

Viktor Frankl at Ninety: An Interview

Matthew Scully¹

“Did you ever hear from Otto?” I asked Viktor Frankl.

Readers of Frankl’s classic *Man’s Search for Meaning: Experiences in the Concentration Camp* will remember Otto as the fellow prisoner to whom he recited his final testament before being sent to a “rest camp” for the sick prisoners of Auschwitz. “No one knew whether this was a ruse to obtain the last bit of work for the sick . . . or whether it would go to the gas ovens or to a genuine rest camp”, Frankl wrote. The chief doctor offered that evening to take his name from the list. “I told him this was not my way; that I had learned to let fate take its course”. Returning to the hut, “I found a good friend waiting for me”.

“Tears came to his eyes and I tried to comfort him. Then there was something else to do - make my will. ‘Listen, Otto, if I don’t get back home to my wife, and if you should see her again, tell her that I talked of her daily, hourly. You remember. Secondly, I have loved her more than anyone. Thirdly, the short time I have been married to her outweighs everything, even all we have been through here’ . . . Otto, where are you now? Are you alive? What has happened to you since our last hour together?”.

What did happen? “Ah, yes, Otto”, Frankl recalled in an interview last year. “No, I heard nothing. One must assume he did not make it out”.

Frankl wrote *Man’s Search for Meaning* in 1946, the year before *The Diary of Anne Frank* came out and three years before Orwell’s *1984*. Still entitled *From Concentration Camp to Existentialism* in German editions, it is as deeply somber a book as any to come from the era. It is a strangely hopeful book, still a staple on the self-help shelves, but inescapably a book about death.

Yet in Frankl’s own case, fate took a different course. After the loss of his wife in the Holocaust he remarried, wrote another twenty-five books, founded a school of psychotherapy, built an institute bearing his name in Vienna, lectured around the world, and has lived to see *Man’s Search for Meaning* reprinted in twenty-three languages and at least nine million copies.

Finding him at the University of Vienna, I realized, however, that the wistful retrospective I had in mind - *Aging Lion Looks at Our Troubled World* - would be not

¹ *First Things* 52 (April 1995) 39-43. Matthew Scully, a former Literary Editor for National Review and speechwriter for Vice President Dan Quayle, is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia.

only trite but false. Dr. Frankl looks quite healthy. An assistant asked that students not take pictures because the flash hurts his failing eyes. But otherwise, approaching ninety, he sat in easy command-joking, pounding the table for emphasis, telling stories about Freud (whom he met in 1923 and worked with thereafter). Now and then he would dart to the blackboard to illustrate his idea of “dimensional ontology” or the “tragic triage” of life.

One story reflected Frankl’s conviction that many psychotherapists are themselves mad. It was in the forties, he recalled, here in Vienna. He read a quotation from a noted modern philosopher and another from a schizophrenic patient, and asked his listeners to match quotation with author. Overwhelmingly, he said triumphantly (as though the results of the experiment had just come in), “the majority of listeners got it wrong!”

What philosopher and lunatic had in common, Frankl went on to explain, is the certainty that happiness can be attained by furious pursuit and a consequent rage at the unsatisfying results. His useful word for this is “hyperintention”, a tendency that only inflames what is usually the real problem, our own self-centeredness. “Everything can be taken away from man but one thing -to choose one’s attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”.

The sane are those who accept this charge and do not expect happiness by right. Thus Frankl’s own “logotherapy”, which views suffering not as an obstacle to happiness but often the necessary means to it, less a pathology than a path.

Logotherapy amounts in nearly all situations to the advice, “Get to work”. Other psychologies begin by asking, “What do I want from life? Why am I unhappy?” Logotherapy asks, “What does life at this moment demand of me?” Happiness, runs a favored Frankl formulation, “ensues”. “Happiness must happen”. Life should find us out there in the world doing good things for their own sake. Even “if we strive for a good conscience, we are no longer justified in having it. The very fact has made us into Pharisees. And if we make health our main concern we have fallen ill. We have become hypochondriacs”.

**Psychologies begin
by asking “What do
I want from life?
Why am I
unhappy?”
Logotherapy asks
“What does life at
this moment
demand of me?”**

At the time of his deportation, from a train station just blocks from where he was now speaking, Frankl was putting the final touches on a book advancing these same points. He had a chance before the war to go to America to write his books and build a reputation. “Should I foster my brainchild, logotherapy . . . or should I concentrate on my duties as a real child of my parents” and stay by them? He arrived home from the American consulate, visa in hand, to find a large block of marble sitting on the table. Recovered by his father from a local synagogue razed by the Nazis, it was, Frankl recalled, a piece from a tablet bearing the first letters of the Commandment, “Honor thy father and mother that thy days may be long upon the land”. He let his visa lapse.

Frankl is the rare intellectual called to live out his theories, and then rewarded against staggering odds for his faithfulness. *Man’s Search for Meaning* itself attests to his notion of hyperintention. Had he used the visa and the excuse of professional obligation he would not be the same compelling witness.

The camps, he wrote, reveal man much as Freud and others had described him -a creature driven by ego and instinct and sublimated drives. But they reveal something

even more fundamental- our defining “capacity for self-transcendence”. “Man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips”. Frankl -who in the early thirties coined the word “existentialism”- is the man who reminded modern psychology of one detail it had overlooked, the patient’s soul.

Man’s Search for Meaning is known for powerful scenes like the parting with Otto and for its insights from camp life. “If only our wives could see us now!” said the man next to Frankl as they set off on a morning march to the labor site. “And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another upward and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking about his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife’s image, imagining it with uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look . . . A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so

Freud’s was a time of curiosity and excitement over the possibilities that lay hidden in the “basement” of human aspiration. He just forgot about the upper stories

many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth-that love is the highest goal to which man can aspire . . . I understand how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss . . . In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way-an honorable way-in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, “The angels are lost in divine contemplation of an infinite glory””.

Spared to serve as a worker, he pleaded with the guards not to destroy a manuscript he had hidden in the lining of his coat. “Look, this is the manuscript of a scientific book . . . I must keep this manuscript at all costs; it contains my life’s work. Do you understand that?” . . . Yes, he was beginning to understand. A grin spread slowly over his face, first piteous, then more amused, mocking, insulting, until he bellowed one word at me in answer to my question, a word that was ever present in the vocabulary of camp inmates: ‘Shit!’ At that moment I saw the plain truth and did what marked the culminating point of the first phase of my psychological reaction: I struck out my whole former life”. The tone of *Man’s Search for Meaning* is like this throughout: the reasonable, detached observer describing not only the radical evil around him but radical absurdity, stripped of everything “except, literally, our naked existence”. The effect is to connect life at Auschwitz with life anywhere.

We needed to stop asking ourselves about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life-daily and hourly. . . Therefore, it was necessary for us to face up to the full amount of suffering, trying to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum. But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer.

Viktor Frankl had called in reply to my first letter that he would be glad to meet me, but would “strongly advise” that I read his other five books translated into English.

Too many American interviewers come to Vienna, Frankl complained, having read only his one famous book. These other books (including *The Will to Meaning*) appeared in brisk succession after *Man's Search for Meaning* was translated in 1959. In great demand, Frankl spent twenty years in the United States, lecturing, appearing on TV, holding professor emeritus status at Berkeley, and occasionally saying controversial things, such as his suggestion in the seventies that America should erect on its West Coast a "Statue of Responsibility". Of a modern political ideologue, Frankl observed, "He doesn't have opinions; his opinions have him".

I had resolved not to seem effusive or over-awed, like those fresh converts to logotherapy who, a colleague of Frankl told me, arrive at his door from all over the globe with offerings of gratitude. But it was not easy. Viktor Frankl, like Mother Teresa or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, is a person one can meet only over a chasm of moral experience.

A casual enough opener had suggested itself when I passed by his study into the office. "I am absolutely convinced", Frankl had said in *The Doctor and the Soul*, "that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin, but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers". It was clear he regarded Freud as one such thinker. Why, then, did I just see a bust of the great man on the way in?

He speaks of Freud with a kind of protective sympathy, a son happy the father was spared from seeing how all his dreams had worked out. Freud was a great man, "a genius", replied Frankl. So much that we know about the human psyche, we know because of Freud. But "even a genius cannot completely resist his *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of his time". And Freud's was a time of curiosity and excitement over the possibilities that lay hidden in the "basement" of human aspiration. He just forgot about the upper stories.

"The point of logotherapy?" I asked. "Exactly! Logotherapy sees the human patient in all his humanness. I step up to the core of the patient's being. And that is a being in search of meaning, a being that is transcending himself, a being capable of acting in love for others. . . You see, any human being is originally -he may forget it, or repress this- but originally he is a being reaching out for meanings to be fulfilled or persons to be loved".

Frankl had heard of M. Scott Peck's *Road Less Traveled*, a popular book that declares, like *Man's Search for Meaning*, the hardness of life. In fact he had heard enough to wonder why the book and others like it pay no homage to the logotherapy of which they seem bland imitations. "But", he said with a dismissive wave, "it is no matter. Better that they should borrow from logotherapy than use their own nonsense".

Had he, I asked, been following our "Politics of Meaning" debate back in America? He had. But the question raised an unhappy story from their 94th and probably last visit to the United States. It happened, Mrs. Frankl recalled, a year earlier in the very month of Mrs. Clinton's "Politics of Meaning" speech in Austin, Texas. Some American friends called the producers of Good Morning America. Would they like to have the author of *Man's Search for Meaning* on the show to discuss the First Lady's existential angst? But either they did not know the name or had already booked

**The man on the street,
he has always
understood what I am
saying. He sees that
something is missing.
He realizes that he is
more than his id, more
than his drives**

some more intriguing figure like Howard Stern or Dr. Ruth. “This is how America treats Viktor Frankl?” Mrs. Frankl asked.

I wondered aloud whether this story might suggest a depressing possibility. As a general cultural drift, mustn’t Freudian ideas, exactly because they validate the shallow in their self-absorption, inevitably triumph over Frankl and his more demanding message?

This brought a ferocious rebuttal. “But how can you say this! Show me another book that has sold so far nine million copies, as *Man’s Search for Meaning* did! What more empirical evidence do you need? And these letters -Ellie, how many do we receive each day?”

“An average of twenty-three a day”, said Mrs. Frankl.

“Yes, you see, twenty-three letters every day-still. And most of them are from Americans. And do you know what they say? Most just write to say, ‘Thank you, Dr. Frankl, for changing my life’”.

“You see”, he continued, “the intellectuals, the fashionable crowd, the high-brows, perhaps they do not care for it. Although I wonder. Sometimes they say, ‘Of course it does not mean that we share the philosophical ideas of Dr. Frankl’ -but they use it. I don’t give a damn whether they share my philosophical conviction! But it is satisfying, deeply, that they are using it for the benefit of patients. . . The man on the street, he has always understood what I am saying. He sees that something is missing. He realizes that he is more than his id, more than his drives”.

This defensiveness was not only touching, but very odd. It turns out to be a complicated matter. There are those “high-brows” who believe that Frankl, however moving his personal testimony, is raising up all the old, unscientific notions of soul and conscience and guilt. Among these there is also a suspicion of religiosity, something I had made a note to bring up. But there are also critics with more standing who believe Frankl has always missed the unique evil of the Holocaust. This may explain why, for instance, one cannot find what after *The Diary of Anne Frank* is the second-most widely read Holocaust book in the bookstore of Washington’s Holocaust Museum.

“Here for instance”, he explained, “the jury of Vienna is absolutely against me, because I’m too much for reconciling -very mean to me. They are fearing that I’m one who has forgotten the Holocaust. In my whole book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, you will not find the word ‘Jew’. I don’t capitalize from being a Jew and having suffered as a Jew, you see? I ask them, Are you angry with me? Yes. Why are you angry with me? Perhaps because I am too much of a reconciling spirit? Yes. So is it bad to be reconciling?”

The argument went back to the concept of collective guilt, to which Frankl is “strictly, 100 percent opposed”. “I could adopt the concept if I were a National Socialist, because this is absolutely a concept in the framework of National Socialists, see? That it made no difference between Jews, one Jew and another Jew, Jews were absolutely *Untermenschen*, subhuman beings. And this concept justified them, as they thought, for all kinds of atrocities. But I start on the ground that guilt is, a priori, personal guilt. I can be judged guilty only for something I have missed, failed to do. But in no way can I be regarded as guilty for something an uncle of mine has done, or a grandmother of mine has done. This is 100 percent nonsense!”

It was this conviction, Frankl explained, that led him from Auschwitz back to Vienna, rejoining the very neighbors who had watched or participated in his

persecution. "People forget what it meant at that time to join the resistance. More or less, it meant at any moment being caught, being arrested, and sentenced to death, as my best friend at the time was sentenced to death. And all the more we have to admire the heroism of these people".

"But my point", he continued, "is that heroism ultimately can only be demanded or expected of someone -of only one person. You are never entitled to place the demand of heroism on any one else, not unless you have been in the same position, facing the same decision, the same way facing death as punishment. But anyone who had immigrated to the United States and, viewing the situation in the past from that place, is not entitled to tell anybody who had remained in Germany that he should have joined the resistance, unless he himself has done so, facing all the risks, facing the question of whether his responsibility toward his whole family had allowed him, because he would have thrown his own family into the concentration camps".

**I can be judged
guilty only for
something I have
missed, failed to do.
But in no way can I
be regarded as
guilty for something
an uncle of mine
has done**

It was almost time to go, so I raised the question of his own spiritual convictions. Readers, Frankl told me, are invariably curious to know whether he himself believes in God. And indeed the first thing one notices entering the apartment is a sizable crucifix in the hall. (Mrs. Frankl is a Catholic.) "The crowning experience of all for the homecoming man", he wrote in *Man's Search*, "is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear anymore -except his God". Always his arguments take us back to the "soul", "the higher part of man", "the religious impulse", "the Unconscious God".

Should we take these as metaphors, projections, and mythic archetypes, or when he said "God" did he mean God?

What distinguishes logotherapy from other schools of psychology is the humble recognition of an objective order that simply is and moral facts about the universe that are beyond our power to escape, modify, or reinvent. Frankl himself warned in *The Doctor and the Soul* against a strutting "nothing-but-ism" that declares our spiritual longings are nothing but instinctual drives and God nothing but a creation of the id. Without a Creator, I asked, wouldn't any notion of "spirit" collapse back into instinct and logotherapy fall apart?

Not quite, he answered, but in any case his own calling was to heal the soul, not save it. "I do not allow myself to confess personally whether I'm religious or not. I'm writing as a psychologist, I'm writing as a psychiatrist, I'm writing as a man of the medical faculty. . . And that made the message more powerful because if you were identifiably religious, immediately people would say, 'Oh well, he's that religious psychologist. Take the book away!'"

"You see", he added, "I don't shy away, I don't feel debased or humiliated if someone suspects that I'm a religious person for myself. . . If you call 'religious' a man who believes in what I call a Supermeaning, a meaning so comprehensive that you can no longer grasp it, get hold of it in rational intellectual terminology, then one should feel free to call me religious, really. And actually, I have come to define religion as an expression, a manifestation, of not only man's will to meaning, but of man's longing for an ultimate meaning, that is to say a meaning that is so comprehensive that it is no

longer comprehensible. . . But it becomes a matter of believing rather than thinking, of faith rather than intellect. The positing of a supermeaning that evades mere rational grasp is one of the main tenets of logotherapy, after all. And a religious person may identify Supermeaning as something paralleling a Superbeing, and this Superbeing we would call God”.

Dr. and Mrs. Frankl walked me out, pausing at the mementos in the study. There was a framed letter from his friend Martin Heidegger (the philosopher, it turns out, whose words audiences had confused with the schizophrenic). Next to that was a charmingly incongruous picture and letter from Mamie Eisenhower, an avid admirer of Frankl after President Eisenhower died.

Then he showed me a certificate declaring him an honorary citizen of Austin, Texas, where he lectured in 1975. “And when they conferred this on me, I said to the Mayor, ‘Mr. Mayor, it would be more appropriate if I appointed you an honorary logotherapist.’ ‘Because’, I said, ‘unless soldiers coming from America, among them certainly some youngsters coming from Texas, had not risked their lives in order to get us out of the camp, there would not have been any Viktor Frankl from the 27th of April of 1945, even less any logotherapy or books or anything’”.

And last on the tour, a painting of Auschwitz done after liberation by an inmate named Bruno, who, Frankl explained, was allowed to live so that the guards might have their own private portraitist. “And this corner here is the place where the ceremony of burial has taken place, and these are recycled coffins. And in one of these coffins, at this very place, I saw the body of my father who died there”.

“You asked me earlier, Do I still think of these things? Not a day goes by when I do not! And in a way I do pity those younger people who did not know the camps or live during the war, who have nothing like that to compare [their own hardships] with. . . . Even today, as I lose my sight or with any severe problem or adverse situation, . . . I have only to think for a fraction of a second and I draw a deep breath. What I would have given then if I could have had no greater problem than I face today!”