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reflection

Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl

Jeremy Holmes

Contra Brecht, happy the age that has its heroes. Your author's psychiatric pantheon includes Pinel, Tuke, Freud, Meyer, Schneider, Jaspers, Menninger, Lewis, Bowlby, Laing, Lambo; the living await the verdict of history. But alongside intellectual and organisational greatness, a species of fame comes from adversity overcome, a life lived well, from unimpeachable integrity and moral courage. Gandhi, Mandela, Ahkmatova – and the psychiatrist Victor Frankl – come immediately to mind.

Frankl survived 3 years in Auschwitz and Dachau, entering the camps clutching a half-completed manuscript which contained the seeds of his famous 'third Viennese school of psychology'. Logotherapy's Schopenhauerian guiding philosophy is the 'will to meaning', in contrast to Freud's pleasure, and Adler's power principles. Logotherapy can be reframed relationally as connectedness and communication, verbal and non-verbal.

In the camps Frankl found practical confirmation of his precepts. Man can live, even without bread alone, if he has a framework of meaning to sustain him and give him hope, whether this be religious or political. Suffering is inescapable; to the extent one can accept suffering as 'an ineradicable part of life, even as fate or death', one is buttressed against adversity. Even in the worst of situations, man is always free to choose his perspective. There is no overall 'meaning of life', only specific meanings in particular situations. Our choices represent 'footprints in the sands of time' – so choose wisely, as though living life for the second time, and 'had acted as wrongly the first time as you about to act now'. Clarity is all: 'emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it'.

For all its best-seller status, *Man's Search for Meaning* is something of a hodge-podge, consisting of three unrelated essays, the first the compelling story of Frankl's incarceration, the second a brief account of logotherapy, the third a statement of his guiding philosophy, 'the search for "tragic optimism"'. Re-reading it 40 years on was not easy – its upbeat message notwithstanding, man's inhumanity to man feels even more unbearable now than in mortality-denying youth. An interesting aspect is that here psychotherapy saved not the patient's life, but the therapist's; for a while Frankl was befriended by a troubled 'Capo', patiently listening to this brutal man's domestic troubles, so was protected from the worst jobs which would have meant almost certain death. Another ironic survival factor was Frankl's determination to accept whatever fate dealt him, and to stick by those who depended on him – his parents during the Anschluss, and his cholera patients in the camps – rather than pursue illusory dreams and escape plans. Thus, this founder of 'existential therapy' found a way to trust life, and accept the reality of death, even in extreme circumstances. His survival story is one which every psychiatrist should read, not just as a vivid window into the supreme horror of the 20th century, but as a parable for the transcendence of, and recovery from, the worst of human cruelty and destructiveness.

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