MAN'S SEARCH FOR ULTIMATE MEANING

'BRILLIANT!'
Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

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About the Book

Viktor Frankl is known to millions of readers around the world as the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, his harrowing Holocaust memoir. In his own words: 'Readers of my short autobiographical story usually ask for a fuller and more direct explanation...' and this insightful book is it. In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl explains the thinking that enabled him to survive the concentration camps in spite of tremendous odds. Believing there is more to our existence than meets the eye, he reveals his firm conviction that we are not glorified animals but repressed angels. From the nature of our dreams to the question of God, Frankl considers a range of important subjects. Ultimately, he reveals how to create meaning for ourselves and how life has more to offer us than we could ever imagine.

About the Author

Viktor Frankl was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School. For twenty-five years he was head of the Vienna Neurological Policlinic. His Logotherapy/Existential Analysis came to be known as the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. He held professorships at Harvard, Stanford, Dallas, and Pittsburgh, and was Distinguished Professor of Logotherapy at the US International University in San Diego, California. His writings have been called ‘the most important contributions in the field of Psychotherapy since the days of Freud, Adler and Jung’ by Sir Cyril Burt, ex-President of the British Psychological Society.

Born in 1905, Frankl received the degrees of Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Vienna. During World War II he spent three years at Auschwitz, Dachau and other concentration camps.

Through four decades Dr. Frankl made innumerable lecture tours throughout the world. He received honorary degrees from twenty-nine universities in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia. He held numerous awards, among them the Oskar Pfister Award of the American Psychiatric Association and an Honorary Membership of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Frankl's thirty-nine books appeared in thirty-eight languages. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* has sold millions of copies around the world. Viktor Frankl died in 1997 in Vienna.

“Viktor Frankl … is one of the moral heroes of the twentieth century. His insights into human freedom, dignity and the search for meaning are deeply humanising and have the power to transform lives” Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks

“Viktor Frankl declares that evil and ennui cannot fully extinguish us” Brian Keenan, author of *An Evil Cradling*

ALSO BY VIKTOR E. FRANKL

Man's Search for Meaning
The Doctor and the Soul
Psychotherapy and Existentialism
The Will to Meaning
The Unconscious God
The Unheard Cry for Meaning

For More Information

Institutes of Logotherapy can now be found on all five continents. For further information on Viktor Frankl and Logotherapy, including an extensive bibliography, please refer to the website of the Viktor Frankl Institute, Vienna at www.viktorfrankl.org.

Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning

Viktor E. Frankl

With a Foreword by Claudia Hammond
and
Afterword by Alexander Batthyány

RIDER
LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

To my sister

Foreword by Claudia Hammond

As the title suggests, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* is for anyone who is interested in the hunt for meaning in life. In it, Frankl explains how anyone can find meaning, whatever their circumstances, and why even a life of unbearable pain can still be meaningful. As people begin to wonder whether consumerism is really the way forward, at the start of the twenty-first century this book feels especially relevant.

I'm approaching writing this foreword in the way I imagine most people will approach reading the book—as an admirer of Victor Frankl's more famous work, *Man's Search for Meaning*. I still remember sitting in a café, making cups of tea last long enough for me to finish that book in the same afternoon. If you have not read the original no doubt you will want to by the time you have read this fascinating work.

Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl's meditation on suffering and survival, is a classic which has sold more than a million copies for each of the nine days he spent writing it (with sales now in excess of twelve million copies worldwide). We marvel at this concentrated genius, but those nine days only covered the act of writing his thoughts down; the thinking had taken place over many years. Like many great books, it left me wanting more. Some eminent writers leave us to gain all our understanding from the work alone, but with Frankl we are lucky enough to have the set of writings published here, in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, in which he explains his thinking in

more depth. The following chapters undoubtedly have a unique value if read alone, but also provide a fresh perspective on and a new motivation for reading the first book again.

The second decade of the twenty-first century with its air of crisis and uncertainty is the perfect time to revisit Frankl's theories. Reading these writings by Frankl, I am struck many times by the way they anticipate modern research in the field of psychology. Here, he talks of tragic optimism, of how we know that life brings pain, guilt and death and yet, for the most part, we manage to carry on. Using his observations and experiences from the Holocaust, Frankl tells us how to deal with these three inevitable elements of life by making use of them: turn suffering into achievement, use guilt to improve yourself and use the knowledge that life is short as a spur to action. Half a century later optimism has become a key theme in the increasingly influential field of positive psychology, the study of the strengths and virtues that allow both individuals and communities to thrive. Although I doubt Frankl would have described himself as associated with this field, there are some striking parallels.

Anyone with experience of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), either as a practitioner or a client, will see precursors of today's techniques in Frankl's work. In CBT, people learn how to reframe information, to find other ways of looking at their thoughts. In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl gives the example of an older man devastated by the loss of his wife. The man is questioning why she had to die first, leaving him alone and grief-stricken in old age. Frankl advises him to think of his staying behind as a sacrifice. He has saved his wife from experiencing this grief herself and should view it as a gift to the person he loved most in the world.

In psychological research today resilience is an important theme. Rather than teach children to have high

self-esteem regardless of achievement, we should foster the strength of character to handle setbacks in the future as well as successes. Although resilience is not a word Frankl uses often, I would argue that again he was ahead of his time here. In a sense his observations in the concentration camps were studies of resilience—not just of other people's, but of his own. Part of the fascination in reading Frankl's work is watching how he employs coping mechanisms to manage his own mental survival. He found meaning in his experiences of the Holocaust by taking the opportunity not only to observe human behaviour in a situation far more desperate than any psychologist could create in a laboratory, but also to make use of those insights.

The most challenging element of *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* for me is the emphasis on religion. Frankl defines religion in its broadest sense, but coming to the material without faith myself and from a background in contemporary psychology, my initial reaction was to baulk at the prominence he gives it. However, Frankl anticipates late twentieth-century research on the potential of religion to aid recovery from mental health problems. While I would disagree with his view that only psychiatrists possessing religious feelings of their own can do this, there have been recent calls for mental health professionals to have more training in discussing spirituality with clients. It is true that sometimes such discussions make practitioners feel uncomfortable. Frankl could be talking today when he describes patients feeling ashamed to mention their religion to their psychiatrists.

If you come to this book as religious person the six and seventh chapters might be of particular interest to you, but if you are not religious there is still plenty here for you. For me, the most thought-provoking parts of the book are the final chapters, in which Frankl examines the problem of meaninglessness. He discusses the choice between taking a

job that pays well or one that brings your life meaning. These are questions with particular pertinence during the economic downturn and this is where his theories can have lessons for us all today. Frankl is convinced that even when all control appears to have been taken away from us, such as when facing death in a concentration camp, it is still possible to find meaning. Although few of us will experience any such horror, the existential vacuum of modern life that he describes will resonate with many today. As we wonder if there is life beyond consumerism in a time where trust between individuals is decreasing, he talks about finding shared meaning and a new sense of community.

What I most admire about Frankl is his compassion and generosity. He had the opportunity to leave Vienna before the war, yet he stayed behind to care for his parents despite the risks. He is never prescriptive and admits that his form of existential analysis, logotherapy, is no panacea. The aim of this form of therapy is to help people find meaning in life and it rests on the premise that however wretched a person's circumstances, meaning still can be found. Frankl seems to want people to find their own way. His appalling experiences could have led him to dismiss as trivial everyday complaints about the meaninglessness of our safe, comfortable lives. Instead he seems to understand that *any* of us can feel lonely, in despair and in desperate need of meaning. In this way he turned his own battle to understand what he witnessed into a great contribution to twentieth-century thought. At the same time he put his theories into practice in his own life by making his work be devoted to helping others fulfil their own search for meaning.

CLAUDIA HAMMOND

Claudia Hammond is an award-winning broadcaster, writer and lecturer in psychology. Using her specialist knowledge she has originated and presented numerous radio series on psychology and science, including the critically acclaimed landmark series *State of Mind*. She has appeared often on TV, discussing psychological research, and is on the part-time faculty at Boston University's London base where she lectures in health and social psychology. Her first book, *Emotional Rollercoaster—a journey through the science of feelings*, has been translated into six languages.

Foreword (2000)

On January 1, 1994, I stood at the top of the stairs at the embassy residence, a bit confused. The diminutive, white-haired man walking spryly toward me wasn't at all what I had expected. I shook the hand of Viktor Frankl, my guest, and told him, "I read your book 25 years ago, and I still remember it."

"Do you remember in your mind, or in your heart?" he asked.

"In my heart."

"That's good," he answered, as if bestowing a blessing.

Throughout the coming months, I came to rely on Professor Frankl as a confidant and an advisor. Whether the subject was U.S. foreign policy in Bosnia, family health problems, or my own personal and professional priorities, Viktor and Elly were my anchor, a vital source of wisdom. And when wisdom failed us all, they were my wellspring of comfort.

Their clarity was imparted with kindness, understanding, and love. I was close enough to know of some of their own travails. And I wondered about their own source of strength.

This book holds an answer to that question. For in it, we see Viktor Frankl dealing with the finitude of his place within infinite possibility. He does not confuse his own limitations with ultimate limitation, nor does he mistake his own being with ultimate being.

There is also an extraordinary sense of tolerance in his thinking—a graciousness in his concession that our symbols

for ultimate meaning only point to a reality we cannot experience directly. The concentration camps in which he suffered and in which his loved ones died were, after all, created to annihilate those who were different. And so Frankl leaves room for the breadth of human experience of the metaphysical.

Let God take on an anthropomorphic form for some. For others, let God be confused with the self. After all, ultimate meaning is certainly able to absorb the finitude of our attempts to understand and describe infinity.

But for Frankl, such tolerance does not imply a lack of judgment. For there is evil in the world, and his life bears the scars. The unconscious search for ultimate meaning can lead to nefarious ends: flagrant nationalism, obsessive jealousies, ethnic hate, compulsive work. Half a century since this volume was conceived, I spent an afternoon with Elly and Viktor speaking not only of Auschwitz, but also of Srebrenica: a diabolic and perverted meaning found by some in sadistic debauchery.

So we are reminded once again that abstract theory is not an end in itself. It must shape concrete living. From this small volume, there is a great moral imperative to be pondered. As we reflect on Frankl's thought, we may take time to muse on what we personally hold most dear and, even in the moment of that intimate dialogue, contribute to the universal force for goodness.

Tolerance, jealousy, benevolence, hate, decency. What will be ultimate in our lives? As Viktor Frankl would remind us, the choice is ours.

Swanee Hunt
United States Ambassador
to Austria

Preface

The main title of this book is identical with the title of the Oskar Pfister Award Lecture that I gave at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in 1985. The text of this lecture is reprinted here as Chapter 9. As for the first part of this volume, it has already been published under the title “The Unconscious God” in 1975, the English translation of “Der unbewusste Gott,” published in 1947. This book, in turn, had been based on the manuscript for a presentation I had been invited to give in Vienna, only a few months after the end of the war.

The “printing history” of the present volume thus goes back some 50 years. Perusing what I wrote in 1947, in 1975, and in 1985, I feel that it is, as a whole, a consistent sequence of presentations of some substantial thoughts regarding a quite important subject. Hopefully, then, some of what I have written throughout these decades may be of value to some readers.

However it may be—“See, I have not kept my lips closed.”

V.F.