

Adapted from the following text, first published in 1949:

Frankl, Viktor E. "The Case for a Tragic Optimism" (postscript to *Man's Search for Meaning*).  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

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Let us first ask ourselves what should be understood by "a tragic optimism." In brief it means that one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the "tragic triad," which consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: (1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death. 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 everything," presupposes that life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. And this in turn presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative 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.

It must be kept in mind, however, that optimism is not anything to be commanded or ordered. One cannot even force oneself to be optimistic indiscriminately, against all odds, against all hope. And what is true for hope is also true for the other two components of the triad inasmuch as faith and love cannot be commanded or ordered either.

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.

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.

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. And what happens if one's groping for a meaning has been in vain? This may well result in a fatal condition. Let us recall, for instance, what sometimes happened in extreme situations such as prisoner-of-war camps or concentration camps. In the first, as I was told by American soldiers, a behavior pattern crystallized to which they referred as "give-up-itis." In the concentration camps, this behavior was paralleled by those who one morning, at five, refused to get up and go to work and instead stayed in the hut, on the straw wet with urine and feces. Nothing—neither warnings nor threats—could induce them to change their minds. And then something typical occurred: they took out a cigarette from deep down in a pocket where they had hidden it and started smoking. At that moment we knew that for the next forty-eight hours or so we would watch them dying. Meaning orientation had subsided, and consequently the seeking of immediate pleasure had taken over.

Is this not reminiscent of another parallel, a parallel that confronts us day by day. To be sure, it is not just a cigarette to which they resort; it is drugs. In fact, the drug scene is one aspect of a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from a frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our industrial societies. As Irvin D. Yalom of Stanford University states in *Existential Psychotherapy*: "Of forty consecutive patients applying for therapy at a psychiatric outpatient clinic . . . twelve (30 percent) had some major problem involving meaning (as adjudged from self-ratings, therapists, or independent judges)."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Basic Books, New York, 1980, p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> "Wirtschaftskrise und Seelenleben vom Standpunkt des Jugendberaters," *Sozialärztliche Rundschau*, Vol. 4 (1933), pp. 43-46.

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.

Along with unemployment neurosis, which is triggered by an individual's socioeconomic situation, there are other types of depression which are traceable back to psychodynamic or biochemical conditions, whichever the case may be. Accordingly, psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy are indicated respectively. Insofar as the feeling of meaninglessness is concerned, however, we should not overlook and forget that, per se, it is not a matter of pathology; rather than being the sign and symptom of a neurosis, it is, I would say, the proof of one's humanness. But although it is not caused by anything pathological, it may well cause a pathological reaction; in other words, it is potentially pathogenic. Just consider the mass neurotic syndrome so pervasive in the young generation: there is ample empirical evidence that the three facets of this syndrome—depression, aggression, addiction—are due to what is called “the existential vacuum,” a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness.

It goes without saying that not each and every case of depression is to be traced back to a feeling of meaninglessness, nor does suicide—in which depression sometimes eventuates—always result from an existential vacuum. But even if each and every case of depression is to be traced back to a feeling of meaninglessness, nor does suicide—in which depression sometimes eventuates—always result from an existential vacuum. But even if each and every case of suicide had not been undertaken out of a feeling of meaninglessness, it may well be that an individual's impulse to take his life would have been overcome had he been aware of some meaning and purpose worth living for.

If, thus, a strong meaning orientation plays a decisive role in the prevention of suicide, what about intervention in cases in which there is a suicide risk? As a young doctor I spent four years in Austria's largest state hospital where I was in charge of the pavilion in which severely depressed patients were accommodated—most of them having been admitted after a suicide attempt. I once calculated that I must have explored twelve thousand patients during those four years. What accumulated was quite a store of experience from which I still draw whenever I am confronted with someone who is prone to suicide. I explain to such a person that patients have repeatedly told me how happy they were that the suicide attempt had not been successful; weeks, months, years later, they told

me, it turned out that there was a solution to their problem, an answer to their question, a meaning to their life. “Even if things only take such a good turn in one of a thousand cases,” my explanation continues, “who can guarantee that in your case it will not happen one day, sooner or later? But in the first place, you have to live to see the day on which it may happen, so you have to survive in order to see that day dawn, and from now on the responsibility for survival does not leave you.”

Regarding the second facet of the mass neurotic syndrome—aggression—let me cite an experiment once conducted by Carolyn Wood Sherif. She had succeeded in artificially building up mutual aggressions between groups of boy scouts, and observed that the aggressions only subsided when the youngsters dedicated themselves to a collective purpose—that is, the joint task of dragging out of the mud a carriage in which food had to be brought to their camp. Immediately, they were not only challenged but also united by a meaning they had to fulfill.<sup>3</sup>

As for the third issue, addiction, I am reminded of the findings presented by Annemarie von Forstmeyer who noted that, as evidenced by tests and statistics, 90 percent of the alcoholics she studied had suffered from an abysmal feeling of meaninglessness. Of the drug addicts studied by Stanley Krippner, 100 percent believed that “things seemed meaningless.”<sup>4</sup>

Now let us turn to the question of meaning itself. To invoke an analogy, consider a movie: it consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown. However, we cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components, each of the individual pictures. 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?

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.” There are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on this experiment, see Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unconscious God*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1978, p.140; and Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1978, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> For further information, see *The Unconscious God*, pp. 97-100; and *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, pp. 26-28.

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 “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.”<sup>5</sup>

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. Again it was Edith Weisskopf-Joelson who once expressed the hope that therapy “may help counteract certain unhealthy trends in the present-day culture of the United States, where the incurable sufferer is given very little opportunity to be proud of his suffering and to consider it ennobling rather than degrading” so that “he is not only unhappy, but also ashamed of being unhappy.”

For a quarter of a century I ran the neurological department of a general hospital and bore witness to my patients’ capacity to turn their predicaments into human achievements. In addition to such practical experience, empirical evidence is also available which supports the possibility that one may find meaning in suffering. Researchers at the Yale University School of Medicine “have been impressed by the number of prisoners of war of the Vietnam war who explicitly claimed that although their captivity was extraordinarily stressful—filled with torture, disease, malnutrition, and solitary confinement—they nevertheless . . . benefited from the captivity experience, seeing it as a growth experience.”<sup>6</sup>

But the most powerful arguments in favor of “a tragic optimism” are those which in Latin are called *argumenta ad hominem*. Jerry Long, to cite an example, is a living testimony to “the defiant power of the human spirit.”<sup>7</sup> To quote the *Texarkana Gazette*, “Jerry Long has been paralyzed from his neck down since a diving accident which rendered him a quadriplegic three years ago. He was 17 when the accident occurred. Today Long can use his mouth stick to type. He ‘attends’ two courses at Community College via a special telephone. The intercom allows Long to both hear and participate in class discussions. He also occupies his time by reading, watching television and writing.” And in a letter I received from him, he

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<sup>5</sup> "The Place of Logotherapy in the World Today," *The International Forum for Logotherapy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1980), pp. 3-7.

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Sledge, J. A. Boydston and A. J. Rabe, "Self-Concept Changes Related to War Captivity," *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry*, 37 (1980), pp. 430-443.

<sup>7</sup> "The Defiant Power of the Human Spirit" was in fact the title of a paper presented by Long at the Third World Congress of Logotherapy in June 1983.

writes: "I view my life as being abundant with meaning and purpose. The attitude that I adopted on that fateful day has become my personal credo for life: I broke my neck, it didn't break me. I am currently enrolled in my first psychology course in college. I believe that my handicap will only enhance my ability to help others. I know that without the suffering, the growth that I have achieved would have been impossible."

Is this to say that suffering is indispensable to the discovery of meaning? In no way. I only insist that meaning is available in spite of—nay, even through—suffering, provided, that the suffering is unavoidable. If it is avoidable, the meaningful thing to do is to remove its cause, for unnecessary suffering is masochistic rather than heroic. If, on the other hand, one cannot change a situation that causes his suffering, he can still choose his attitude.<sup>8</sup>

Long had not been chosen to break his neck, but he did decide not to let himself be broken by what had happened to him. As we see, the priority stays with creatively changing the situation that causes us to suffer. But the superiority goes to the "know-how to suffer," if need be. And there is empirical evidence that—literally—the "man in the street" is of the same opinion. Austrian public-opinion pollsters recently reported that those held in highest esteem by most of the people interviewed are neither the great artists nor the great scientists, neither the great statesmen nor the great sports figures, but those who master a hard lot with their heads held high.

In turning to the second aspect of the tragic triad, namely guilt, I would like to depart from a theological concept that has always been fascinating to me. I refer to what is called *mysterium iniquitatis*, meaning, as I see it, that a crime in the final analysis remains inexplicable inasmuch as it cannot be fully traced back to biological, psychological and/or sociological factors. Totally explaining one's crime would be tantamount to explaining away his or her guilt and to seeing in him or her not a free and responsible human being but a machine to be repaired. Even criminals themselves abhor this treatment and prefer to be held responsible for their deeds. From a convict serving his sentence in an Illinois penitentiary I received a letter in which he deplored that "the criminal never has a chance to explain himself. He is offered a variety of excuses to choose from. Society is blamed and in many instances the blame is put on the victim." Furthermore, when I addressed the prisoners in San Quentin, I told them that "you are human beings like me, and as such you

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<sup>8</sup> I won't forget an interview I once heard on Austrian TV, given by a Polish cardiologist who, during World War II, had helped organize the Warsaw ghetto upheaval. "What a heroic deed," exclaimed the reporter. "Listen," calmly replied the doctor, "to take a gun and shoot is no great thing; but if the SS leads you to a gas chamber or to a mass grave to execute you on the spot, and you can't do anything about it - except for going your way with dignity - you see, this is what I would call heroism." Attitudinal heroism, so to speak.

were free to commit a crime, to become guilty. Now, however, you are responsible for overcoming guilt by rising above it, by growing beyond yourselves, by changing for the better.” They felt understood.<sup>9</sup>

As for the concept of collective guilt, it is totally unjustified to hold one person responsible for the behavior of another person or a collective of persons. Since the end of World War II, I have not become weary of publicly arguing against the collective guilt concept.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes, however, it takes a lot of didactic tricks to detach people from their superstitions. An American woman once confronted me with the reproach, “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?” She stopped objecting to my writing books in German.

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.*

In fact, 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 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. In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost, but rather, on the contrary, everything is irrevocably stored and treasured. To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.

From this one may see that there is no reason to pity old people. Instead, young people should envy them. It is true that the old have no opportunities, no possibilities in the future. But they have more than that. Instead of possibilities in the future, they have realities in the past—the potentialities they have actualized, the meanings they have fulfilled,

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<sup>9</sup> See also Joseph B. Fabry, *The Pursuit of Meaning*, New York, Harper and Row, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> See also Viktor E. Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1967.

the values they have realized—and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past.

In view of the possibility of finding meaning in suffering, life's meaning is an unconditional one, at least potentially. That unconditional meaning, however, is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of the dignity of man. Just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her, and it does so because it is based on the values that he or she has realized in the past, and is not contingent on the usefulness that he or she may or may not retain in the present.

More specifically, this usefulness is usually defined in terms of functioning for the benefit of society. But today's society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and, in particular, it adores the young. It virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in so doing blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness. If one is not cognizant of this difference and holds that an individual's value stems only from his present usefulness, then, believe me, one owes it only to personal inconsistency not to plead for euthanasia along the lines of Hitler's program, that is to say, "mercy" killing of all those who have lost their social usefulness, be it because of old age, incurable illness, mental deterioration, or whatever handicap they may suffer.

You may be prone to blame me for invoking examples that are the exceptions to the rule. "*Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt*" (but everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find) reads the last sentence of the *Ethics* of Spinoza. You may of course ask whether we really need to refer to "saints." Wouldn't it suffice just to refer to *decent* people? It is true that they form a minority. More than that, they always will remain a minority. And yet I see therein the very challenge to join the minority. For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best.

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.