

THE KEY TO MENTAL HEALTH IS FOUND IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

BY PETER MILNES



The key to mental health is the search for meaning according to Psychiatrist and Neurologist, Viktor Frankl. Frankl based conclusion on extensive academic training and personal experience in the horrors of the holocaust. After the war Frankl developed Logotherapy and Existential Analysis which is considered to be the 3rd Viennese School of Psychotherapy¹ - discarding the earlier Freudian view that humans are driven primarily by the “will to pleasure” (1st Viennese School) and Adlerian Individual Psychology based on the Nietzschean doctrine

of the ‘will to power’ (2nd Viennese School). In this article, Frankl’s life and therapeutic approach will be summarized before we engage in a brief discussion about the way in which his views are compatible with a spiritual quest – a factor of great interest to Christian Counsellors.

Viktor Frankl (26 March 1905 – 2 September 1997) was born into a Jewish family in Leopoldstadt, Vienna. He studied medicine at the University of Vienna before specializing in neurology and psychiatry. While still a medical student he directed a very successful student suicide prevention program. Upon graduation he first gained a position at the Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital (1933-1937) and then became head of the Rothschild Hospital’s

¹ Langle, A. (2012) The Viennese School of Existential Analysis: The Search for Meaning and Affirmation of Life. In Barnett, L & Madison, G. (eds) Existential Therapy: Legacy, Vibrancy and Dialogue. New York, Routledge: 159.

neurological department. In January 1942 he married a nurse named Tilly Grosser and it would seem that they were on the pathway to a happy life together. However, just nine months later, on 25 September 1942, they were both deported to concentration camps as part of Hitler's 'final solution'.

Frankl's observations of his new circumstances are of great interest because he was able to combine scientific psychiatric observation with personal experience of the horror. He noticed that the key factor for survival in prison camp was a person's state of mind - healthy men without some quest for meaning would wither away, while more fragile-looking prisoners remained alive if they found meaning in mental activities such as constructing an imaginary house, creating and performing plays, or writing poetry. So, it was here, in a concentration camp, that Frankl constructed the basic elements of Logotherapy.

Sadly, the Holocaust claimed Tilly's life and almost all of Frankl's

family. On his release from concentration camp in 1945, Frankl returned to Vienna and wrote *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe Eriebt das Konzentrationslager* (translated as "Saying Yes to Life in Spite of Everything: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp" and published in English as *Man's Search for Meaning*²). From 1946 to 1972 Frankl was the head of the Vienna Polyclinic of Neurology and concurrently the Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna and during this time travelled extensively to lecture and popularize Logotherapy and Existential Analysis.

Logotherapy is based on the following Kierkegaardian³

2 Frankl, V. (2009) *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York, Beacon Press.

3 Costello, S. (2014) *An Existential Analysis of Anxiety: Frankl, Kierkegaard, Voegelin*. <https://drstephenjcostello.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/an-existential-analysis-of-anxiety-frankl-kierkegaard-voegelin/>



principles:

1. Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones.
2. Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.
3. We have freedom to find meaning in what we do, and what we experience, or at least in the stand we take when faced with a situation of unchangeable suffering⁴.

Through these three principles we can change our attitude to events of unchangeable fate (such as a diagnosis of an inoperable cancer) and 'wrest meaning from life by becoming witness of the most human of all human capacities: the ability to turn suffering into human triumph.'⁵ Each principle was present in Frankl's experience of a Nazi Death March – a particularly miserable circumstance:

We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbour's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: 'If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us.'

The motivation for living and meaning in life was to be found in an encounter with another - the memory of his young bride:

That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of 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 an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

The thoughts of Tilly were followed by a wider vision - we have freedom to find meaning when faced with a situation of

unchangeable suffering:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which Man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of Man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. 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 honourable way – in such a position Man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfilment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory."⁶

Frankl's experience is reminiscent of Buber's⁷ description of an encounter with the 'Eternal Thou' which he claimed was the basis for all 'I-Thou' relationships. So, instead of thinking about German guards as objects of hatred, Frankl was able to think about love and honour – incredible given his miserable circumstances. Frankl quoted Nietzsche and added his own interpretation:

'He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how' (Nietzsche⁸) ... Understanding the why simply meant that people could find a meaning in their sufferings, and even probable death⁹.

Meaning in Life is discovered in three different ways¹⁰:

1. Creating a work or doing a deed;
2. Experiencing something or encountering someone; and
3. The attitude taken toward unavoidable suffering (such as the diagnosis of an inoperable cancer).

By pursuing these simple ends we can 'wrest meaning from life by becoming witness of the most human of all human capacities:

4 Marshall, M. & Marshal, E. (2012). Logotherapy Revisited: Review of the Tenets of Viktor E. Frankl's Logotherapy. Ottawa, Ottawa Institute of Logotherapy.

5 Frankl, V.E. (1945) Man's Search for Meaning, New York, Pocket Books: 133

6 Frankl, V.E. (1945) Man's Search for Meaning, New York, Pocket Books: 56–57

7 M Buber (1923/1996) I and Thou. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Simon and Schuster.

8 Nietzsche, F. (1895/1977) Twilight of the Idols. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977: 12.

9 Frankl, V. (2009) Man's Search for Meaning. New York, Pocket Books: 133.

10 Marshall, M. & Marshal, E. (2012). Logotherapy Revisited: Review of the Tenets of Viktor E. Frankl's Logotherapy. Ottawa, Ottawa Institute of Logotherapy.



the ability to turn suffering into human triumph’¹¹. Others agree with the need for meaning. For example, Adler¹² found that positive life purpose and meaning was associated with strong religious beliefs, membership in groups, dedication to a cause, life values, and clear goals. All theories of adult development and maturation, such as Erikson’s¹³ include meaning of life becoming more important with age.

Frankl observed that blocking or hindering a person’s search for meaning is psychologically damaging. If a prison camp inmate lacked the why - unable to take the challenge of searching for meaning, believing that life was over, that all the real life opportunities had disappeared for good, and that his days were numbered – then he vegetated, progressively sliding down towards the imminent end¹⁴. Observing the modern world later, Frankl suggested that the barriers hindering our quest for meaning were:

1. Affluence,
2. Hedonism, and
3. Materialism.

Frankl believed that these barriers created a vacuum or “existential void” within the individual. Many of our counselling clients may experience this existential void in spite of having everything but whose unhappy lives are spent in the pursuit of wealth, pleasure and material possessions.

There was no universal *meaning* for everyone according to Frankl, but a personal quest. The human spirit was not ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ but was a process of the individual will where the search for meaning was more important than the object of God or any other supernatural being. Life gives the individual an assignment, and it is the responsibility of each person to find out what that assignment is, what is important, and to discover this within his/her individual psyche¹⁵. We choose our reactions to our circumstances – a point that was later popularized in Julian Rotter’s¹⁶ (1962) ‘I-E Factor’ where ‘I’ = Internal control indicated a person choosing reactions to life’s circumstances and ‘E’ = External control where circumstances dictated personal reactions. In the face of suffering, it is us who choose our reactions and it is we who decide whether or not to pursue our search for meaning.

As Christian Counsellors we should not shy away from a respectful

11 Frankl, V. (2009) *Man’s Search for Meaning*. New York, Pocket Books:133.

12 Adler, N. (1997). *Purpose in Life*. Psychosocial workgroup. New York, MacArthur Foundation.

13 For example, the later stages of Erikson’s “Stages of Development”. Erikson, E.H. (1950/1993) *Childhood and Society*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company:242

14 Frankl, V.E. (1945) *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York, Pocket Books: 133

15 Frankl, V.E. (1945) *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York, Pocket Books: 133.

16 Rotter, J. (1966) Generalized Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcements. *Psychological Monographs*, 80(1): 5

discussion with our clients about their “will to meaning” because it has been found to have valuable outcomes. Crumbaugh and Maholick's “Purpose in Life (PIL)” test¹⁷ based on Logotherapy found a relationship between religiosity and well-being¹⁸, uncontrollable stress with substance use; and depression with self-derogation¹⁹. When counselling those stricken with ‘unavoidable suffering’, Logotherapy provides the possibility of introducing purpose, meaning, and self-image when there may be none.

The quest for meaning in life is more than just a choice – it is a search that inevitably requires ‘self-transcendence’ (rising above one's own self) because we need to direct ourselves to something or someone else in order to encounter another.

The more one forgets himself - by giving himself to a cause to serve, or another person to love - the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.²⁰

Frankl provided a case analysis of a client who was an elderly general practitioner suffering from severe depression that had begun with the death of his beloved wife two years earlier:

Frankl: ‘What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife had survived you?’

Doctor: ‘That would have been terrible and she would have suffered!’

Frankl: ‘You see, Doctor, such a suffering has been spared her, and it is you who have spared her this suffering; but now, you have to pay for it by surviving and mourning her.’

He said no word but shook hands and calmly left the office.

Frankl commented: It can be said that we are worthy of our sufferings; the way we bear our suffering is a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom - which cannot be taken away - that makes life meaningful and purposeful²¹.

By directing the doctor towards his thinking of another – his wife and changing his attitude, Frankl opened the door to the possibility of finding meaning. Frankl did not believe that people should suffer unnecessarily²² but when doing a deed or encountering someone fails to provide meaning, suffering may become the only avenue for the quest.

While not all Christian Counsellors may agree with Frankl's conception of God, we do have a scriptural mandate for encouraging the search:

‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD²³.

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17 A free copy of the test can be downloaded at http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/burke_b/Personality/PIL.pdf

18 Dufton, Brian (Spr 1986). The Association between Religiosity and the Purpose-of-Life Test. Does it Reflect Purpose or Satisfaction? Journal of Psychology and Theology (Biola University) 14 (1): 42–48.

19 Adler, N. (1997). Purpose in Life. Psychosocial workgroup. New York, MacArthur Foundation.

20 Frankl, V.E. (1945) Man's Search for Meaning, New York, Pocket Books: 178-179

21 Frankl, V.E. (1945) Man's Search for Meaning, New York, Pocket Books: 178-179

22 Frankl, V.E. (1986). The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy. New York, Random House:115

23 Jeremiah 29:13-14 (NKJV)

