

# Viktor Frankl & Our Search for Meaning

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Lecture at OASIS Adult Education  
Albuquerque, NM    November 22, 2016

The story of Viktor Frankl is extraordinary: the circumstances that changed his life—and the ways in which his life and work have changed the lives of countless others.

Viktor Frankl was a physician, surgeon, psychiatrist, philosopher—and Holocaust survivor. Born in Vienna in 1905, Viktor was taken in 1942 with his wife, mother, and father to the Nazi concentration camp of Theresienstadt. Two years later, he was sent to Auschwitz and Dachau—until he was at last freed by American soldiers in 1945. A few months after his release, Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* in the space of nine days—one of the most influential books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the time he died in 1997, over twenty million copies had been printed. Simply put, *Man's Search for Meaning* changed lives—and continues to do so.

In the 1970's, Viktor Frankl lectured summers in Vienna and winters in San Diego, CA, at the United States International University—where I studied with him in 1972 and 1973, and would write my doctoral dissertation in Psychology on *The Diagnosis and Therapy of Loss of Meaning and Purpose in Life*.

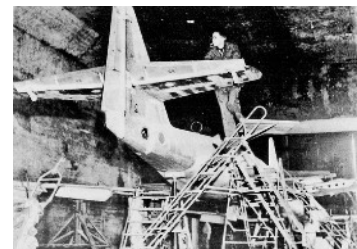
The heart of Frankl's contributions to ways in which we can view our lives and how to enrich them can be simply stated, but in order to probe deeply enough into them that we can incorporate them into our own lives is not so easy. I intend to state specifically what his basic conclusions were, describe how his life influenced these perspectives, and then show through specific examples how these principles apply to our ordinary lives.

Frankl observed that meaning, purpose, and human values can be found in:

1. Creative Values—What we do (baking a pie, writing a letter, playing golf)
2. Experiential Values—What we experience (eating a pie, reading a letter, watching golf)  
Experiential values also include causes greater than ourselves, friendships, and love.
3. Attitudinal Values—The stance we take toward circumstances we cannot change.

These ideas are straightforward and understandable. But to allow them to become dynamically alive, we must see some illustration in Frankl's life. And, to allow his basic principles to take residence in the living of our own lives, I will take one incident from his life and indicate how it can be translated into our own lives.

The place is Kaufering III, one of Dachau's slave-labor camps. These eleven camps were set up to assemble ME 262 jet fighters in



### Half-underground prisoner huts at Kaufering III



underground bunkers. Two million eight hundred thousand hours of slave labor failed to finish the project before the end of the war. No ME 262 jets took flight from the Kaufering complex. Frankl was forced to work building railroad beds that would connect the eleven camps—and to dig out the subsurface portion below the plywood tents of these prisoner huts. [see above]

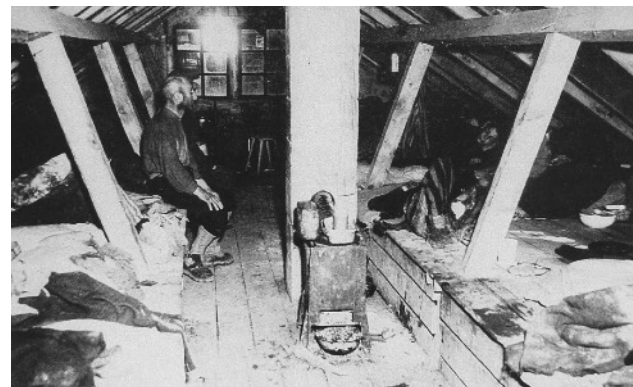
By now, Frankl himself is wasting away from malnutrition. The camp is in crisis. One day before, a half-starved prisoner had stolen a few pounds of potatoes—an intolerable crime punishable by death. The authorities ordered that the guilty man be identified by the prisoners or the entire camp of 2,500 men would starve for a day. They all chose a day of starvation.

On the evening of that day of intolerable hunger, the prisoners were irritable; they were lethargic, depressed. The senior block warden feared that even more of them would commit suicide or just give up and die.

He turned to Frankl and asked him to speak to this grim collection of near-dead prisoners.

At that moment, the electricity failed; the single light bulb went out. Recalling this physically, psychologically, and emotionally dark moment, Frankl said:

I mentioned the past; all of its joys, and how its light shone even in the present darkness. ...What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you. ...Not only our experiences, but all we have done, whatever great thoughts we may have had, and all we have suffered, all this is not lost, though it is past; we have brought it into being. ... Whatever we had gone through could still be an asset to us in the future. And I quoted Nietzsche: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger".



Kaufering prisoner hut interior

Now Frankl spoke of the future: loved ones who may still be living and waiting for reunion; tasks begun in the past that could be completed in the future; a book to write; a professional responsibility—those things that draw us toward the future.

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under

any circumstances never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. . . . The purpose of my words was to find a full meaning in our life, then and there, in that hut and in that practically hopeless situation. I saw that my efforts had been successful. When the electric bulb flared up again, I saw the miserable figures of my friends limping toward me to thank me with tears in their eyes.

This extraordinary passage from Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, touches on some of the major themes just summarized: the resources of our past, the challenge of the present, the beckoning of the future, and the invitation to take a stance toward circumstances we cannot change. And, above all, the Meaning of Life! The *categorical* meaning of life—regardless of poverty or plenty, pain or pleasure, long lives or short.

But we are not captives in slave-camps—so how do Frankl's principles translate into our lives? I will relate one experience from my own life that illustrates this kind of absorption, incorporation, and application:

Our first daughter, Jane Elizabeth, was born on February 1, 1963. One year later, she was diagnosed with Leukemia; she died two weeks after her first birthday on February 16, 1964.

The death of a child is a stunning event in the life of a family. No words can bear the weight of expressing it. The way my wife and I looked at our lives changed: everything about life became more precious. Priorities become rearranged: things you once thought were important suddenly are pushed aside by more ultimate concerns. Pauline at that time said two crucial things to me: she said that she gave thanks at the birth of each child for the gift of that life for as long as our child should live—and that our daughter had lived a *complete* life...even 'tho brief. In short, we experienced those realities described by Frankl to his comrades huddled around him in the slave-labor camp: that life is meaningful at all times and places and under every condition; that the meaning of a life is not contingent on its days, months, or years; that even tragic experiences can make us stronger—and become future assets; and, when we face grim circumstances that we cannot change, that our stance—posture—attitude suddenly becomes critically important to the way in which we experience the meanings of our lives.

How shall we describe such a stance—posture—attitude in the depths of loss, sorrow, and grief?

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross spoke of the stages of grief as: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Perhaps our attitude, the configuration of our stance or posture, will change as we move through some or all of these stages—not easily, of course, but it is helpful to know that others have led the way before us. Some have found ways to penetrate very dark shadows.

Albert Camus wrote: *In the midst of winter I at last discovered that there was within me an invincible summer.* When our hearts are gripped in permafrost, how can we even imagine such a possibility? An invincible summer . . .

Emily Dickinson wrote: *Winter under cultivation is as arable as spring.*

An intelligent, highly educated person turned to me and said:

“Winter? Under cultivation? Arable as Spring”? Are you kidding? What does that even mean? It makes no sense at all!

It may not make sense to everyone—but here is something else that defies *common* sense. Viktor Frankl had told his fellow prisoners in their hut that they would be strengthened by their sufferings and that the living through of those trying times could become an *asset* to them in the future. Asset! Years later, he would go on to say that the slave-camp experience was for him a *gift*. A gift? Yes. Although he had worked out his basic principles years before the concentration camps, after his survival his writings were greeted with a high degree of convincing credibility. He had *lived* each of the concepts that he would teach.

A few months after the death of our daughter, our oncologist asked me to visit a young couple whose child had just died. As I sat with them, and later with similar others through the years, I realized that it was not anything that I could *say* to them that would be helpful, it was the fact that someone else had stood before the same unbearable and unimaginable void—and somehow had learned how to live with and beyond the grief and loss.

Not only did Frankl insist to his fellow sufferers that the stance we take toward grim circumstance is important, he also claimed that they could determine for themselves what that stance would be. And what would a sampling of possible stances look like?

One stance could be stoical—with clenched fists and gritted teeth.

Or rage—with a vain passion in our hearts to “conquer” grief and suffering.

Or depressed resignation—giving up on Life with a despairing gasp.

Or, our stance could be one of composure and acceptance—and with a feeling of gratitude for the gift of life, and with rejoicing for our experiences of Life and its many wonders.

When Viktor Frankl wrote “Man’s Search for Meaning”, it was not with that title. His title in German was “*Trotsdem Ja zum Leben Sagen*” which he translated into English as “*Nevertheless, say Yes to Life*”, or “*In Spite of Everything Say Yes to Life*”.

Our search for meaning, a journey on which Frankl and many others have gone before us, is one in which we will experience deep meanings in tasks that we complete, in acts of creativity, in dedication to causes beyond ourselves and deep *love for others*—and, finally, in the positive attitude or stance we take toward circumstances we cannot change. Perhaps we, too, can affirm that we shall “*Nevertheless say Yes to Life*”. **Trotsdem Ja zum Leben sagen!**

Frankl’s basic principles are compact, condensed, and powerful. I have opened the door for you to reveal how they expand and flow into our lives. Now I will turn to Frankl’s life to show where and how they arose in his life and what they can mean to us.

Frankl’s mother, Elsa Lion, was born in Prague (then in the Czech Republic) in 1879, she was a pious and religious woman; a descendant of a number of rabbis. Gabriel Frankl, Viktor’s father, was born in 1861 in Southern Moravia but went to Vienna for High School and Medical School. However, Gabriel Frankl did not have enough funds to complete his medical training, and spent his life working in various government positions—ultimately as the director of the Ministry of Social Services.



Victor Emil Frankl was born in Vienna in 1905 on the fourth floor of the apartment building at 6 Czerningasse street in the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna—in which he lived for almost all of his life before Nazi deportation.



6 Czerningasse Street

Viktor at five between his older brother, Walter, and younger sister Stella. Of his entire family, only Stella would survive the Holocaust—she fled in time to Australia.



On the left of the Aspern bridge over the river Danube is the main area of Vienna. To the right is Leopoldstadt, where the Frankl’s lived—a mostly Jewish neighborhood.

One day in Junior High School, his Science teacher told the class that all life—including human life—was, “in the final analysis” nothing but oxidation, like the burning of a candle. Young Frankl sprang to his feet and passionately asked: “If that’s so, then what kind of meaning does life have?”

While still in High School, Frankl was invited to speak “On the Meaning of Life” to an adult philosophical workshop. He recalls that:

“Even at that early age I had developed two basic ideas. First, it is not we who should ask for the meaning of life, since it is we who are being asked. It is we ourselves who must answer the questions that life asks of us, and to these questions we can respond only by being responsible for our existence. The other basic idea I developed in my early years maintains that ultimate meaning is, and must remain, beyond our comprehension. ... whatever we have to go through, life must have ultimate meaning, a supra-meaning. This supra-meaning we cannot comprehend, we can only have faith in it.”

Viktor was a precocious student at the Sperlgymsnasium—the same high school that Freud had attended much earlier. Teenage Viktor sent a number of letters and essays to Sigmund Freud. Freud would answer with a postcard. When Viktor was seventeen, he sent an essay to Freud: *On the Mimic Movements of Affirmation and Negation*. It so impressed Freud that he asked Viktor if he could publish it in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis—which, two years later, Freud did. Young Viktor also corresponded with Alfred Adler who, in 1925, published his paper *Psychology and Weltanschauung* in the International Journal of Individual Psychology.

The final exams in High School (Gymnasia) were called the Matura, and were extremely rigorous. As part of the Matura, Frankl wrote a paper on *The Psychology of Philosophical Thought*, a psychoanalytically oriented study of Arthur Schopenhauer. On the basis of his Matura exams, he matriculated directly into medical school in 1923, where he would eventually focus on neurology and psychiatry—with particular emphasis on depression and suicide. The Matura exams were such a high challenge that every year they led to a spike in teen suicides both before and after the exams. As a student in medical school, Frankl did not forget the daunting Matura examinations at the conclusion of high school. When he was in his medical residency, Frankl convinced several Viennese therapists to volunteer their time to screen students for depression and to provide counseling and help free of charge.

After Frankl and his team instituted his program in 1931, the number dropped to—zero, and his screening method would soon be adopted by six other European cities.

Viktor was physically sleight, but wiry. Mountain climbing, beginning in high school, was his passion. Later, when he was deported to the concentration camps, among the most treasured items that he carried with him were the manuscript of his first book on Existential Analysis and (what he called his “pride and joy”) the badge of the Donauland Alpine Club which certified him as a climbing guide.

VF on left of the Donauland Alpine Club. Today in the Austrian Alps, three “first ascent” trails are named for Frankl as the person who first used a particular route in scaling the mountain.



Once, in a slave-labor camp, one of the prisoners remarked that Frankl carried heavy loads “like a climbing guide”. To which Viktor answered: “I am!”

Frankl continued mountain climbing until he was 80 when loss of vision made it no longer possible. Frankl once said that:

“...mountain climbing was my most passionate hobby. When I was not permitted to go to the Alps because I am a Jew and had to wear the yellow star, I *dreamed* about

## Rax Mountain



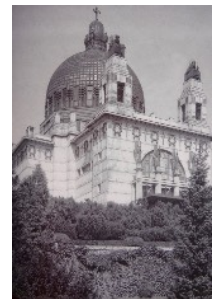
climbing. One time my friend, Hubert Gsur, persuaded me, and I dared to go to the mountains *without* my Jewish star. I literally kissed the rock. Climbing is the only sport of which one can say that the diminishing strength due to aging can be compensated by greater climbing experience and techniques. ... Every important decision I have made, almost without exception, I have made in the mountains.”

He loved heights—once saying that as Freud’s methods were called Depth Psychology, his should be called Height Psychology.

In the 1970s, Viktor Frankl spent the winter months lecturing in San Diego. In 1972 he took flying lessons and was pleased and proud when he soloed and got his flying license. This is the way I remember him.



Between 1933 and 1937, Viktor Frankl was the psychiatrist responsible for the Vienna psychiatric hospital’s Suicide Pavillion. Frankl was seeing about ten attempted suicides per day. By his own estimate, he oversaw the treatment of 12,000 suicidally depressed patients in that four-year period. Twelve thousand! Some, of course, suffered from serious somatic psychiatric illnesses and had to be treated by combinations of medications and long-term psychotherapy. Most, however, were hospitalized for situational depression.



At dawn on March 12, 1938, Nazi Wehrmacht troops, on Adolf Hitler’s orders, invaded Austria. After the *Anschluss* annexing Austria into Nazi Germany, the persecution of Jews was viciously intensified. In that same month, Adolph Eichmann established an Office of Emigration in Vienna—where 200,000 Jews were living. By July, Jewish physicians were prohibited from public hospital

practice. In August, all Jewish women were required to add *Sarah* and men to add *Israel* to their names—to indicate that they were Jewish. Frankl was removed from his position at the psychiatric hospital and began to work in private practice from his parent’s apartment. He was required to put up a sign that read: *Dr. Viktor Emil Israel Frankl*

*Jew-Caretaker for Neurology and Psychiatry.*

Frankl applied for a visa to emigrate.

In December of 1938, Hermann Göring was given authority to resolve “The Jewish Question” and, within a year, Jews were systematically being evacuated from Vienna. Anyone could be deported...at any time .

In 1940, Frankl took the position of director of the Neurological Department of the Rothschild Hospital for Jewish patients. By this time, the Nazi government had initiated a practice of euthanizing mentally ill and/or disabled patients. Frankl, at great danger to himself, often made false diagnoses to protect these mentally ill patients from death.



Frankl, center, with Rothschild physicians

Eventually, in 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor, Frankl’s wait was over. He was asked to come to the American Consulate to pick up his Visa.

However, only a few months earlier, Hitler had ordered Heinrich Himmler to carry out the *Final Solution*—the complete extermination of all Jews. The visa applied only to Viktor, not to his parents. Selective deportation of Jews in Vienna had begun, and his parents, most likely, would be swept up with others. In this moment of dilemma, Viktor left the family apartment and took a long walk during which he resolved to make a decision. On his return home, he saw a broken piece of marble on the table. He asked his father what it was, and Gabriel Frankl said:

This? Oh, I picked it out of the rubble of the synagogue they have burned down. It has on it part of the Ten Commandments. I can even tell you from which commandment it comes. There is only one commandment that uses the letter that is chiseled here: “Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.”

Frankl stayed with his parents in Vienna.

By the end of 1941 130,00 Jews had fled from Vienna to other countries. Deportations to concentration camps were in full swing—eventually sweeping up 65,000 Viennese Jews. Of these, only about three of every one hundred would survive the camps.



During that year of constant anxiety, stress, and justifiable fear, Viktor fell in love with Tilly Grosser, a nurse.



The Nazis then announced that no Jews would be allowed to marry after December 1, 1941. It was on that very day that Viktor Frankl, Tilly Grosser, and two friends of theirs were the last four Jews allowed to be married in Vienna ‘till after the end of WWII.

Because Jews were not allowed to take taxis, they walked to the government office for their license wearing the yellow star on their wedding clothes—and they lived with his parents for the nine months before their deportation because Jews could not apply for housing.

Viktor and Tilly were constantly in danger of being sent to the concentration camps. A decree was circulated that pregnant Jewish women would be immediately deported to the camps—whether they were married or not. Tilly became pregnant and had to sacrifice the fetus she was carrying. Among the many books that Frankl has written, one is titled *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*—which he dedicated to their unborn child.

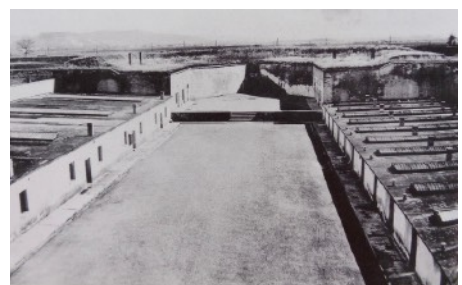
On September 25<sup>th</sup> 1942, Viktor, Tilly, and his father & mother were swept up by the Nazis and transported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in the former fortress and military garrison town of Terezin—at that time part of the Czech Republic. Viktor would be the only member of this family unit to survive the camps.



Theresienstadt Entry



Guard Quarters



Assembly ground

Theresienstadt is best known as the German’s “model” ghetto camp, but the brutal facts are that the daily death rate was comparable to that of Buchenwald & Dachau. Viktor was almost beaten to death in the assembly yard. He had no idea why the guard at last stopped beating him.

A total of 141,184 persons were imprisoned at Theresienstadt. For some it was a transit hub, and 88,323 of them were deported to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other killing centers—where perhaps only about 4% survived the war.

In Theresienstadt, 33,521 “residents” died of disease, starvation, exposure, or while performing slave-labor. In 1942, the year that Frankl and his family arrived, 15,891 Jews died there. At that

time, there were no gas chambers in Theresienstadt, but the death climbed so rapidly that toward the end of 1942 the Germans built a crematorium capable of incinerating almost 200 bodies a day.

Theresienstadt  
Crematorium



Theresienstadt was created as a “model” camp for a number of reasons. One motivation was that it was to this camp Nazis sent Jews who were so prominent that the rest of the world might begin asking questions. Sigmund Freud’s sister, for example, died there. It was presented as a Retirement Settlement, but it was anything but that. It was a cruel hoax. A diabolical fraud. Many Jewish persons of wealth, professional standing, and international reputation were sent there: artists, writers, scientists, musicians, and scholars and professors in all fields.

It was the only camp in which inmates had any influence on the life of the camp. A Jewish council was formed that could organize and direct various aspects of camp life. But part of their responsibility was the selection of which inmates would stay in Theresienstadt and which would be transferred to other camps—that is, to the death camps. Theresienstadt was constantly and crushingly overcrowded by arriving victims of the Nazi Final Solution, so the members of the council were faced with the stupefying task of saving some on a “protection list”—which, of course, left others vulnerable for transit to almost certain death. It was an interminable and humanly intolerable “Sophie’s Choice”.



However, given this opportunity of creating a sham normality, the inmates did extraordinary things—particularly in regard to the children. They dedicated two large buildings in this former military garrison to house 600 children. They provided classes for the children in such things as art and poetry! Among the few children that survived, some became internationally known in their fields. The adults were so successful in their efforts to protect the minds and spirits of the young that a number of the children, when they had become adults, remembered their childhood as a time of happiness—and only later realized what astonishing efforts their parents and the community had made to protect them from the real horrors of the Holocaust.

The adults, too, took advantage of the Nazi’s bizarre policy of making a “model” camp to obscure the real nature of the Final Solution to the rest of the world.

They produced plays and entertainments, put together an orchestra and a choral group, and had concerts by leading artists.



They compiled a library of 10,000 books in Hebrew and arranged lectures and classes in all fields.

In the two years that Viktor Frankl was in Theresienstadt he lectured on such wide-ranging topics as: *Sleep and Its Disturbances*, *The Body and The Soul*, *The Psychology of Mountaineering*, *The Medical Care of the Soul*, *The Rax and Schneeberg* [*The highest mountain range in Lower Austria*], *Existential Problems in Psychotherapy*, *How I Keep My Nerves Healthy*, and *Social Psychotherapy*.

When Frankl first arrived in Theresienstadt, he was asked to serve as a general practitioner in a medical clinic. Then, because he was also a psychiatrist, he was assigned to the psychiatric ward in Block B IV where he set up a camp psycho-hygiene or mental health care service.

New arrivals could be overwhelmed by the shock of deportation; many would be deeply depressed and possibly suicidal. So Frankl began a suicide-screening process for newcomers with Regina Jonas, the world's first female Jewish rabbi.

This photo of a girl arriving in Theresienstadt surely has several story-lines. She is wary, confused; she doesn't know what will happen next—or precisely where she is. This is probably a street in the town of Terezin—used as a ghetto adjacent to the barracks of the Theresienstadt fortress that housed all of the slave laborers. She is carrying two pots and something else (bread? a stuffed toy?). A woman on the far side is carry her pots in a bag. What are the three older women thinking?



Frankl and Rabbi Regina Jonas identified new arrivals in most need of emotional and psychological support with a process of triage that began with a single question. After all, each arriving transport was packed with hundreds of shocked and disoriented people. Without the luxury of time, they would ask: Do you feel that your life is without purpose? 1) frequently – *haufig*, 2) seldom – *selten*, or 3) never – *niemals*. After that, Frankl asked a second question: Have you ever thought of committing suicide, or are you thinking of committing suicide now?

Those who said that they were indeed considering suicide were, of course, given immediate attention and care. But to the remainder, Frankl would ask a truly unexpected question. He would either say “Why didn’t you committed suicide—and why won’t you now?”—or a variation of the same probing question.

Those who, in fact, were not harboring serious suicidal plans would immediately mention their responsibility to their family or their work: something unfinished from the past or something that needed to be done in the future. But those who actually were in immanent danger of suicide would be at a loss to express reasons for living. They would be embarrassed, try to change the subject, burst out in anger. It was a simple and perhaps crude form of triage, but the transports had to be met, people had to be screened quickly, and (of course) the triage was done by Viktor Frankl himself. Then Frankl would ask: “Can you identify what it was that kept you from suicide (selbst morder)? Then he would ask them to turn again to those resources, those values, that stance or attitude that one can take in the worst of times.

Frankl would later write that:

“...the basic meaning orientation of an individual—or, as I am used to calling it, the ‘will to meaning’—has actual survival value. Those inmates who were oriented toward the future, whether it was a task to complete in the future, or a beloved person to be reunited with, were most likely to survive the horrors of the camps...”

Eight months after arriving in Theresienstadt, Gabriel Frankl (Viktor’s father) died of pneumonia and congestive heart failure.

A year later on October 19, 1944 Frankl, his mother Elsa, and his wife Tilly were sent to Auschwitz. Tilly was transferred to Bergen-Belsen; Viktor to Kaufering and Türkheim, satellite slave-labor camps of Dachau. Elsa died at Auschwitz.

Any time human beings face daunting circumstances that they are helpless to change or avoid, the major symptomatic evidence is depression. If you ever lost your job because of factors beyond your control or failed in a relationship and could not avert the failure, that helplessness probably showed itself as depression. Sometimes, our reaction to helplessness is rage—but, for our examination of Frankl’s basic contributions, we will look at depression. If you have ever lost through death a parent or spouse or close friend or sibling—or a child—you will experience grief and sadness—but, in your helplessness to reverse this loss, the symptomatic signs will often be that of depression.

Viktor Frankl saw that finding meaning in life while threatened with immanent death in a concentration camp is clearly much like living with a terminal illness. Finding meaning in life takes a kind of urgency whenever we contemplate that our live’s will not stretch out to an endless future, when we consider that the gift of life is time-limited, that life is a terminal condition.

About 70 years ago, I sat in a barber-shop reading a dog-eared copy of *The Reader's Digest* which once had one-paragraph stories called *Life in these United States*. In one of these stories, a boy is watching his grandmother reading the Bible. He asks his sister "What's grandma doing?" The sister replies: "She's cramming for the finals".

Grandma wasn't cramming for the finals, she was absorbing the lesson plans of her particular heritage. She wasn't learning how to die—she was exercising the muscles of meaning; she was advancing in her ability and understanding of how to live Life—every part of it. Perhaps she was reading Ecclesiastes:

For everything there is a season...  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to harvest what is planted;...  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
...  
(There is) a time for every matter under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

Frankl's challenge for us is whether we, like the grandmother, can find ways to live more fully during every season given to us; to find deeper and richer meaning in every aspect of life.

I have been with some people as they faced death whose eyes were white with stark terror. I have also been with other people as they died with astonishing composure and peace. Amazingly, they seemed to have received and enjoyed this immense gift of life and, at the end, were somehow able—with gratitude...to release it.

Viktor Frankl described a number of those (like himself) who, when it seemed inevitable that their barracks-block would be the next to be taken to the gas chambers, were able to live and act in truly humane ways; to live lives that clearly had meaning and purpose. Frankl said:

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 us 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. . . .

And, for Frankl, this attitude or stance was anchored in a solid foundation: that human life is supported and sustained with infinite meaning—meaning that may be assailed but never diminished by any circumstances of life, including imprisonment, privation, suffering, and death.

Before the First World War, Oscar Wilde—publicly disgraced, humiliated, in prison, and with only months to live, wrote these words: *But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find*

*hidden away somewhere in my nature—like a treasure in a field— something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all.*

Viktor Frankl, too, was able to say that—categorically. We are capable of discovering and experiencing that nothing at all in the whole world is meaningless.

Pre-War Vienna



Post-War Vienna



After the war was over and the camps were liberated (in Frankl’s case by American soldiers from Texas on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1945), he returned to Vienna to a great emptiness: his father had died in Theresienstadt; now he learned that his mother, brother, and sister-in-law had died in Auschwitz. He did not yet know that his wife, Tilly, was dead. Then, in the first week of his return to Vienna, he learned that Tilly had indeed died in Bergen-Belsen. She may have been alive when Bergen-Belsen was liberated, but she was most probably among the thirteen thousand or more who died in the first few weeks after liberation from the effects of starvation and disease.



Bergen-Belsen after liberation.



Women dying—after liberation



British troops burn Bergen-Belsen

Frankl often translated a dictum of Friedrich Nietzsche as: “Those who have a *why* to live for can endure almost any *how*”. But Frankl also translated Nietzsche into English in this way: “Those who have a *reason* to live endure almost any *condition* of living”.

Writing about this first week after his return to Vienna, Frankl said that he felt empty of any reason to live, that he himself was sliding through depression toward suicide. He could see no reason to live—but for one thing: prior to being taken to the concentration camps, Frankl had

written an extended manuscript of his vision for a new kind of therapy. By 1939, he called his approach Existential Analysis, then Logotherapy—which he always translated as Meaning Analysis/Therapy. His book on these methods, techniques, and perspective would be called *The Doctor and the Soul* [Die Ärztliche Seelsorge—*The Physician's Care of the Soul*]. This book had been almost ready for the publisher when the Frankls were carried off in the transports to the concentration camps, but he was able to keep the manuscript with him until it was lost to him in Auschwitz. He continued to make observations and take notes on scraps of paper while in the camps from 1942 to 1945. Now, in Vienna, he returned to the apartment building where he had lived for most of his life. Of course, non-Jewish people now lived in his former apartment, but there was a friend still living in the building with whom he had left a copy of the complete first draft of his book: *The Doctor and the Soul*—and this copy was returned to him intact! With this one remaining copy in his hands, Frankl describes how—still suicidally depressed—he committed himself to bringing the book to publication. After that...well, perhaps he would end his life...perhaps not.

And then there were those observations of the psychology of prisoners and guards of the camps that he had committed to scraps of paper. He decided to add these conclusions as a final chapter to the book. After that, he would decide whether or not he had sufficient reason to live.

Notes from Türkheim

Just at the point that he completed his revised addition of *The Doctor and the Soul* he was urged to write a personal account of his life in the camps. He dashed off “*Man's Search for Meaning*” in just over a week. Nine days!



For Frankl, meaning and purpose began to return to his life; he had new reasons to live. “Those who have a *reason* to live endure almost any *condition* of living.”

As an indication of Frankl's gradual progression out of the depth's of depression, it is instructive to read a poem that he wrote about a year later. In the poem, he speaks to his dead wife, Tilly.

You weigh on me, you whom I lost in death.  
You've given me the silent charge to live for you;  
So it is for me now to erase the debt of your extermination—  
    Until I know that with each ray of sun  
    You wish to warm me and to meet me;  
    Until I see that in each blossoming tree  
    There's someone dead who wants to greet me;  
    Until I hear that every bird's song is your voice  
    Sounding out to bless me —and perhaps to say  
    That you forgive me that I live. V. Frankl: *Recollections: An Autobiography*

He chose to live on behalf of one who had died: living to honor the life of another.

Depressions can build up over long periods of time, but that final act of suicide often takes place during a relatively brief window of time when persons reach the lowest possible point when they are no longer aware of the meanings of the past or the possibility of a future. For them, no future can be conceived beyond the next crucial moment of self destruction. But sometimes it may not take much to lift them past the danger.

A woman I know once received a phone call from her adult son. He recounted how an endless multiplication of responsibilities beyond his ability to perform them had driven him to decide to end his life...now. As she listened to his anguished words, she heard the sharp metallic click as he loaded and activated his pistol. And she said: "Stop, you can't do that! You have a dentist's appointment on Thursday!"

When a person is at the bottom of the pit of depression, there is seemingly no tomorrow. A mother's reminder of a dentist's appointment may not seem enough to provide a rich and full awareness of meaning and purpose in life—but it was adequate to move this man into the next few days, and to begin the climb back up to a balanced life. For Frankl, it was first the challenge of completing the book he had worked on for so long before the war and, second, as he moved beyond the crisis point, to honor the feeling that he was now given the responsibility to live in some sense on behalf of his wife.

*You weigh on me, you whom I lost in death.  
You've given me the silent charge to live for you;*

Frankl applied to his own life the methods that he and Rabbi Regina Jonas used as they tried to determine which prisoners needed the most help. If a person appeared about to commit suicide, Frankl would ask if they had ever felt this way before. If they had, he would ask—since they had lived to tell the tale, how did they feel after a few weeks or months about having escaped death? What had helped them to get past the suicidal desire before. Then, he would ask in what ways the future was calling for them to complete tasks or maintain relationships. He would help them to mine the resources of their own past and to face the challenges of the future.

This tactic, of appealing through memory to a person's own resources and asking in what ways the future might be calling upon them to use these resources, is simple enough to express—but it may not seep thoroughly into your comprehension sufficiently to be useful to you. I will try to help that happen.

Viktor Frankl had a favorite teaching technique that he shared with his students. Dr. Frankl repeatedly said: "If you want a person to laugh, tell a joke; if you want them to fully understand a concept, tell a story". So I will tell you a story; one that includes several of Frankl's most important contributions.

One evening, forty or fifty years ago, a man phoned me and urged me to come to his home because he was certain that his wife was about to commit suicide. When I entered their house, I

found the woman curled up in a fetal position on the couch. Her eyes were closed; she would say nothing. How could I use any of Frankl's methods if I couldn't communicate with her? But she could hear—and so I asked her husband what had brought her to this state. He said that she had been born and raised in a foreign country under circumstances that were so oppressive and dangerous that she had left her native land and was separated from her family, friends, and culture. In many ways her situation was similar to that of tens of thousands of refugees from Syria and other nations today. She was completely silent as he described the circumstances that had brought her to complete despair. Hers was a dangerous silence; a challenging silence. From her husband's description, there did not seem to be any straw that she could grasp to pull herself from her black depression. No reason for being, no accessible meanings to her life.

Unable either to mine the resources of meanings from her past or to probe what the possibilities of the future might come to her aid, I began to ask her husband what *he* hoped for the future, what *he* thought would be the best possible outcomes beyond where they were in this moment. After a long time, as he spoke of his hopes for their future life, she sat up. She looked me full in the face, and I shall never forget her first words to me: "When you first entered our house", she said, "I was lusting to see the blood spurt from my veins". Lusting! That was the word she used—lusting for the bath water to turn crimson.

Could this woman, who moments before had been *lusting* for the sight of her own blood, "Say Yes to Life in Spite of Everything"? Oh no. No, my no.

And what tools did I have to help her find inner resources to emerge from this dark pit? What arrows did Frankl have in his quiver to destroy or disable this deadly depression? Because, without dramatic change, this depression could disable or destroy her.

Thinking of how Viktor Frankl and Rabbi Regina Jonas screened new Therisienstadt inmates, I asked the woman on the couch: "Have you ever before been so hopeless that you wanted to end your life?"

She immediately said: "Yes—once."

I said: "And why didn't you commit suicide that time? What was it then that enabled you to embrace Life?"

She then recounted an amazing story. At a certain point after arriving in the United States—without family, friends, or other contacts—she fell seriously ill and was hospitalized. There she was told that she was in the last stages of a terminal illness. Her room was on the third floor of the hospital. From her window, she could see below a playground for children. There were sandboxes and swings; there were mothers pushing children in strollers, there were slightly older youngsters on tricycles riding around a concrete path. If the window panes had not been sealed and thick, she said she would have cast herself out and ended it all. But the next day a cluster of physicians and staff came into her room to announce that an immense mistake had been made, a wonderful mistake: she was *not terminally ill*. Although she was very sick, she would recover quickly and completely. I asked her if she could recall the feelings she had after this news. "Oh,

yes.” Now, when she looked out of the window everything seemed to be dancing with vivid color. She could barely hear the laughter and shouting of the children, but it seemed like magical tinkling music that reminded her of life possibilities that she had thought she would never have. I said to her: “As you think of the wonder of that new gift of life, can you, even now, feel some of the unexpected happiness and joy?” “Yes, yes”, she said. There would be a long road before her until she could dispel her depression and begin the steps to a fuller life, but she had taken the first steps.

As Frank might have said to her: *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben Sagen—Nevertheless, say Yes to Life; In spite of everything, Say Yes to Life!*

But how would Frankl’s method of approach help a person’s search for meaning in an ordinary situation of non-suicidal, low grade depression?

In that same year, I walked into a nursing home to see a person I had never before met. Outside, it was a Fall day. The maple trees were beginning to turn color: there were still many green leaves, but others had turned yellow; some were tinged with scarlet. Inside, the nursing home stank. Today, not many nursing homes smell bad, but this one did. Along the hall walls, there were people strapped into wheelchairs by the doors of their rooms. They were spaced just far apart that they could not easily communicate with each other. It was the very definition of a depressing place. I arrived at the appropriate room, knocked, entered, and found an elderly woman sitting on a chair. The television set was off. She was not reading or writing...just sitting. I introduced myself and began to talk with her. She was blandly apathetic. Then I said to her: “In a week or two it will be Thanksgiving. What’s the biggest turkey you ever cooked?” “Why”, she said, “It was twenty-three and a half pounds!” Her eyes sparkled; her face lit up; she became as animated as if she had felt a very pleasant electric charge.

“And who did you cook the turkey for?”

“For the whole family, of course!...and three very, very close friends.”

“It must have been a wonderful time,” I said, “and do you think that you could, in your imagination, remember the people that sat at that table? Could you tell me their names and relationship—and perhaps describe why you have such fond memory of them?” From then on, it was story after story...a delightful and meaningful afternoon—for both of us.

Viktor Frankl would say that people such as this woman may at first be able to see only the barren, “stubby fields” of their present life. They need to be reminded that they have been ignoring, just out of sight, “the rich granary” of the past that is simply filled with permanent nourishing treasures that have been rescued and stored—and which can be accessed by the simple act of delving into our memories. Or, he would say to such a person that they are focused on the remaining blank and unknown pages of their future life when there are chapters after chapters of completed experience in this amazing book of their life! Open the book anywhere; just take a look! See the wonders that are there. There are losses and defeats, but there also victories and challenges met. There is sorrow, grief, and loss—but there is also the sunny warmth of friendships and fond love—and of allegiances and calls-to-service beyond our narrow

self-interest. By reading chapters in your life story, by turning to the rich granary of memory, you can be strengthened to do the work of living that yet needs to be done.

Does every moment of our lives contain such richly meaningful moments? No. Can we maintain a constant high level of happiness and meaning such as we have in these unforgettable moments? Again—no. However, those meaningful experiences and the happiness associated with them are not in some inaccessible past. By memory, they are accessible now and they are ready to serve us. It is this possibility that Viktor Frankl became keenly aware of—that we can gain access to these resources regardless of how dark our present moments may be; that even in a slave-camp we have the freedom of our thoughts.

One of the most astonishing illustrations of this profound reality is expressed in an old German song (1842) sung by concentration camp inmates. The song is called simply by its refrain: **Die Gedanken sind frei**. *Thoughts are free*.

Die Gedanken sind frei, wer kann sie erraten.  
(Thoughts are free, who can guess them?)  
Sie fliegen vorbei wie nächtliche Schatten.  
(They fly by like nocturnal shadows)  
Kein Mensch kann sie wissen, (No man can know them,)  
Kein Jäger erschießen, (no hunter can shoot them)  
Die Gedanken sind frei! Die Gedanken sind frei!  
...  
My hope and desire, no one can take, steal, or buy.  
And if I am thrown into the darkest dungeon,  
All these are futile chains, because my thoughts  
Tear all gates and walls apart: Die Gedanken sind frei!  
...  
In my heart, I can always laugh and love  
And sigh at the same time: Die Gedanken sind frei!  
...  
I am not alone—for my love is always with me:  
Even though I die! Die Gedanken sind frei! Die Gedanken sind frei!

In the following example of the precious freedom of human thought, Frankl reveals the way in which the human mind can transport itself into both the past and the future—showing that one path to deep meaning in one's life can be found in dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself—that is, to a great love.

Of the slave-labor camp, Frankl wrote:

We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. ...

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 more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: . . . I understood how, when you have nothing left in this world, you still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of your beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when you cannot express yourself in positive action, when your only achievement may consist in enduring your sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position you can, through loving contemplation of the image you carry of your beloved, achieve fulfillment.

. . .

Another time we were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere, in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose, I heard a victorious "Yes"

This must have been the moment of insight that would later enable Frankl to repeatedly encourage us all to —*Say Yes to Life in spite of Everything*.

Trotsdem Ja zum Leben Sagen.

In the Kaufering slave-labor camp, swinging a pick-ax at frozen earth in the pre-dawn and being insulted and kicked by guards of various levels of brutality, Frankl was living in and experiencing the "stubby fields of the present" as he would say. But he discovered that he could turn to the rich granary of the past (both immediate and distant) and dip into the storeroom of memories—both of his wife and of seemingly trivial events. Frankl says of fellow prisoners:

[An] intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation, and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past. When given free rein, his imagination played with past events, often not important ones, but minor happenings and trifling things. . . . In my mind I took bus rides, unlocked the front door of my apartment, answered my telephone, switched on the electric lights. Our thoughts often centered on such details, and these memories could move one to tears.

Frankl was not escaping into a fantasy land, he was revisiting again events and experiences that had contributed in one way or another to the meaningfulness of his life.

Frankl's claim is that we discover our unique, personal meanings by fulfilling the responsibilities that Life places before us: by giving to life—creatively, by receiving from life—experientially, and by the stance or attitude we take toward those things we can neither change nor overcome.

When we are fully aware of the amazing gifts of Life, we become brimful with gratitude—and *In spite of Everything Say Yes to Life*. Trotsdem **Ja** zum Leben Sagen!

*Charles Adams Eaton* November 22, 2016

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### Response to questions raised after the OASIS lecture

I've been asked if Viktor ever saw his sister Stella again. Yes. She flew from Australia to Vienna and tried to convince him to go back to Australia with her—but he decided to stay in Vienna. He travelled several times to Australia: he lectured there and visited Stella. In October of 1996, was told by a phone call that Stella had died. That evening, he entered the hospital with heart problems. His health rapidly declined, and he died in 1997.



Two years after the death of Viktor's first wife, Tilly, he married Elly Schwindt, a Catholic nurse. They were married in a civil ceremony because neither a priest nor a rabbi would bless their marriage. Tilly's aunt (left in wedding photo) was present as a witness. Viktor & Elly had one daughter, Gabrielle (center). Gabrielle would also have a child, Katharina, (right with VF)

Pope Paul VI invited Viktor Frankl to visit him. After twenty minutes of conversation regarding the significance of Franks's thoughts on Meaning and Purpose, the Pope asked Viktor to pray for him.



Frankl, age 83, in Jerusalem for his second Bar Mitzvah

I have been asked if Viktor Frankl was a religious person. This is an interesting question. You will not find an answer to it by reading his over 20 books and published lectures—but only from close associates and his second wife, Elly Schwindt. When Frankl returned to Vienna, he recovered several things that had been stored for him: the first draft of *The Doctor and the Soul*, his mountain-climbing rope, and the tefillin or phylacteries that his father Gabriel had bound around his head and arm for the traditional Jewish morning prayers. From then on, Frankl daily used his father's tefillin for morning prayers. In addition to that, Frankl had his own evening discipline: he would choose a Psalm, read it carefully, and meditate on what it might mean for his life. Furthermore, when he was eighty-three, Frankl made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a second Bar Mitzvah on the seventieth anniversary of his first. In the final days of his life, his Catholic wife, Elly, assisted him in binding his father's tefillin around his head and arm for the observance of religious tradition.

Frankl's religious practices were elements of his Worldview from which he could derive resources to nurture his own meanings and purposes in life. The simple reason that he did not speak of his own spirituality is that he considered the resources of his client's Worldview (or Weltanschauung) to be crucially valuable for each specific client. His professional duty was to assist others in discovering, applying, and benefiting from their own unique resources—their own “rich granary”. His own faith tradition, Worldview, and spiritual practice were irrelevant in the context of his therapy and his teaching, C.E.

Post Script:

On page 19, I included translation of several lines from the popular German Resistance song, *Die Gedanken Sind Frei*. To feel the energy (passion) of that song, I recommend that you do a Google search with these words: *Die Gedanken sind frei – English subtitles*. This search will bring you to YouTube and several slightly different but excellent renditions sung in German with subtitles in English. The roots in German poetry reach back into the Middle Ages. Its current form (and melody) can be traced to at least 1842.