

# Man's search for meaning assignment



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Critical Analysis of Man's Search For Meaning by Viktor Frankl  
Man's Search For Meaning is a book documenting the experiences of an Austrian psychotherapist named Viktor Frankl who had his life completely turned upside down one day when he was dragged off to a concentration camp during World War II. Frankl, as a young man, showed early interest in psychology, and eventually went to medical school to study neuroscience and psychology. He ended up being extremely successful at counseling patients who were suicidal.

He was a practicing doctor up until he was sent to Auschwitz, even in the small grotto similar to ones many of the Jews were sent to before being sent to concentration camps. Later, while in Auschwitz, to give himself a sense of purpose, he observed his fellow prisoners and their individual experiences. Once returning home after being freed, he developed an entirely new method of therapy called Logotherapy. He wrote A Man's Search For Meaning in order to explain how the theory came about as well as to add a different perspective to the many books being written about the reality of the Nazi concentration camps.

It is a difficult task to summarize Frankl's experiences, because many of them are non-chronological narratives not about him, but about his fellow prisoners. For that reason this paper will examine a central theme present in the book: the three psychological stages Frankl claims each prisoner and the view of God, humanity, and the world that is characteristic of each stage. The first stage explained in the book is when the prisoner is first brought into the camp. This stage is characterized by shock (22).

The prisoner does not fully realize the magnitude of being in a concentration camp and experiences "delusion of reprieve," a phenomenon where the prisoner thinks that maybe at the last minute they may be freed (23). The prisoners at this point are holding onto hope that they have not found themselves in such dire straits and they still hold onto life as a free person. Frankl shares a personal example where he, in an effort to save the manuscript of the book he had been writing, asked an old prisoner to keep it for him, only to get the reply of "Shit! (27) That is when the realization hits him that there is no hope of holding onto his previous life. At this point in their Journey, not many of the prisoners' views have been shaken. Their tight grasp on the idea that everything will be okay yet, leaves them with whatever views they had previously. Although Frankl does not discuss it, there must be also a large amount of faith in God that He will deliver them from the camps. Considering most, if not all of the prisoners of the concentration camps were Jewish, who have a sometimes militant interpretation of God, the theory that they believed God would save them is not far-fetched.

Also, one can assume that the prisoner could also have a sliver of belief in humanity. The idea that one human being could treat another human being with such cruelty as to send them all off to camps where they are almost surely to die, is hard to believe, mostly because there is a general faith in humanity present in most people. The first stage, shock upon arrival, is certainly a valid interpretation of the general phenomenon of humans placed in new situations. It is observable everywhere. Yes, it can be seen in extreme ways in the life of a loved one, or some other major upheaval in their life.

It seems to be an inherent part of the human condition that we take some time to adjust to anything that is new, much less something that is new and traumatic. It is also valid to believe that within those circumstances people retreat into deluding themselves into thinking that everything is going to be okay. They let themselves hope because if nothing else, that is a comfort. The same principle applies to believing that God will deliver. The second stage is when the prisoner becomes apathetic once they've adjusted to every day prison life. They become almost dead inside, and have no emotions toward anything.

Frankl offers several examples of things that stop affecting a reaction from the prisoners such as the sight of dead bodies, or the abuse of their fellow inmates by the guards. This stage is the one most detailed in the book, because this is where Frankl delves into the need for every person to find his or her meaning. The search for meaning is a way to effectively deal with the apathy stage. Frankl states several times that without a meaning or a reason to live, the prisoner will lose all will to live and will succumb to something that their body had been keeping at bay while they still had the will to fight for their life.

One particular example of this stuck out. Frankl met a man in the camp who had had a dream in which someone came to him and said, ask me anything and I will answer you. The man asked when he would be freed from the concentration camp. The person in the dream replied to him " March 30th. " March 30th came and went and they had not been freed. The man died on March 31st (83). That prisoner had so much hope that what he had heard in his dream was true, that as soon as he discovered that it was not the truth,

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his body succumbed to disease. He became so apathetic that he no longer cared whether he lived or died, and so he died.

Another powerful example Frankl uses to make his point is that the death rate increased on the camp between Christmas and New Years unlike anything they had ever experienced. One of the camp's doctors was sure that the reason for that is that a lot of the prisoners were hoping they would be home by Christmas, and when that didn't happen, they lost all hope and will to live. Frankl spent time working with some of his fellow prisoners making sure they had something, anything to live for. The prisoners in the apathy stage have a unique view in the world in that they're particularly numb. They actually don't see.

This blindness can be a blessing as well as a curse. The horrors that the prisoners were experiencing every day were of such a magnitude that one can almost take solace in the idea that the prisoners at some point simply stopped seeing it. However, no matter how bad something gets, there is always something good. In a state of apathy not only does nothing upset you, nothing excites you. There is no emotion, and missing out on the positive emotions you could be feeling in order to avoid negative ones is somewhat of a high price to pay. The prisoners at this stage also have a unique view of God.

Some of the prisoners, Frankl observed, equate the experience in the camp to a sacrifice. One man, he says, ". made a pact with Heaven that his suffering should save the human being he loved from a painful end. " (91). Prisoners like this man were mature in their faith. And then there is another

group of people who have lost faith completely. Those who have lost their faith were struggling to find their source of meaning and were therefore struggling harder to find that will to live. The final stage is the prisoner after he is describes it was "... unreal, unlikely, as in a dream. 95) Frankl even says at one point that he had to work, step by step, to once again become a human being. The camp life so effectively altered the psyche that the adjustment to non-camp life was a difficult, rather than enjoyable, experience. He says that it is naive to think that the freed prisoners do not need any support. It is a huge adjustment. At this stage, the prisoners' views of humanity, and the world must be extremely disorganized. It had to be so difficult to reconcile what you knew happened in that camp and hearing that people outside didn't even know what was going on.

Also, you are grateful that the oldiers who came in and saved you did, but the German soldiers were so cruel. Their views of God, however, I assume were much surer. The last line of Frankl's recollection of his experiences in the camps says, " The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling tht, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he needed to fear anymore -except his God. " (100) Now of the question do I think the book is useful? Yes. I do. This book, though it seems at first glance to simply be another book written about the holocaust, it is not. It is remarkable that Viktor

Frankl, while in the concentration camps, conducted a psychological study. His mind was so finely attuned to observe the patterns, and even find a way to resolve the issue as a whole. The back of the book hold his theory of Logotherapy, which is to find a meaning in your life to work towards, that

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stemmed out of his study of his fellow prisoners. I had never read a book about the Holocaust from a psychological point of view. Truly, it was fascinating. One of my favorite parts of the book was not in the narrative, but actually in his explanation of Logotherapy under the heading "The Meaning of Life.

He says, "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 his life cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated." (113) For me, and my ongoing fascination with all things psychological, this quote is so profound. Not only does he reassure us that the meaning of life isn't some sort of philosophical hard-to-understand theory. Rather, it is your own individual journey and where you want to end up, and who is important to you. That is the meaning of YOUR life.

Whatever gives you purpose is truly what is important. This idea is so comforting, because even though I do not find myself in life or death situations very often, I do have my daily struggles when I ask myself if it's all worth it. It is so easy to say no, it's not worth it, and quit living. But it is so much more fulfilling to take a moment, think about who is in your life who matters to you and what is in your life that's important to you, and go, "That's why." because without a meaning, there is no will to live. Turns out everybody can find that will to live if they look inside themselves.