

## MAN'S SEARCHING FOR MEANING

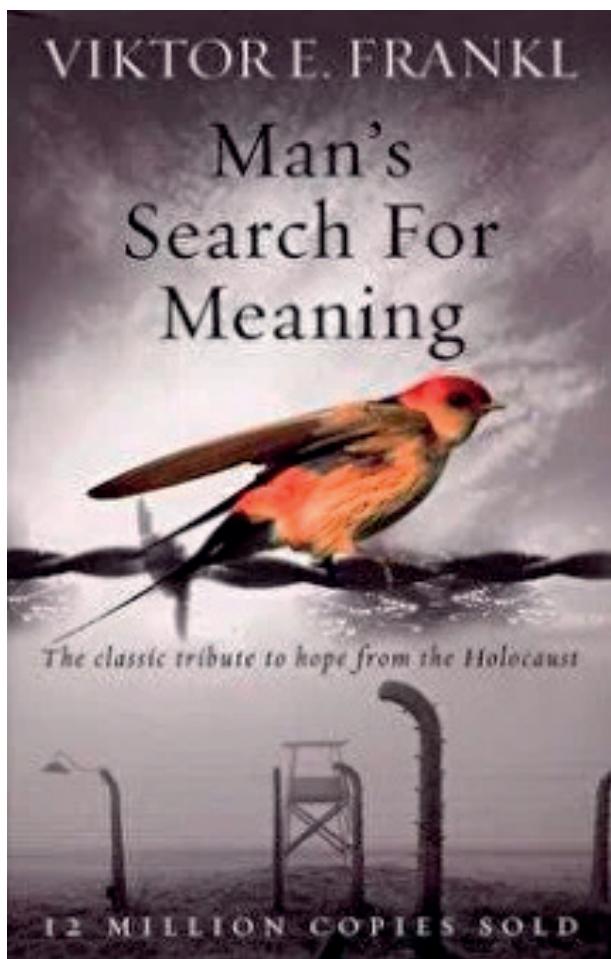
VICTOR E. FRANKL

– Reviewed by By PETRA COMANDAŞU–

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**Man's Search for Meaning** can be easily described as Viktor Frankl's most popular work. Without overstating the timeless echoes of the Second-World-War events depicted in this book, the psychiatrist and psychotherapist's existential approach shines throughout his writing, without undermining its positive undertones.

As a newly captured Auschwitz prisoner, dr. Frankl started to take note of the



psychological changes that himself and his concentrated fellows were experiencing. He later comprised them as 3 defining mental stages, progressively transpiring through the detainees' day-to-day behaviours.

The author describes the first couple of days of his sentence as being fraught with shock. Much like the death-row inmates before their execution, the concentration camp prisoners were struck by "the delusion of reprieve", a term coined by Frankl to better express the enduring hope of escaping out of an objectively desperate situation.

On being scrutinized, robbed and physically and emotionally abused by the guardians, the inmate was curiously observing the changes he was forced into. On top of pushing himself in order to put up with continuous sleep deprivation and chronic shortage of food, caffeine and nicotine, the psychiatrist was also being subjected to physical and emotional abuse. Consequently, we are introduced to a special kind of prisoner, the Capo, who was specifically recruited to ensure obedience among their fellows and to inflict severe and often unnecessary punishments upon them. The installment of this classist system, in which some have more privileges than others and as such, more chances of survival, is intended to only divide the people even more and set them against each other.

As a result, passively getting by from one day to another was a necessary protection for the dissociated mind of a traumatised person that was yet to fathom the fragility of their own life.

As violence became ingrained into the daily routine of the concentration experience, the inmate's mind was accommodating to it and entering a stage of „emotional death”. Feelings such as the disgust with extremely unsanitary living conditions, the fear and hopelessness whilst being continuously exposed to violence, and the deep-seated longing for home and loved ones had to be shut down and refrained, under the cruel and ever-present eyes of the Capos and the guards.

Apathy ensued as a necessary coping mechanism of dulling the senses and maintaining survival. Doctor Frankl links this state „to a more primitive form of mental life”, in which one's desires revolve around food, caffeine, nicotine and bodily cleanliness.

But even in the most dire form of scraped existence, prisoners sought out some type of spirituality to hang onto. Some followed the religious path, others latched onto the memories of loved ones. Here, the author conveys the fascinating resilience that stems from the mind's self-preservation mechanisms: in a dissociative state, as his body was performing the gruelling daily marches and labours, he was enraptured by his loving memories of his wife and his imaginary talks to her. Having spiritually reconnected with his loved one, he found the strength to survive. In addition, underlining his personal example, are stories of physically capable inmates whose immune health would drastically decline as soon as they let hopelessness take over them.

After having endured so much suffering, freedom came with no little surprise. Alas, liberation bore no easy price, as the doctor recollects the emotional labor of depersonalisation and derealisation. Along with his fellows, he is too psychologically stunned to rejoice in their escape.

His memories also portray the dream-like feeling of his surroundings. While dealing with his own hardships, he cannot look

away from his former fellows who have become accustomed to the violence of camp and are now reproducing it in their post-liberation life. Having been subjected to so many acts of cruelty, many former prisoners wish to inflict revenge upon random victims. Dr. Frankl adds that he later took part in helping them recover from the trauma. The recovery was also troubled by the loneliness of being a war survivor in a world that was eager to forget about the war and move on as quickly as possible.

Upon his return, the psychiatrist finds a way to reconnect with himself and rebuilds his life from the ground up.

The second part of the book begins with depicting the fundamentals of a meaning-centered type of therapy that the author created- *logotherapy*. This is based on the legitimacy of the basic human need for meaning. As results from various cited studies imply, most people strive to attach meaning to the very core of their existence.

When they are unable to accomplish their *will to meaning*, people experience *existential frustration*. This can develop into *noogenic neuroses*, which are specific to the human mind. Existential frustration can be hard to tolerate, but it doesn't always carry pathological significance. Instead, it can be utilised as a catalyst for change and for a deeper closeness to meaning. The logotherapist must therefore help the client to become aware of their deepest desires and to follow their own path to fulfilling them in a significant way. In order to decipher their unique path towards meaning, one must be aware of the distance between their past endeavours and their projected future accomplishments. Upon reaching this level of awareness, there develops a state of mental tension that is described as crucial to the motivation to achieve those goals. This mental tension is the basis of *noo-dynamics*, defined as “*the existential dynamics in a polar field of tension where one pole is represented by a meaning that is to be*

*fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it“.*

When unable to find a specific meaning to strive for, people experience the existential vacuum. Dr. Frankl states that modern humans are more prone to harbouring an existential vacuum because of our disconnection from most of our basic animal instincts and from our traditions and rituals. Found among students, working people and seniors alike, it sets the tone for psychiatric conditions such as depression and addiction.

Logotherapy views the present as past and the past as something that may yet be changed and amended. “*Such a precept confronts him with life's finiteness as well as the finality of what he makes out of both his life and himself that can still be changed.*”

As human beings can freely communicate with the outside and thus channel their energy towards a purpose or another person, they can therefore *self-actualize*. On the path of finding meaning, one can create a body of work or they can have children and better the world. They can also feel changed by becoming vulnerable in the face of beauty and art, or by connecting with someone and thus exposing themselves to the risk of truly loving them. Thirdly, maintaining dignity when confronted with suffering which cannot be

avoided provides that suffering with meaning. Therefore, in the face of passing time, man finds solace and pride in his creations, his authentic connections to other beings and his meaningful suffering.

As the practical part of the volume unravels, *the paradoxical intention technique* is conveyed through clinical description of various obsessive-compulsive and phobic cases, where an opposite approach is made toward the object of anticipatory anxiety (e.g. the client anxious about how much he is going to sweat is instructed to demonstrate that he can sweat so much more). There is also made use of an important inner trait of the client-self-irony, which promotes detachment from one's suffering.

The psychiatrist conveys that people may not be able to change everything that is thrown at them by life, but they can change their attitude towards what is happening to them. Self-determination is therefore a two faced coin, on one side engraved with freedom and on the other with responsibility. Through this knowledge, people can strive for meaning even in the worst of conditions. At any given moment in our lifetime, every human being has the potential to become either evil or good and as dr. Frankl explains, the decision is only ours to make.