# Man's Search for Meaning

It is, therefore, up to the patient to decide whether he should interpret his life task as being responsible to society or to his own conscience.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 110)

A painter tries to convey to us a picture of the world as he sees it; an ophthalmologist tries to enable us to see the world as it really is. The logotherapist's role consists of widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him.

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Thus far we have shown that the meaning of life always changes, but that it never ceases to be. According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.

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In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 113)

The odds of surviving the camp were no more than one in twenty-eight, as can easily be verified by exact statistics.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page

114)

This was the case when I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber immediately after his arrival at the Auschwitz railway station. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in a pocket of the newly acquired coat one single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer, Shema Yisrael. How should I have interpreted such a “coincidence” other than as a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?

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Their question was, “Will we survive the camp? For, if not, all this suffering has no meaning.” The question which beset me was, “Has all this suffering, this dying around us, a meaning? For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance—as whether one escapes or not—ultimately would not be worth living at all.”

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The reader will note that this procedure consists of a reversal of the patient’s attitude, inasmuch as his fear is replaced by a paradoxical wish. By this treatment, the wind is taken out of the sails of the anxiety.

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“The neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management, perhaps to cure.”

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A given symptom is responded to by a phobia, the phobia triggers the symptom, and the symptom, in turn, reinforces the phobia.

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Man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them.

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Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.

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Therefore, we can predict his future only within the large framework of a statistical survey referring to a whole group; the individual personality, however, remains essentially unpredictable.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 131)

Lubianka prison in Moscow.

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Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibleness. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibleness. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 132)

A human being is not one thing among others; things determine each other, but man is ultimately self-determining.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 133)

Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.

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LET US FIRST ASK OURSELVES WHAT SHOULD BE understood by "a tragic optimism." In brief it means that one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the "tragic triad," as it is called in logotherapy, a triad which consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: (1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death.

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Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page

109)

As each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.

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“Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!”

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It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds.

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To draw an analogy: a man’s suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the “size” of human suffering is absolutely relative.

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We had all been afraid that our transport was heading for the Mauthausen camp. We became more and more tense as we approached a certain bridge over the Danube which the train would have to cross to reach Mauthausen, according to the statement of experienced

traveling companions. Those who have never seen anything similar cannot possibly imagine the dance of joy performed in the carriage by the prisoners when they saw that our transport was not crossing the bridge and was instead heading “only” for Dachau.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 44)

But it is not for me to pass judgment on those prisoners who put their own people above everyone else. Who can throw a stone at a man who favors his friends under circumstances when, sooner or later, it is a question of life or death? No man should judge unless he asks himself in absolute honesty whether in a similar situation he might not have done the same.

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A man’s character became involved to the point that he was caught in a mental turmoil which threatened all the values he held and threw them into doubt.

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The list was the only thing that mattered. A man counted only because he had a prison number. One literally became a number: dead or alive—that was unimportant; the life of a “number” was completely irrelevant.

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In Auschwitz I had laid down a rule for myself which proved to be a good one and which most of my comrades later followed. I generally answered all kinds of questions truthfully. But I was silent about anything that was not expressly asked for.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 53)

He shook my hand silently, as though it were a farewell, not for life, but from life.

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On returning to his house the master himself met Death, and questioned him, “Why did you terrify and threaten my servant?” “I did not threaten him; I only showed surprise in still finding him here when I planned to meet him tonight in Teheran,” said Death.

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As soon as I had told him with finality that I had made up my mind to stay with my patients, the unhappy feeling left me.

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Many weeks later we found out that even in those last hours fate had toyed with us few remaining prisoners.

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The majority of prisoners suffered from a kind of inferiority complex. We all had once been or had fancied ourselves to be “somebody.” Now we were treated like complete nonentities.

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Whenever the degraded majority and the promoted minority came into conflict (and there were plenty of opportunities for this, starting with the distribution of food) the results were explosive.

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We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

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We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

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And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 66)

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 67)

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish.

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Those of us who saw the film called Resurrection—taken from a book by Tolstoy—years ago, may have had similar thoughts.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 68)

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. “I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard,” she told me. “In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously.” Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, “This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness.” Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. “I often talk to this tree,” she said to me. I was startled and didn’t quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. “Yes.” What did it say to her? She answered, “It said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.’”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 69)

Let me explain why I have employed the term “logotherapy” as the name for my theory. Logos is a Greek word which denotes “meaning.” Logotherapy, or, as it has been called by some authors, “The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy,” focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a will to meaning in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the will to pleasure) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the will to power on which Adlerian psychology, using the term “striving for superiority,” is focused.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 98)

A public-opinion poll was conducted a few years ago in France. The results showed that 89 percent of the people polled admitted that man needs “something” for the sake of which to live. Moreover, 61 percent conceded that there was something, or someone, in their own lives for whose sake they were even ready to die. I repeated this poll at my hospital department in Vienna among both the patients and the personnel, and the outcome was

practically the same as among the thousands of people screened in France; the difference was only 2 percent.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 99)

16 percent of the students checked “making a lot of money”; 78 percent said their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 100)

Man’s will to meaning can also be frustrated, in which case logotherapy speaks of “existential frustration.” The term “existential” may be used in three ways: to refer to (1) existence itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the meaning of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the will to meaning.

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Noögenic neuroses do not emerge from conflicts between drives and instincts but rather from existential problems.

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Existential frustration is in itself neither pathological nor pathogenic. A man’s concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an existential distress but by no means a mental disease.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 102)

There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear

almost any how.”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 104)

Thus it can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 104)

We should not, then, be hesitant about challenging man with a potential meaning for him to fulfill.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 105)

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 105)

So if therapists wish to foster their patients’ mental health, they should not be afraid to create a sound amount of tension through a reorientation toward the meaning of one’s life.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 105)

No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism).

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 106)

Let us consider, for instance, “Sunday neurosis,” that kind of depression which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 107)

For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment. To

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 108)

There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one’s opponent.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 108)

“He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (loc. 21)

Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it.

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Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (loc. 34)

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (loc. 46)

“Don’t aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (loc. 79)

In psychiatry there is a certain condition known as “delusion of reprieve.” The condemned man, immediately before his execution, gets the illusion that he might be reprieved at the very last minute.

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The salvation of man is through love and in love.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 37)

“The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 38)

Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.

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“Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death.”

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 39)

One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset.

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“How beautiful the world could be!”

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“Et lux in tenebris lucet”—and the light shineth in the darkness.

Viktor E. Frankl & Harold S. Kushner & William J. Winslade. *Man's Search for Meaning*. [Kindle ebook]. (page 41)

Earlier, I mentioned art. Is there such a thing in a concentration camp? It rather depends on what one chooses to call art.

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