7 Lessons Learned From Man’s Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl (Book Review)

SEPTEMBER 20, 2016 BY BEN MCEVOY

*Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) by Viktor E. Frankl is one of the most life-changing books I have ever read.

There are only a handful of books that have permanently changed the way I view the world, the way I view life, and my constant state of mind. *Man’s Search for Meaning* is one of those rare books.

**If you could only read one book for the rest of the year, this book should be it.**

I stayed up late over three nights and got up early just so I could read this book. And since reading it, I have found myself questioning everything about my normal thought patterns and my responses to the ebbs and flows of day-to-day life.

I wonder how different my life would have been if I had read this book years ago when it first came on my radar.
I was visiting a friend who had just had a baby. He was my age and he was young. Very young to be having a baby and having to cope with the cold reality of single fatherhood before he had even graduated college. I wondered how my friend coped with it all. How did he cope with his life changing so drastically? With his future being altered forever?

He seemed so calm, so mature, so confident and full of purpose. While he was feeding the baby, I noticed a well-thumbed copy of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search of Meaning* on the kitchen counter. He noticed me looking and implored me to read it. I nodded, said I would, and added it to my ever-growing mental book recommendation list. Then I promptly forgot about it.

Just a few weeks ago, I saw the book again. I was browsing the spirituality section of a bookstore. None of the books looked particularly inspiring. Then I noticed *Man’s Search for Meaning* and remembered my friend. I remembered how dutifully and purposefully he had adapted to life’s sudden turn. So I picked it up.
I wasn’t able to put it down for three days.

For three days I was completely immersed in Viktor Frankl’s life moving from concentration camp to concentration camp (including Auschwitz) during the 1930s. I was immersed in his theories of life and logotherapy.

I wasn’t able to talk until I had finished it.

Now, 3 months after reading, the book is still with me on a day-to-day basis. Here are 10 lessons I learned.

1. “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

This is the refrain of the entire book. If you had to distill logotherapy, Frankl’s own brand of psychotherapy, into one sentence it would have to be this one.

“Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygenic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why – an aim – for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, “I have nothing to expect from life any more.” What sort of answer can one give to that?

Throughout the book, Frankl speaks deeply about his own ‘why’ and its power to help him endure his situation.

He also speaks of many prisoners who had completely lost their ‘why’ and quickly lost their life as a result.

Frankl and his fellow prisoners had to endure atrocities that many of us cannot even imagine. Prisoners had to survive on one small piece of bread a day and maybe some thin soup. They had to work 20 hours each day, digging and laying railroads and so on. If you looked weak, you were beaten. If you stopped working, you were beaten. And you didn’t get much of a second chance after that. You could be killed for any reason.
There are three ‘whys’ that stand out from Frankl’s writing:

- Love
- Work
- Dignity in suffering

We have likely heard many people utter these words from a concentration camp prisoner: “I have nothing to expect from life anymore”. In fact, we have probably uttered these words ourselves. Many of our own darkest moments look positively radiant when compared to that which POWs like Frankl had to endure. And yet we still have the gall to say such things.

Frankl asserts that it doesn’t matter if we have nothing to expect from life. We can still find meaning:

“...What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

How’s that for a remedy against depression?

Ask yourself hour by hour whether you are staying true to what life expects from you. You may not be where you want to be in life right now but so what? It’s not all about you. What can you do for life? What can you do for others?

Frankl also goes on to say that everybody’s ‘why’ is different:

“...No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny.

How did Frankl endure the horrors of the camps? How did he persevere where others perished?
One thing he did was to rewrite the manuscript that was confiscated from him. When he entered Auschwitz, his manuscript was ready for publication but it was taken and destroyed. Instead of despairing, Frankl rewrote that manuscript in his head. He wrote bits of it on scraps of paper. He imagined giving lectures on his very situation and his theory of logotherapy to lecture halls full of students in America.

“when in a camp in Bavaria I fell ill with typhus fever, I jotted down on little scraps of paper many notes intended to enable me to rewrite the manuscript, should I live to the day of liberation. I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a Bavarian concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse.

And here Frankl is giving one of his many wonderful lectures after surviving the horrors of the camps:

2. “The salvation of man is through love and in love.”

In addition to thinking constantly about reproducing his manuscripts, Frankl also endured the camps by thinking constantly of his wife who had been separated from him long ago and sent to a female camp.
Even in the harshest parts of the day, exhausted, sleep-deprived, overworked, underfed, Frankl found salvation in the love that he had for his wife:

“But my mind clung to my wife’s image, imaging 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.

Frankl learned that love really does conquer all. The sadistic guards could do anything they liked to him. It didn’t matter. He had his loving wife’s image in his mind for company. Love was an antidote to pain.

“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.

Frankl managed this bliss despite not even being with his wife. Despite not knowing how she was enduring her own suffering. Despite not knowing if she was even alive.

“I did not know whether my wife was alive, and I had no means of finding out (during all my prison life there was no outgoing or incoming mail); but at that moment it ceased to matter. There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved. Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying.

3. You can get used to anything
The human body is tougher than you think.

Frankl talks of the terrifying journey into the camps. How he and his fellows were stripped and shaved completely. How all of their documents and personal possessions were confiscated and burned, including his life’s work of papers related to logotherapy.

The prisoners had everything taken away from them. Even their names. They were given numbers, which were tattooed onto their skin.

90% of the Jewish POWs didn’t even make it into the camp. If you looked weak, you went straight to the gas chambers. Families were separated. Frankl himself was separated from his wife and would not know what became of her until after the war.

Then, once in the camps, curiosity took over as you learned the extraordinary amount of punishment that the human body is capable of resisting.

“The medical men among us learned first of all: “Textbooks tell lies!” Somewhere it is said that man cannot exist without sleep for more than a stated number of hours. Quite wrong! I had been convinced that there were certain things I just could not do: I could not sleep without this or I could not live with that or the other. The first night in Auschwitz we slept in beds which were constructed in tiers. On each tier (measuring about six-and-a-half to eight feet) slept nine men, directly on the boards. Two blankets were shared by each nine men.

Who would have thought humans could actually endure hells as harsh as Auschwitz? After all, Auschwitz was so terrible that it prompted Theodore Adorno to state that, “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

And yet they did endure. The fact that many endured (keeping in mind that the majority did not) gives one overwhelming gratitude for not having to face the same situation. It also gives one overwhelming confidence in the capabilities of their own mind and body.

“We were unable to clean our teeth, and yet, in spite of that and a severe vitamin deficiency, we had healthier gums than ever before. We had to wear the same shirts for
half a year, until they had lost all appearance of being shirts. For days we were unable to wash, even partially, because of frozen water pipes, and yet the sores and abrasions on hands which were dirty from work in the soil did not suppurate (that is, unless there was frostbite).

4. You can resist your environment’s influence

Many psychological studies, such as the famous Stanford prison experiments detailed in Zimbardo’s *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, argue that individuals are a product of their environment. Anyone can be coerced into perpetrating evil given sufficient environmental influence. Yet this is an issue that Frankl has a problem with:

“In attempting this psychological presentation and a psychopathological explanation of the typical characteristics of a concentration camp inmate, I may give the impression that the human being is completely and unavoidably influenced by his surroundings. But what about human liberty? Is there no spiritual freedom in regard to behavior and reaction to any given surroundings? […] Most important, do the prisoners’ reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?”

Frankl argues that we are not bound to our environments. Yes, the environment can be a harsh determiner of our actions but it is not fate. We do have a choice:

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

Frankl saw the lowest parts of humanity while in the camps. He saw fellow prisoners promoted to be in-camp guards turning on their fellow prisoners. He watched as they beat their lifeless, malnourished campmates. He watched sadistic guards treating them as if they were lower than animals. But he also saw individuals rising up like saints above it all:
“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.

You may not have a choice in your circumstances and environment. But you always have a choice in how you react to those imposed upon you.

5. There is meaning in suffering

Many of us spend our lives in the desperate attempt to completely eradicate suffering, thinking (like Buddha) that happiness will come when suffering is gone. But Frankl, not arguing for happiness but for something greater, believes that there is great meaning in suffering. Suffering does not automatically make one’s life void of meaning but can actually offer meaning:

“An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize the values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfilment in experiencing beauty, art, or nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in man’s attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.

How can suffering be meaningless if it is so intricately bound to life itself? Frankl’s assertion that we all can choose that which we wish to designate meaningful. Suffering can be meaningful if we want it to be, if we handle it as such:

“The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most
difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.

When suffering fills your life, what do you do? Do you take up your cross? Do you remain “brave, dignified and unselfish”? Or do you become “no more than an animal”?

Most men in a concentration camps believed that the real opportunities of life had passed. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners.

What a wonderful freedom to discover that you can choose your own meaning and that meaning with keep you filled with life.

6. Without hope, meaning, a future, death will come soon

We see this often enough in our own lives. We see people who admit to having no future, no purpose, no hope. And those same people are wallowing in self-pity. They are constantly ill and constantly complaining. They are going around and around in circles, waiting to die. Frankl saw this often enough in the camps:

The prisoner who lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.

Frankl talks about one inmate that had a dream that the war would be over on March 30th. He told this to Frankl at the beginning of the month and had hopes that his dream was a premonition that would come true. However, on the 29th, when no sense of an ending was coming, this inmate
became ill. On March 31st, Frankl writes that “his prophecy came true and he died”. The war was over for him.

“To all outward appearances, he had died of typhus.

It wasn’t typhus that had killed him. It was his loss of hope.

“Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man – his courage and hope, or lack of them – and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect.

It’s no coincidence that cancer patients with strong religious convictions have a greater chance of surviving. This is hope, meaning, and a belief in a future saving them from their own illness.

7. Logotherapy is a practical solution to your problems

As a therapeutic resource, I believe that logotherapy is infinitely more useful than many other psychotherapy techniques, particularly any that come from Freudian psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis is backward-looking, self-indulgent, and unhelpful. It seems to encourage patients to put unnecessary amounts of blame on their upbringing without offering any practical solutions to dealing with their issues.

But logotherapy is all about constructing a future for oneself. It’s all about restoring one’s sense of purpose.

Frankl filled many big books with his theory so I can’t recount it in detail here but one aspect I find fascinating is the idea of “paradoxical intention”. Frankl describes this as such:

“Logotherapy bases its technique called “paradoxical intention” on the twofold fact that fear brings about that which one is afraid of, and that hyper-intention makes impossible what one wishes […] In this approach the phobic patient is invited to intend, even if only for a moment, precisely that which he fears.
Frankl discusses the case of a patient who always perspired heavily when public speaking. The solution? Frankl advised the patient to tell the audience directly that he was going to see how much he could sweat. He actually told them he intended to sweat and would see if he could sweat more than last time. The result? His phobia of public speaking (and the sweating) disappeared.

This is one of many such examples. I believe that writers can also use this technique whenever they are suffering from writers block. Simply telling oneself that you will see how bad you can write will suddenly free you from your fear of writing.

**There is a lot to learn from *Man's Search For Meaning*.**

For such a short book, I can barely begin to discuss the effect it has had on my mindset. This article is only just scratching the surface and really does Frankl's work little or no justice. It's a book that everyone must read. I'm rarely prescriptive with what people "should" read but this is one of those rare occasions where I will say you should read this book. You need to read this book.

**You can buy *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl here.**

All quotes are taken from *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, translated by Ilse Lasch, and published by Beacon Press, Boston (2006).

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Anonymous says  
July 8, 2017 at 11:15 am

Mcevoy, you have wonderfully summed up what we can learn from Frankl's book. I finished it a week ago. It was truly captivating and inspiring. I am at a point in my life where, I believe, a life full of despair is staring at me. My academic career is going nowhere, I am 31, girlfriend left me 2 years ago because she got bored. In fact, I changed my academic stream just to be with her and now I am stuck. Anyways, what I want to know from you is that do you know any more of such inspirational books? I am not looking for ‘get rich and successful’ kind of books that just say that life is going to be okay one day. I want to read something like Frankl's book that can give a fresh perspective on suffering. Thanks.

Ben McEvoy says  
July 8, 2017 at 11:03 pm

Thank you. I’m sorry to hear about your situation. You have likely already read or heard of the books I would recommend. If you haven’t, these are absolute must-reads and I’m sure will help you:

– How to Stop Worrying and Start Living by Dale Carnegie
– The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle

If you found Frankl's book inspiring, the former should also be appealing. It’s crammed with true life stories of people up against the odds, staring into a pit of despair, and yet prospering. It is filled with applicable advice that I use every single day and the book is phenomenal for beating despair, depression, and anxiety.
The second can help you to eliminate despair by getting you out of your head. I wouldn’t say it’s inspiring because it’s less about filling your mind with wonderful ideas and more about helping you to eliminate negative thought patterns and to silence the negative silent movies of our lives constantly playing in our heads.

These two books are immensely valuable and, if applied (which it sounds like you will do), are life changing.

If you want more after those two, I’d recommend The Denial of Death by Ernest Becker – although that is pretty depressing most of the way through. However, I found it instrumental for completely changing my life path and perspective a few years ago. Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations are also good for daily doses of inspiration and applicable philosophy.

Also, I know you just asked about books but you did mention a few things about your current situation and I hope it’s not an intrusion for me to offer some advice on that – from one guy to another who knows what you’re going through. I know you feel stuck because you’re in the center of the situation right now but maybe a perspective from someone outside your situation would be useful.

If your academic career is going nowhere, you feel stuck, and you changed it just to be with a girl who hasn’t been in your life for 2 years, why are you still there? Is it possible to change it? I know it may not be possible because of finance and social pressures but, in that case, how long do you have left? If it’s a matter of a year, for example, is there any way to power through to the end and become an underdog success story?

I personally had trouble in my last year of Oxford. I was failing across the board. I was depressed. I felt trapped. And the university wanted me to take a year off, then come back. I knew if I took a year off, I would not come back. So I fought extremely hard to overturn their decision to suspend me for a year and I worked my ass off to get my grades up and to graduate so I could move on with my life. Suddenly, overturning everyone’s expectations became my mission. It gave me a purpose and it showed me what I could do. It also filled me with hope for the future because I took control.

The situation with your ex sucks and I totally sympathise. We’ve all been there. It sounds like you’re heart-broken and still suffering from the fallout. But you probably know logically that 2 years is a long time to spend pining over someone who didn’t like you or care about you enough to stay. Again, I’m just guessing, I don’t know your
specific situation, but I’d say you need to bury the memory of her in a far-off place in your mind and move on to better things. There are people out there who will like you for you. You’ve just got to find them. It takes work and it takes rejection and a thick-skin but I’d suggest lining up dates with as many girls as possible. You might not want to but you do need to. Maybe you live in a place where there is stigma about doing something like this (either from religion or just the culture) – if so, do it in secret if your morals allow. If you have access to any online dating sites (not the spammy ones filled with bots and escorts), get yourself on those.

Also – are you meditating? Wim Hof breathing + cold showers work wonders for remedying despair.

Are you working out regularly? We can change our negative mental patterns by simply getting sweaty and making our endorphins pump around our bodies.

It doesn’t surprise me that you feel like a life full of despair is staring at you. Two of the “Big 3” of life are completely out of alignment: your work and your love life. The other piece of the puzzle is health and I’m guessing that if the first two are suffering, your health isn’t in top shape either.

Definitely read those books but really try to apply them. Meditate (or pray) first thing in the morning. Lift weights. Go for runs. Eat vegetables. Meet pretty girls for coffee and have some nice conversations (see where it goes). And either strive to make the best of your academic career or change it completely.

I wish you all the best in the world, my friend. You can beat this situation if you want to. I promise. I know.
WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT TODAY!

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