



MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

by Viktor E. Frankl



Overview

The author was a psychiatrist before being hauled away to a concentration camp. This book (written in 1959) discusses the utter grimness of the situation in excruciating detail. But it also provides a message: the goal for each person's life is to find his or her meaning. Even in the face of extreme suffering, that "meaning" can be one's attitude of bravery towards the situation. He gives an overview of his psychiatric technique of "logotherapy" in which he does not use psychoanalysis, but rather works with his patients to discover a meaning (or "logos") in their lives to cure mental diseases.

PART 1. EXPERIENCES IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP

Inside a camp, there is no time for morality. There is no hesitation to have another prisoner replace you. If one man favored his friends in the camp, nobody judged him; who could truly judge another man's decisions?

Most prisoners first arrived with a small sense of optimism. They naïvely believed that they would be able to keep just a small token from their former lives. But the guards stripped them all down bare, leaving them with nothing, not even their hair. It resulted in an odd, strange curiosity. "Oh, will I die here or not?" Any optimism was quickly stamped out when they were given a total of five ounces of bread over four days.

Former medical doctors quickly realized how much their textbooks lied to them about the limits of the human body (e.g. the lack of sleep one can endure and still stay alive). Man (un)fortunately can adapt to anything. An exhausted man who was previously the lightest of sleepers had no issue sleeping soundly next to someone who snored incessantly.

The first phase is shock. It's during this phase that fear of death is quickly distinguished. The second phase is apathy, or emotional death. Feelings of longing for the outside world or disgust with the current surroundings become quickly jaded after hourly beatings.

One guard playfully threw a stone at the author when he briefly rested on his shovel, signifying how much the guards saw him as nothing more than cattle. It was no longer about the physical pain (which they were all used to), but the indignity and injustice of it all. The mental agony could be worse than the physical. The simple hope that the cook would scoop up two measly peas from the bottom of the vat of soup epitomized the desolateness of the situation. Such detachment was a defense mechanism to dim the harshness of reality.

The prisoners were reduced to a primitive mind, their thoughts mostly craving simple things like a warm bath or a small slice of bread. They would never wake another prisoner from a nightmare, for anything was better than the reality of the present situation. Food was constantly on their minds, and their bodies were treated as corpses in a giant herd of organic mass. To awaken was the worst part of the day, being forced to put on soggy shoes and begin the cruelty of their existence anew. None had the energy for sexual thoughts, even in dreams. Instead, discussions of politics and religion were commonplace amongst the downtrodden. The optimists were the most irritating.

"And we, the sheep, thought of two things only – how to evade the bad dogs, and get a little food."

The power of love was quickly realized. When all was lost, envisioning a beloved could carry one through the most painful of moments. Love doesn't even require proof that the person is alive; the mere image of the beloved can be just as powerful. While the author was envisioning a conversation with his wife, a bird flew down and stared at him in a profound moment. The outer life was so bleak that the prisoners' inner life was intensified, escaping into memories of the past.

Suffering, it turns out, is like pumping gas into a box. It is not concentrated, but rather any small amount of it quickly infects every facet of life, just as gas equally distributes to its surrounding container. The prisoners



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