover adult literature in a more serious way, I was new to almost all of it. However, being a teenager obsessed with both reading & writing, the list excited me, & I took to my bike & cycled to my local bookshop the next morning ready to begin. It took a long time to decide where this reading journey should start, but eventually I settled on Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*.

The book had a profound effect on me. It may seem strange now, but growing up in Ireland in the mid-1980s, we didn't study the Holocaust in school, & so, outside of war films that I'd seen on television & the occasional World War II novel aimed at younger readers that I'd borrowed from the library, this was my introduction to a subject that would grow to fascinate & horrify me in equal parts over the years to come. A subject that would become an intrinsic part of my own story, even though I had been born more than a quarter century after the last of the death camps had been liberated.

As often happens with reading, 1 book that summer led me to another, & another after that, & soon I abandoned my teacher's list & allowed the writers & the stories to dictate where I should go next. I found myself working my way through much of Primo Levi's autobiographical writings, as well as the works of Anne Frank & Elie Wiesel, alongside some history books &, memorably, a biography of Hitler. & then, just as the summer was drawing to a close & I was being measured up for the next year's school uniform, I discovered *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, a book whose title intimidated me but that felt like the natural continuation of my education as I attempted to understand the most terrible period of history, a time when it seemed that the human race displayed just how cruel it could be.

Frankl's book, like Levi's, like Wiesel's, like Anne Frank's, affected me greatly, both when I read it in 1986 & again, 30 years later, when I re-read it in preparation for writing this foreword. There's a clarity to his analysis of how prisoners felt in this most dehumanizing of experiences that is both surprising in its lack of bitterness & illuminating in its lucidity: The feelings of shock, dismay, & fear that victims felt having been pulled from their homes & brought to unfamiliar & frightening places. The cycle that the mind must have gone through as it adjusted to living within the electrified fences of death. The basic human urge that must have forced a person to do all he or she could simply to stay alive. & then the effect on the devastated psyche for those victims who survived the experience & found themselves liberated into a changed world, who would take decades to come to terms with the things that had taken place.

Frankl even makes us wonder about the word *survived*. Did anyone actually *survive* the camps? I'm not so sure that they did, the experience proving so overwhelming, the memories so brutal, the grief for lost loved ones so intense that it must have weighed on the consciousness like an insupportable burden.

Each memoir written by a victim of the camps is different & surprising, but for me, 1 of the most unexpected elements of Frankl's book is his central belief that every moment of our existence – happy, sad, generous, or cruel – gives us our experience of life & should be accepted as such. There's a stoicism to this concept that takes time to understand – indeed, I think one would have had to experience what Frankl experienced to comprehend it fully – but it gave the author the courage to survive on a daily basis & eventually to use his experiences to join that extraordinary group of men & women who were willing to plunge fearlessly into their darkest days to share their experiences with the world without self-pity or acrimony but with nothing more than a clear desire that we should understand, & through understanding, prevent such things from taking place again.

Frankl was ahead of his time in his controversial belief that freedom of choice remains an inherent part of the captive's life, that under the most extreme of situations, to lose hope is to surrender entirely to the darkness. His analysis of the different types of person – whether guards or prisoners – is also startling, & there is real daring in his clinical examination of both that must have proved shocking & perhaps even unpleasant to some when the memoir was 1st published in 1946.

For me, however, the most fascinating element of the book is his exploration of the life of the victim – & I prefer the word *victim* to *prisoner*, for *prisoner* suggests rightful incarceration while *victim* is clear on the innocence of the abused party – after his or her liberation. It's impossible for someone of my generation & background to imagine the feelings of relief, confusion, & anger that must have jostled for dominion in the mind. Impossible for any of us, anymore, I think. The emotions & the personality must have been so shattered that to take pleasure in any part of life afterward would have proved a substantial challenge. When you have seen the worst of human behavior, after all, how do you continue to live among people? This was something that each victim had to come to terms with & perhaps some were more successful than others. For Frankl, there was only 1 way to hope: *write about it*.

Viktor Frankl died when I was just a child, but as a novelist who has made an attempt at understanding the Holocaust through my own fiction, I have been fortunate to be part of that last group of writers to have had the privilege of meeting survivors of the camps through my travels over the years. The single most humbling experience of my professional life has been standing in community centers, halls, theaters, & on festival stages around the world while audience members have risen to recount their own memories. Talking to them afterward, feeling honored to be in their presence & a little unworthy to have written about a subject using only my imagination when their true stories are so much more powerful & authentic than my own, is something I will always cherish. & in those conversations the name of Viktor Frankl & *Man's Search for Meaning* has come up time & again, alongside those other classic works that help keep the memories of that time alive. & it always will. That is his legacy.

Why do we keep writing about it? is a question that comes up time & again. I think it's because although all powerful works of fiction, nonfiction, & memoir inspire discussion, passion, & even criticism, the joy of literature, as opposed too often to the practice of politics or religion, is that it embraces differing opinions; it encourages debate, & it allows us to have heated conversations with our closest friends & dearest loved ones. & through it all no one gets hurt, no one gets taken away from their homes, & no one gets killed. This is something that Viktor Frankl must have understood, for *Man's Search for Meaning* is such a book. One to read, to cherish, to debate, & one that will ultimately keep the memories of the victims alive.

John Boyne¹ – Frankl, 2017, pp. 6–8

Preface to the 1992 Edition

"This book has now lived to see nearly 100 printings in English – in addition to having been published in 21 other languages. & the English editions alone have sold more than 3 million copies.

These are the dry facts, & they may well be the reason why reporters of American newspapers & particularly of American TV stations more often than not start their interviews, after listing these facts, by exclaiming: "Dr. Frankl, your book has become a true bestseller – how do you feel about such a success?" Whereupon I react by reporting that in the 1st place I do not at all see in the bestseller status of my book an achievement & accomplishment on my part but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails.

To be sure, something else may have contributed to the impact of the book: its 2nd, theoretical part ("Logotherapy in a Nutshell") boils down, as it were, to the lesson one may distill from the 1st part, the autobiographical account ("Experiences in a Concentration Camp"), whereas Part I serves as the existential validation of my theories. Thus, both parts mutually support their credibility.

I had none of this in mind when I wrote the book in 1945. & I did so within 9 successive days & with the firm determination that the book should be published anonymously. In fact, the 1st printing of the original German version does not show my name on the cover, though at the last moment, just before the book's initial publication, I did finally give in to my friends

¹John Boyne is the author of several notes for adults & 5 novels for younger readers, including *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.

who had urged me to let it be published with my name at least on the title page. At 1st, however, it had been written with the absolute conviction that, as an anonymous opus, it could never earn its author literary fame. I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of a concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. & I thought that if the point were demonstrated in a situation as extreme as that in a concentration camp, my book might gain a hearing. I therefore felt responsible for writing down what I had gone through, for I thought it might be helpful to people who are prone to despair.

& so it is both strange & remarkable to me that – among some dozens of books I have authored – precisely this one, which I had intended to be published anonymously so that it could never built up any reputation on the part of the author, did become a success. Again & again I therefore admonish my students both in Europe & in America: “Don’t aim at success – the more you aim at it & make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, & it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s dedication to cause a greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, & the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do & go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run – in the long run, I say! – success will follow you precisely because you had *forgotten* to think of it.”

The reader may ask me why I did not try to escape what was in store for me after Hitler had occupied Austria. Let me answer by recalling the following story. Shortly before the United States entered World War II, I received an invitation to come to the American Consulate in Vienna to pick up my immigration visa. My old parents were overjoyed because they expected that I would soon be allowed to leave Austria. I suddenly hesitated, however. The question beset me: could I really afford to leave my parents alone to face their fate, to be sent, sooner or later, to a concentration camp, or even to a so-called extermination camp? Where did my responsibility lie? Should I foster my brain child, logotherapy, by emigrating to fertile soil where I could write my books? Or should I concentrate on my duties as a real child, the child of my parents who had to do whatever he could to protect them? I pondered the problem this way & that but could not arrive at a solution; this was the type of dilemma that made one wish for “a hint from Heaven,” as the phrase goes.

It was then that I noticed a piece of marble lying on a table at home. When I asked my father about it, he explained that he had found it on the site where the National Socialists had burned down the largest Viennese synagogue. He had taken the piece home because it was a part of the tablets on which the 10 Commandments were inscribed. One gilded Hebrew letter was engraved on the piece; my father explained that this letter stood for 1 of the Commandments. Eagerly I asked, “Which one is it?” He answered, “Honor thy father & thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land.” At that moment I decided to stay with my father & my mother upon the land, & to let the American visa lapse.

– Viktor E. Frankl, *Vienna, 1992*” – Frankl, 2017, pp. 10–11

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Frankl, Viktor E. (2017). *Man’s Search For Meaning*. Beacon Press, p. 138.