

# Finding Meaning in Suffering, Work and Love: A Psychological Study of Viktor.E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*

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## **Abstract**

*Holocaust literature that emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has portrayed the horrifying events of the concentration camps during the reign of Hitler. The bleakest events of the Nazi regime have been documented by the survivors of the holocaust in different genres. Viktor. E. Frankl, the founder of the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, was a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp. His autobiography Man's Search for Meaning gives an account of his survival at the Auschwitz concentration camp. The present paper focuses on how the author withheld his hope even in the darkest of times. Furthermore, this research throws light on his logotherapy-finding meaning in suffering, pain, and love. This paper aims to study how hope helps people to find meaning and purpose in their life.*

**Keywords:** holocaust, logotherapy, hope, meaning and purpose in life.

## **Introduction**

Literature flourished in various genres, labelled as poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction, mythology, cultural studies, et al. One genre led to the other with a parallel flourishing of literary criticism and theories. Writers wrote on miscellaneous themes like family, love, nature, realism, mysticism, which metamorphosed according to the age in which they lived. There is a humungous increase in the evolution of different sorts of literature in the present day, amongst which Holocaust literature stands out to be a budding genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, tracing the history of genocide and the horrifying events of the concentration camps.

Holocaust emerged as a part of literature which was defined not through the structure but solely through its subject matter; the bleakest events and the destruction of the Jews by the Europeans, especially between 1942 and 1945. Holocaust literature flourished as a genre after the second world in the form of diaries and memoirs written by the survivors of the holocaust. Holocaust has been represented in 'n' number of fields in popular culture namely, dance, films, music, role-playing game, theatre, visual arts etc. The Holocaust has also been portrayed in a substantial body of literature. These works describe the horrifying events of the concentration camps during the Nazi regime, mainly the horrors of Auschwitz. Most of these works are documentation by the Holocaust survivors, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, fiction and

non-fiction. They are mostly written in first person which intensifies the work and it also doesn't require any aesthetic and artistic ornamentation.

One of the notable survivors of this darkest era in the human history was the Austrian psychologist Viktor E. Frankl. He was born on 26<sup>th</sup> march 1905 in Vienna into a Jewish family of civil servants. He had an interest in psychology at a very early age and became a professor of neurology and psychiatry at the university of Vienna Medical School until his death. He was the founder of what has come to be called the Third Viennese school of Psychotherapy (after Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology)- the school of logotherapy.

## **Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy**

His logotherapy gives the idea of what is called existentialism. Existentialism, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is defined as "a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will". The term existentialism owes its existence to Gabriel Marcel, a French philosopher, who popularized the existential thought in his lecture and later published in the book *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Existentialism is a Humanism). Existential therapy focuses mainly on making the clients to view the pattern of life and choose a route in

that pattern, which would give them ultimate meaning and value of life. Thus, the client's views on hopeless living or the sickness of life is eradicated gradually and shifts from an awkward living to that of a meaningful living, through the process of discovering meaning in their own way. It arose as an attempt to help the people to overcome or resolve the uncertainties of the contemporary life such as alienation, chaos, meaninglessness, loss of hope, sequestered life, etc.

His therapy mainly aimed at withholding hope at almost every situation like pain, desolation, love, work, suffering and also challenges the people to find the purpose and meaning through these situations. He developed the tool of making meaning as a strategy for survival in the concentration camps in the reign of the Nazi regime during the World War II.

#### **Finding Meaning in Suffering, Love and Work**

Viktor Frankl was a prisoner from 1942-1945 in the Auschwitz concentration camp along with his parents, siblings and wife who were gassed to death. Miraculously he survived the deadly horrors of Auschwitz. He developed his philosophy from the tragic experiences he faced in the concentration camp. He experienced, observed and personally realized the truths of the existential psychotherapists and philosophers. Through his experiences in the concentration camps, the idea of availability of choices in such a dreadful situation as held by the existentialists was confirmed. This book also portrays how he survived at all, despite the harsh realities laid upon him and his fellow prisoners.

Suffering is inevitable and one cannot escape from it at any cost. Frankl insists that meaning can be ensued even in suffering and gives personal instances to support his view. The inmates were given only a five-ounce piece of bread in four days. It is unimaginable to think that the author and the fellow captives engaged themselves in manual work, who were treated worse than slaves despite lack of good nutrition. Here, logotherapy suggest that if one cannot transform a situation, one has to think of something else. In the concentration camp, suffering is inevitable and thus, the author and others accept this challenge by keeping curiosity and apathy as their protective shell.

The prisoners were whipped in leather belt and were shaved from top to bottom, only portraying their naked body. Though all of their belongings were taken away by the SS men, they couldn't rob off their naked existence. Logotherapy emphasizes on this will to respond to the situation, to show that one is never left with nothing. The initial days in the concentration camps brought a havoc in the lives of the captives. For instance, they were made to stand naked in the open air, during the chill autumn for hours. Curiosity made them to withstand the harsh weather and this eventually led to surprise: a surprise that they didn't catch cold.

Another way of turning this tragic situation was by showing apathy. Every day the sufferers got hourly punishments and many captives fell sick and died due to malnourishment and the cold weather. One such event, that the author witnessed was when he spent some of his time in typhus-stricken patient's hut. He saw patients dying one by one. The author watched these with no sensation or emotions. This numb reaction towards such sympathetic content, proved to be one of the reasons to sustain in such horrendous situation. The chance of getting sick by typhoid was very likely to occur in each and everyone in the concentration camps. The deaths of the others would have eventually brought fear in the mind of the author and this gradually leading to his own death. But apathy kept the author away from such death-fearing events. The author says in his logotherapy that, "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice" (117). Thus, meaning of life includes even the potential meaning of inevitable suffering.

The author draws an analogy between human's suffering and the behavior of gas. When an empty chamber is filled with certain amount of gas, the gas spreads equally and evenly fill the whole chamber, irrespective of its size. Likewise, suffering is like the gas which evenly spreads the human soul and body, irrespective of its size; greater or small. He thus concludes that "therefore, the 'size' of human suffering is absolutely relative" (55). To conclude in the words of the author, "If there is 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" (76).

Logotherapy insists on the meaning of work too. One may wonder how work can turn life meaningful. One's deeds and works can help to position life in a more meaningful way. When the author and his fellow prisoners were forced to hand over their possessions to the SS men, the author was also forced to give away a manuscript which he hid inside a bag at the time of his arrival at Auschwitz. The manuscript was one of the reasons of survival for the author. For the author the manuscript had some purpose in his life. His goal was to finish the manuscript which he had then commenced. If the author hadn't had the thought to write that manuscript in the concentration camp, today his logotherapy wouldn't have come to the spotlight and serve to be one of the most prominent therapies in existentialism.

The author also draws his personal experience from the concentration camp to depict the purpose of life attained through deed. Due to the cold weather and his torn shoes, he got terrible sores in his feet. Thoughts eventually turned to a miserable living. During such a time, he was asked to give lectures in front of the prisoners who sat in seats like attentive audience. As a psychiatrist, the author gave lectures in psychology on various topics which comforted the prisoners. He gave lectures on sleep which was very important for each and everyone in the concentration camp. He also stressed on the meaning and purpose of life which instilled the art of living in the minds of the fellow prisoners. Thus, there is meaning in work or deed too.

Logotherapy gives the essence of meaning of love in which Viktor Frankl states that "love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality" (116). His wife was taken to another camp and as he was working on the icy slopes, his mind was filled with the thoughts of his wife. Looking at the sky, he imagined about her, saw her, talked to her and smiled at her encouraging look. He states that "Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise" (48). This contemplation of his wife intensified his inner life. He states that even if his wife was dead, his inner strength of love in his life would never cease. It is evident that, love can transcend all the hurdles and paves way for finding meaning in one's life. To conclude in the

words of Nietzsche "he who has a 'why' to live for, can bear almost any "how".

### Conclusion

In this present scenario, man is leading a machine life, where there is no room for him to think about the 'why' for whatever he does. He never thinks about the reason for his existence in this beautiful world.

Therefore, it is necessary for them to recognize first the reason for their being. These reasons may differ from person to person and the recognition of this reason lies within the individual. As Viktor E. Frankl said that suffering is ineradicable, man has to first of all accept the situation filled with suffering. For instance, a student may love language and detest mathematics which he finds it difficult and may eventually give up. It is necessary for the student to accept mathematics as a challenge and must work on it instead of seeing it as a burden. The student must practice and always keep in mind that, it isn't difficult and he can do it. When he finds himself improving, he will gradually find the task easy and soon turn this burden into accomplishment. Therefore, no task is difficult and man has a task to be performed in his life, which is unique.

When man succeeds in completing his task, he will definitely realize the meaning and purpose of life. Man has got his own likes and dislikes and it varies from person to person. Hence, to discover the specific meaning, he or she must work towards the demands of fulfillment that arises from his goal or mission in life. It is never the difficult tasks that should be the goal, it could be what one loves to do or what one is good at. This goal can be achieved if he knows his vocation and concentrate on that alone instead of multitasking. Hence, man can find meaning and purpose of his life in his own way.

The Japanese concept Ikigai too deals with purpose and meaning in life. In the book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* written by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles, depicts how the Japanese believe in Ikigai. The author says that every Japanese has an Ikigai which is dormant in them, which some people had already found and the rest are in search of it. He says "our Ikigai is hidden deep inside each of us, and finding it requires a patient search.... our Ikigai is the reason we get up in the morning" (9). Likewise, every human being has

an Ikigai inside him, that is, a potential meaning is dormant in him. By discovering this meaning, man can transform his attitude and life as well.

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