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Man's Search for Meaning

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29 Highlights

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Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. At one point, Frankl writes that a person “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.”

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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.

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

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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.

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But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer. Only very few realized that.

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Shamefacedly some confessed occasionally that they had wept, like the comrade who answered my question of how he had gotten over his edema, by confessing, “I have wept it out of my system.”

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“Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker.” (That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.)

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“Was Du erlebst, kann keine Macht der Welt Dir rauben.” (What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you.)

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Not only our experiences, but all we have done, whatever great thoughts we may have had, and all we have suffered, all this is not lost, though it is past; we have brought it into being. Having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind.

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Obviously the prisoners found the lack of character in such men especially upsetting, while they were profoundly moved by the smallest kindness received from any of the guards. I remember how one day a foreman secretly gave me a piece of bread which I knew he must have saved from his breakfast ration. It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at that time. It was the human “something” which this man also gave to me—the word and look which accompanied the gift.

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Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings, reaches into the lowest depths and becomes apparent even on the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp.

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Only slowly could these men be guided back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them.

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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.) At the same time, logotherapy defocuses all

the vicious-circle formations and feedback mechanisms which play such a great role in the development of neuroses. Thus, the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic is broken up instead of being continually fostered and reinforced.

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Not every conflict is necessarily neurotic; some amount of conflict is normal and healthy. In a similar sense suffering is not always a pathological phenomenon; rather than being a symptom of neurosis, suffering may well be a human achievement, especially if the suffering grows out of existential frustration.

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There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

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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-being. We

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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.

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The existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom.

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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. To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed to a chess champion: "Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?" There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one's opponent. The same holds for human existence. 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.

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Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated.

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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.

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“Why do we speak of the good Lord?” Whereupon I said, “Some weeks ago, you were suffering from measles, and then the good Lord sent you full recovery.” However, the little girl was not content; she retorted, “Well, but please, Daddy, do not forget: in the first place, he had sent me the measles.”

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Logotherapy, keeping in mind the essential transitoriness of human existence, is not pessimistic but rather activist. To express this point figuratively we might say: The pessimist resembles a man who observes with fear and sadness that his wall calendar, from which he daily tears a sheet, grows thinner with each passing day. On the other hand, the person who attacks the problems of life actively is like a man who removes each successive leaf from his calendar and files it neatly and carefully away with its predecessors, after first having jotted down a few diary notes on the back. He

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This need for a reason is similar in another specifically human phenomenon—laughter. If you want anyone to laugh you have to provide him with a reason, e.g., you have to tell him a joke. In no way is it possible to evoke real laughter by urging him, or having him urge himself, to laugh. Doing so would be the same as urging people posed in front of a camera to say “cheese,” only to find that in the finished photographs their faces are frozen in artificial smiles.

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The perception of meaning differs from the classical concept of Gestalt perception insofar as the latter implies the sudden awareness of a “figure” on a “ground,” whereas the perception of meaning, as I see it, more specifically boils down to becoming aware of a possibility against the background of reality or, to express it in plain words, to becoming aware of what can be done about a given situation.

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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.”

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“How can you still write some of your books in German, Adolf Hitler’s language?” In response, I asked her if she had knives in her kitchen, and when she answered that she did, I acted dismayed and shocked, exclaiming, “How can you still use knives after so many killers have used them to stab and murder their victims?”

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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.

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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.
