

Summary of Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl

SUPER-MEANING—It's not what *you* expect from life; it's what *life* expects from you:

“As each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. **Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for his own life*; to life he can only respond by being responsible.** Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.”

- “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 fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.** “
- “This **ultimate meaning necessarily exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man**; in logotherapy, we speak in this context of a **super-meaning**. What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to **bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms. *Logos* is deeper than logic.** “
- “Isn't it the same with life? Doesn't the final meaning of life, too, reveal itself, if at all, only at its end, on the verge of death? And **doesn't this final meaning, too, depend on whether or not the potential meaning of each single situation has been actualized to the best of the respective individual's knowledge and belief?**“

TRANSCENDENCE—Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence:

“By declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that **the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche**, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic ‘**the self-transcendence of human existence.**’ It denotes the fact that **being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.** What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, **self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.**”

- “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**

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transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere **I heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose.** At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. '*Et lux in tenebris lucet*'—and the light shineth in the darkness."

FATE—Accept fate, take fate into your own hands, or both?

"The man who experiences his way of being merely as something totally provisional is no longer taking his life quite seriously. So he is at risk of a kind of life in which he does not actualize the possibilities that are offered to him, but rather he forfeits them: he lets them pass him by. He constantly waits for something, without doing his part to make it happen. **He becomes fatalistic.** Instead of acting from the consciousness of a responsibility, he has the point of view that he should let things go, *laissez aller*, and let other people do as they please—*laissez faire*. **He changes from a human subject into a mere object**—an object of circumstances, of current conditions, of the moment in history. **But he overlooks the fact that in history nothing has already been done—rather, everything is to be done. He overlooks the extent to which current conditions depend on him, the fact that they are creatively *shapeable*; he forgets that he bears a share of the responsibility.**" (1946 essay)

- "The camp inmate was frightened of making decisions and of taking any sort of initiative whatsoever. This was the result of a **strong feeling that fate was one's master**, and that one must not try to influence it in any way, but instead let it take its own course. In addition, there was a great apathy, which contributed in no small part to the feelings of the prisoner. At times, lightning decisions had to be made, decisions which spelled life or death. **The prisoner would have preferred to let fate make the choice for him.**"
- "The unpleasant feeling that had gripped me as soon as I had told my friend I would escape with him became more intense. Suddenly **I decided to take fate into my own hands for once.** I ran out of the hut and told my friend that I could not go with him. As soon as I had told him with finality that I had made up my mind to stay with my patients, the unhappy feeling left me. I did not know what the following days would bring, but **I had gained an inward peace that I had never experienced before.**"
- "Many weeks later we found out that even in those last hours fate had toyed with us few remaining prisoners. **We found out just how uncertain human decisions are, especially in matters of life and death.** I was confronted with photographs which had been taken in a small camp not far from ours. Our friends who had thought they were traveling to freedom that night had been taken in the trucks to this camp, and there they were locked in the huts and burned to death."

SPIRITUALITY—Those with a rich intellectual life could retreat to inner riches and spiritual freedom (and often survive better):

"In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, **it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain** (they were often of a delicate constitution), **but the damage to their inner selves was less.** They were able to **retreat from their terrible**

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surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature.”

- “As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also **experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before.** Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that factor or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature’s beauty, which we had missed for so long... Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, ‘**How beautiful the world *could* be!**’”
- “This **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. His nostalgic memory glorified them and they assumed a strange character. Their world and their existence seemed very distant and the spirit reached out for them longingly: 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.”

LOVE—Love finds its deepest meaning in the inner, spiritual being. Love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. The salvation of man is through love and in love.

“A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. **The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.** Then 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 honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, ‘**The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.**’”

- “My mind still clung to the image of my wife. A thought crossed my mind: I didn’t even know if she were still alive. I knew only one thing—which I have learned well by now: **Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self.** Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.”
- “**Human kindness can be found in all groups,** even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn.”

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HAPPINESS & PLEASURE—These cannot be pursued; they must ensue as side-effects or by-products:

“Don’t aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had *forgotten* to think of it.”

- **“Pleasure is, and must remain, a side-effect or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself.”**
- **“To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to ‘be happy.’ But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to ‘be happy.’ Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically. As we see, a human being is not one in pursuit of happiness but rather in search of a reason to become happy, last but not least, through actualizing the potential meaning inherent and dormant in a given situation.”**
- **“Once an individual’s search for a meaning is successful, it not only renders him happy but also gives him the capability to cope with suffering.”**

SEARCH FOR MEANING—The primary motivation in life:

“Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are ‘nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations.’ But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my ‘defense mechanisms,’ nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my ‘reaction formations.’ Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values!”

- **“To be sure, man’s search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium. However, precisely such tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health. There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life. There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.’ I can see in these words a motto which holds true for any psychotherapy. In the Nazi concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive.”**
- **“Thus it can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-**

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being. We should not, then, be hesitant about challenging man with a potential meaning for him to fulfill. It is only thus that we evoke his will to meaning from its state of latency. I consider it a dangerous misconception of mental hygiene to assume that what man needs in the first place is equilibrium or, as it is called in biology, 'homeostasis,' i.e., a tensionless state. **What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.** What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. **What man needs is not homeostasis but what I call 'noö-dynamics,' i.e., 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.**"

FINDING MEANING—3 ways (*creating work/deed, experiencing something/someone, attitude in suffering*):

"Thus far we have shown that **the meaning of life always changes, but that it never ceases to be.** According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: **(1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.** The first, the way of achievement or accomplishment, is quite obvious. The second and third need further elaboration. The second way of finding a meaning in life is by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth and beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him... We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. **When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves.**"

- "As logotherapy teaches, there are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed. The second is by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love. Edith Weisskopf-Joelson observed in this context that the logotherapeutic 'notion that experiencing can be as valuable as achieving is therapeutic because it compensates for our one-sided emphasis on the external world of achievement at the expense of the internal world of experience.' **Most important, however, is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.**"
- "And how does a human being go about *finding* meaning? As Charlotte Bühler has stated: **'All we can do is study the lives of people who seem to have found their answers to the questions of what ultimately human life is about as against those who have not.'** In addition to such a biographical approach, however, we may as well embark on a biological approach. Logotherapy conceives of conscience as a prompter which, if need be, indicates the direction in which we have to move in a given life situation. In order to carry out such a task, conscience must apply a measuring stick to the situation

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one is confronted with, and this situation has to be evaluated in the light of a set of criteria, in the light of a hierarchy of values. **These values, however, cannot be espoused and adopted by us on a conscious level—they are something that we are.** They have crystallized in the course of the evolution of our species; they are founded on our biological past and are rooted in our biological depth.”

SELF-DETERMINING—Meaning in each moment:

“Man is *not* fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self-determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment. By the same token, **every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.”**

- **“For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.”**
- **“A human being is not one thing among others; *things* determine each other, but *man* is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes—within the limits of endowment and environment—he has made out of himself.** In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. **Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.”**
- **“These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way.** Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. ‘Life’ does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form **man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual.** No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response. **Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross.** Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.”
- **“Thus, the transitoriness of our existence in no way makes it meaningless. But it does constitute our responsibility; for everything hinges upon our realizing the essentially transitory possibilities. Man constantly makes his choice concerning the mass of present potentialities; which of these will be condemned to nonbeing and which will be actualized? Which choice will be made an actuality once and forever, an immortal ‘footprint in the sands of time’? At any moment, man must decide, for better or for worse, what will be the monument of his existence.”**
- **“The opportunities to act properly, the potentialities to fulfill a meaning, are affected by the irreversibility of our lives. But also the potentialities alone are so affected. For as**

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soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited."

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY—Meaning is unique:

"One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it."

- "This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. **When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how.'**"
- "It is, therefore, up to the patient to decide whether he should interpret his life task as being responsible to society or to his own conscience."
- "Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why *I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.*"

CHOICE OF ATTITUDE—The last of the human freedoms:

"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 the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.**"

- "Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that **the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone.** Fundamentally, therefore, **any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.** He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Dostoevski said once, 'There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.' These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that **the last inner freedom cannot be lost.** It can be said that they

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were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. **It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.** “

- “And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.”
- **“To be sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions.”**

CHOICE OF ACTION—The choice is yours alone:

“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.”

- “On my fourth day in the sick quarters I had just been detailed to the night shift when the chief doctor rushed in and asked me to volunteer for medical duties in another camp containing typhus patients. Against the urgent advice of my friends (and despite the fact that almost none of my colleagues offered their services), I decided to volunteer. I knew that in a working party I would die in a short time. But if I had to die there might at least be some sense in my death. **I thought that it would doubtless be more to the purpose to try and help my comrades as a doctor than to vegetate or finally lose my life as the unproductive laborer that I was then.**“
- “My only consolation lies in the fact that **I can say in all good conscience, that I realized the opportunities that presented themselves to me, I mean to say: that I turned them into reality.**” (1945 letter)

FUTURE—Something to aim/hope for:

“Any attempt at fighting the camp's psychopathological influence on the prisoner by psychotherapeutic or psychohygienic methods had to **aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out to him a future goal to which he could look forward.** Instinctively some of the prisoners attempted to find one on their own. **It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future—*sub specie aeternitatis*.** And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task.”

- “Any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in **showing him some future goal.** 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 psychohygienic 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.”

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- “I remember two cases of would-be suicide, which bore a striking similarity to each other. Both men had talked of their intentions to commit suicide. Both used the typical argument—they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of **getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them.** We found, in fact, that for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child's affections.”
- “I speculated that for most of them these losses had really been few. **Whoever was still alive had reason for hope. Health, family, happiness, professional abilities, fortune, position in society all these were things that could be achieved again or restored.** After all, we still had all our bones intact. Whatever we had gone through could still be an asset to us in the future. And I quoted from Nietzsche: *‘Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker.’* (**That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.**)”

LOGOTHERAPY—Frankl's theory:

“Let me explain why I have employed the term ‘logotherapy’ as the name for my theory. **Logos is a Greek word which denotes ‘meaning.’** Logotherapy, or, as it has been called by some authors, ‘The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy,’ **focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning.** According to logotherapy, this **striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man.**”

- “**Logotherapy focuses rather on the future**, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future. (Logotherapy, indeed, is a **meaning-centered psychotherapy.**)”
- “Logotherapy regards its assignment as that of **assisting the patient to find meaning in his life.** Inasmuch as logotherapy **makes him aware of the hidden logos of his existence,** it is an analytical process. To this extent, logotherapy resembles psychoanalysis. However, in logotherapy's attempt to make something conscious again it does not restrict its activity to *instinctual* facts within the individual's unconscious but also cares for *existential* realities, such as the potential meaning of his existence to be fulfilled as well as his *will* to meaning. Any analysis, however, even when it refrains from including the noölogical dimension in its therapeutic process, **tries to make the patient aware of what he actually longs for in the depth of his being.** Logotherapy deviates from psychoanalysis insofar as it considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts, or in merely reconciling the conflicting claims of id, ego and superego, or in the mere adaptation and adjustment to society and environment.”
- “The logotherapist's role consists of widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him.”
- “Logotherapy **tries to make the patient fully aware of his own responsibility; therefore, it must leave to him the option for what, to what, or to whom he understands himself to be responsible.**”

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- “This emphasis on responsibility is reflected in the categorical imperative of logotherapy, which is: **‘Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!’** It seems to me that there is nothing which would stimulate a man's sense of responsibility more than this maxim, which invites him to imagine first that the present is past and, second, that the past 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.**”

TRAGIC OPTIMISM—Human potential in the face of tragedy:

“In brief it means that one is, and remains, **optimistic in spite of the ‘tragic triad,’** as it is called in logotherapy, a triad which consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: **(1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death.** This chapter, in fact, raises the question, How is it possible to say yes to life in spite of all that? How, to pose the question differently, can life retain its potential meaning in spite of its tragic aspects? After all, saying yes to life in spite of aspects into something positive or constructive. In other words, what matters is to make the best of any given situation. ‘The best,’ however, is that which in Latin is called *optimum*—hence the reason I speak of a tragic optimism, that is, an **optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.**”

- “The third aspect of the tragic triad concerns death. But it concerns life as well, for **at any time each of the moments of which life consists is dying, and that moment will never recur.** And yet is not this transitoriness a reminder that challenges us to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives? It certainly is, and hence my imperative: *Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now.*”

HUMANITY'S REALITY—We know what man is capable of, and what is at stake:

“So, let us be alert—alert in a twofold sense: Since Auschwitz we know **what man is capable of.** And since Hiroshima **we know what is at stake.**”

- “Our generation is realistic, for **we have come to know man as he really is.** After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.”

WHAT THEN IS MAN?

“*What then is man?* We have come to know him as perhaps no generation before us has; we have come to know him in the camp—in the camp where everything nonessential to a man was melted away, where everything that one had possessed simply ceased to exist: money, power,

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reputation, happiness; what remained was the man himself—seared by pain and heated red-hot by suffering, **he was smelted into the essential in him, into the human.**” (1949 speech)

- **“What then is man?** Thus we ask the question again. **He is a being that always decides what it is.** A being that has **within it at one and the same time the possibility of sinking to the level of an animal or of soaring to a life of near-holiness.** Man is that being which invented the gas chambers; but he is at the same time that being which walked with head held high into these very same gas chambers, the Lord’s Prayer or the Jewish prayer for the dead on his lips.” (1949 speech)
- **“That then is man.** And now we know the answer to the question that we posed at the beginning: What is man, *that we remember him?* ‘He is a reed,’ Pascal said, ‘but a thinking reed!’ And **this thinking, this consciousness, this responsibility—it constitutes the dignity of man, the dignity of every single man. And it is always and entirely up to the individual man whether he tramples this dignity underfoot—or whether he preserves it.** Just as the one constitutes the personal honor of a man—so the other is his personal guilt. And there is only *personal guilt!* The talk should never be of collective guilt! Certainly, there is also the personal guilt of a man who ‘did nothing’ but who neglected to do such things out of fear for himself or out of trembling trepidation for his relatives. But whosoever would reproach such a man for being a ‘coward’ should first provide proof that he himself, in the same situation, would have been a hero.” (1949 speech)

MEANING IN SUFFERING—Life never ceases to have a meaning, even in suffering:

“In some way, **suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning,** such as the meaning of a sacrifice.”

- **“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.”
- **“When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.** For us, as prisoners, these thoughts were not speculations far removed from reality. They were the only thoughts that could be of help to us. They kept us from despair, even when there seemed to be no chance of coming out of it alive. Long ago we had passed the stage of asking what was the meaning of life, a naive query which understands life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something of value. **For us, the meaning of life embraced the wider cycles of life and death, of suffering and of dying.**“
- **“The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living.** Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent. To draw an analogy: a man’s suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus **suffering completely fills the human soul**

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and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the **“size” of human suffering is absolutely relative.**“

- “An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment 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 a 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.**“
- “**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.”

EXISTENTIAL FRUSTRATION—Existential distress is not a mental disease; it requires navigation *through* it to grow:

“Man's will to meaning can also be frustrated, in which case logotherapy speaks of ‘**existential frustration.**’ The term ‘existential’ may be used in three ways: to refer to (1) *existence* itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the *meaning* of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the *will* to meaning.”

- “Existential frustration is in itself neither pathological nor pathogenic. **A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an *existential distress* but by no means a *mental disease*.** It may well be that interpreting the first in terms of the latter motivates a doctor to bury his patient's existential despair under a heap of tranquilizing drugs. **It is his task, rather, to pilot the patient through his existential crises of growth and development.**“

EXISTENTIAL VACUUM—A widespread phenomenon of modern life:

“Having shown the beneficial impact of meaning orientation, I turn to the detrimental influence of that **feeling of which so many patients complain today, namely, the feeling of the total and ultimate meaninglessness of their lives. They lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for.** They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the ‘**existential vacuum.**’“

- “**The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century.** This is understandable; it may be due to a twofold loss which man has had to undergo since he became a truly human being. At the beginning of human history, man lost some of the

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basic animal instincts in which an animal's behavior is imbedded and by which it is secured. Such security, like Paradise, is closed to man forever; **man has to make choices**. In addition to this, however, man has suffered another loss in his more recent development inasmuch as the traditions which buttressed his behavior are now rapidly diminishing. **No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism).**"

- "A statistical survey recently revealed that among my European students, 25 percent showed a more-or-less marked degree of existential vacuum. **Among my American students it was not 25 but 60 percent.**"
- "The existential vacuum **manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom**. Now we can understand Schopenhauer when he said that **mankind was apparently doomed to vacillate eternally between the two extremes of distress and boredom**. In actual fact, boredom is now causing, and certainly bringing to psychiatrists, more problems to solve than distress. And these problems are growing increasingly crucial, for **progressive automation will probably lead to an enormous increase in the leisure hours available to the average worker. The pity of it is that many of these will not know what to do with all their newly acquired free time.**"
- "**As to the causation of the feeling of meaninglessness**, one may say, albeit in an oversimplifying vein, that **people have enough to live by but nothing to live for; they have the means but no meaning**. To be sure, some do not even have the means. In particular, I think of the mass of people who are today unemployed. Fifty years ago, I published a study devoted to a specific type of depression I had diagnosed in cases of young patients suffering from what I called 'unemployment neurosis.' And I could show that this neurosis really originated in a twofold erroneous identification: **being jobless was equated with being useless, and being useless was equated with having a meaningless life**. Consequently, whenever I succeeded in persuading the patients to volunteer in youth organizations, adult education, public libraries and the like—in other words, as soon as they could fill their abundant free time with some sort of unpaid but meaningful activity—their depression disappeared although their economic situation had not changed and their hunger was the same. **The truth is that man does not live by welfare alone.**"

MENTAL STATE—The negative impact of lack of hope on physical health:

"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**. The ultimate cause of my friend's death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his body's resistance against the latent typhus infection. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body fell victim to illness—and thus the voice of his dream was right after all."

- "The prisoner who had 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

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subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment—not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our friends.”

- “He talked about the many comrades who had died in the last few days, either of sickness or of suicide. But he also mentioned what may have been **the real reason for their deaths: giving up hope**. He maintained that there should be some way of preventing possible future victims from reaching this extreme state.”
- “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?”

PERSONAL GUILT—The only kind of guilt:

“Guilt can only be personal guilt—guilt for what one has done oneself or even not done, neglected to do. But even then we must have some understanding of the fears of those concerned—fear for their freedom, even their lives, and not least fear for the fate of their families. Certainly, there have been those that have nonetheless preferred to let themselves be put in a concentration camp, rather than be unfaithful to their convictions. But actually **one may only demand heroism of one person, and that person is oneself.**” (1985 speech)

- “I must ask you to expect no words of hatred from me. Whom should I hate? I know only the victims, not the perpetrators, at least I do not know them personally—and **I refuse to call people collectively guilty**. There is no collective guilt, it does not exist, and I say this not only today, but I’ve said so from day one when I was liberated from my last concentration camp—and at that time it was definitely not a way to make oneself popular to dare publicly to oppose the idea of collective guilt.” (1988 speech)
- **“In my opinion one may demand heroism only of a single person and that is ... oneself!”** (1988 speech)

THE GOOD ARE IN THE MINORITY:

“Do not think that these considerations are unworldly and too far removed from real life. **It is true that only a few people are capable of reaching such high moral standards.** Of the prisoners only a few kept their full inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even one such example is sufficient proof that man’s inner strength may raise him above his outward fate. Such men are not only in concentration camps. **Everywhere man is confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through his own suffering.**”

- “And if you point out to me that there was in fact so little goodness, then I can only answer with the words of another great Jewish thinker, namely the philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza, whose main work, *Ethics*, concludes with the words: *sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia, quam rara sunt*. **Everything that is great is as rare to find as it is difficult to do.** In fact, **I myself believe that decent people are in the minority, have always been and always will be.** But that’s nothing new.” (1985 speech)

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- **“That decent people are in the minority, that they have always been a minority and are likely to remain so is something we must come to terms with.** Danger only threatens when a political system sends those not-decent people, i.e., the negative element of a nation, to the top. And no nation is immune from doing this, and in this respect every nation is in principle capable of a Holocaust!” (1988 speech)

“One day, a few days after the liberation, I walked through the country past flowering meadows, for miles and miles, toward the market town near the camp. Larks rose to the sky and I could hear their joyous song. There was no one to be seen for miles around; there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the larks’ jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped, looked around, and up to the sky—and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world—I had but one sentence in mind—always the same: ‘I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.’ How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started. Step for step I progressed, until I again became a human being.”