

A RATHER IRREVERENT INTERVIEW WITH VIKTOR FRANKL'S GHOST!

Prof. Dr. Viktor Frankl (VF) : Mag. Adrea Mach (AM)



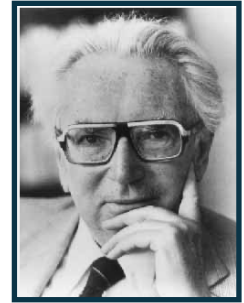
Setting the stage (2020). In the lecture hall at the University of Vienna, the patriarchal Prof. Frankl is holding forth on the interactions between age and resilience, "spiritual pivots" and self-transcendence while his interviewee shows herself impressed but irreverent, as Americans tend to be in the face of academic "splendor".

VF: Thank you, Mag. Mach, for contacting us for this study. The authors want to know what role age plays—in relation to resilience—for both counselors and clients. This is not MY study for two reasons: first, my body died back in 1997; and, secondly, "resilience" was never decisive for me, rather a *"welcome by-product of an unconditional openness of meaning to life."* For me, the "spirit's innate power of defiance" is much more in the foreground.

AM: I understand. Still, I'm fascinated by this study because recent research suggests a positive correlation between resilience and older age. "The serenity of the elderly" is what Christina Berndt says in her book about resilience. She posits that—through greater experience and adaptability—resilience can grow until just before death and puts it this way: *"So serenity gives strength in a very special way to those who have already seen a lot in life."* Encouraging! In your 92 years, did YOU experience it this way?

VF: I might not be a very good example. Anyone who has survived four concentration camps finds everything else only half so bad in comparison. But over the years I've probably gotten more affable with myself and those around me. I have developed more compassion. As a result of this maturation, I now (even from the afterlife!) enjoy playing a mentoring role and making my mark on current generations. But now to the point. Now it's your turn. First the question: How old are you now? Chronologically? Physically? Mentally?

AM: Chronologically, I'm 76 but I feel... (Oppps! I'm interrupted mid-sentence by Frankl's very lively—even if long dead!—self!)



VF: Seventy-six. Hmmmm... That was the year 1981 for me back then when I was still alive. Oh! I was chock full of energy and had just been awarded the Austrian Decoration of Honor for Science and Art. So, my age wasn't an obstacle. On the contrary! But, just so you know, my current spirit incarnated back in 1905 and is now 114 years old... on the spiritual level, of course!

But you? YOU are only 76 on a physical level, a woman who just sort of “wandered” off from America into this still quite patriarchal Austrian society. And yet you dare to apply for such a high-quality academic study at all? Don't get me wrong, I can be a little harsh at times, but that's my kind of challenge: “separate the men from the boys” or—in this case—the women from the girls. So let me ask you honestly: aren't you already chronologically on the decline, or even an already-crashed “basket case”?

AM: I DON'T see it that way, esteemed Professor and spiritual mentor. I have always been on the lookout—actually **searched out**—challenges; my whole life up to now consists of this. I ANSWER life, just like YOU did. That's why your teachings appeal to me so much. And, as I was about to say, despite my 76 chronological years, mentally I feel more like my mid-40s, even though my body is increasingly behaving like a 100-year-old. This could be the result of pesticide poisoning two years ago in the Caribbean where I was vacationing.

VF: What?! Holidays?! And on the other side of the globe no less! While I traveled a lot for my work—you can check my CV—climbing the Rax, right here near Vienna—was more than enough for me in my precious free time. Some *via ferratas* (ladders) are even named after me!

AM: Climbing! YES. An addictive delight! I was also very fond of it in earlier years. On Vienna's local mountain, the Rax, but also in Tyrol's Wilder Kaiser, Italy's Rosengarten and the Swiss-French Mont Blanc region. Such unforgettable experiences were “self-transcendent” in themselves. But I'm not YOU, esteemed Professor. I love travel because I'm just cosmopolitan-curious; I have my own life and have to live it my own way. As you said yourself when still here on earth: **“Every human being is unique and one of a kind”!**



VF: Oh! I should have known it! I DID suspect it, I heard it and felt it... just from the many years I spent there. That cheeky “Attitude!”. You're **American**, aren't you? The land of individualists and “unlimited possibilities”.

AM: Exactly right, Professor. This attitude, as you call it, is innate to me. But I hope you'll appreciate that I have meanwhile become a "Viennese by choice". The music, the culture, the mountains. You know what I mean.



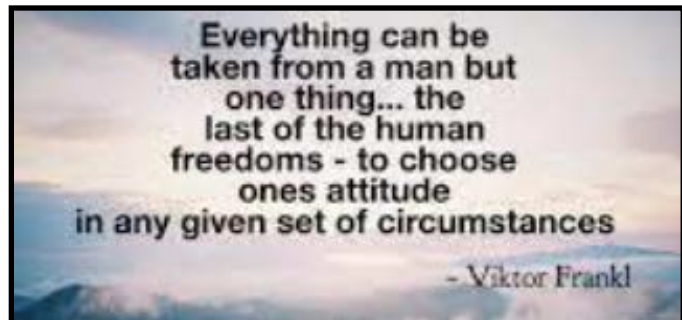
VF: Yes, yes. A good choice. I've also remained true to my Viennese roots. But as for my connections with America: I remember with deep gratitude how I was liberated from my last concentration camp by the Americans—they were Texans—in the spring of 1945 (he becomes thoughtful, even gets tears in his eyes). Later, I was even a visiting professor at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, Texas...

AM: Yes, right there where I was studying at the time! And—although that was over 50 years ago—if I'm not mistaken, I even met you there in the spring of 1966

when you were teaching and lecturing on your book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. I was so excited! Or rather, deeply touched and inspired.

VF: So, could it be that we already know each other?

AM: Something inside of me says "YES" very strongly. So much resonance. On several levels but definitely on the spiritual level. Therefore, I would be more than honored, not only to participate in this study, but also to use your logotherapy in my future practice as Psychosocial Counselor.



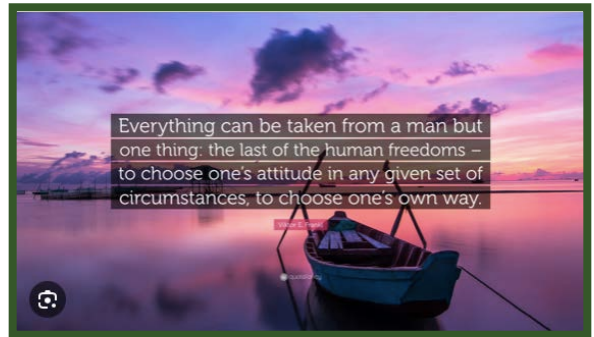
VF: You have my blessing.

AM: And you have my word, dear Professor! (I arise, wanting to shake his hand and say goodbye...)

VF: Wait! This interview isn't over yet! I decide, not you...and I have a few questions for you because you are so much younger and live in a completely different world today. Do you think that logotherapy is even RELEVANT as a solution to the increasing number of psychosocial illnesses these days?

AM: And HOW! Logotherapy didn't stand still. You said yourself that it should continue to evolve. It has, too. In Austria, it remains a respected method and, if I may say so, in America it is more necessary than ever. Just think of the mass shootings or the opioid crises that are destroying so many lives too soon in the form of violence against themselves and others. Violence is everywhere in America! Not least in politics! Where is the meaning of life? What are we supposed to do?

VF: Excuse me, Miss Super-Achiever, but in the Socratic Method, I ask the questions. Let's switch focus from the many global crises over which neither you nor I have control. Instead: how does it look in your own personal world? How about your own "spiritual defiance" in a "Wasteland" world? Just by the way, as you must know, I never used the word "resilience" therapeutically.



AM: Oh! I've always been rebellious—or at least “spiritually defiant” as you put it! But at the same time I've always had a strong inner conscience and refused to accept what I couldn't respect. For example, I emigrated to Europe from America in the summer of 1966, partly because of the Vietnam War. "Conscientious objector" they called it. You'll remember because you were *there* at the time... and already highly acclaimed as an inspirational role model. But the American approach to this endless Vietnam War did not match my inner value system at all. I was outraged! So I took the consequences and immigrated to Europe. Actually, as it turned out, for good and all.



VF: Glad to hear it. To be “konsequent”. That's a key part of logotherapy.

AM: Instead of my planned career as a doctor (with my Albert Schweitzer role model, I would have probably become more of a "Doctor Without Borders" type). I had to let that go but nevertheless ended up at the United Nations (UNO) in Vienna in 1980. Followed by 30+ years of global human rights and public health work on three continents.

VF: Quite impressive actually, your tireless commitment to a better world. But wasn't there a time when your ideals collapsed and you wanted to give it all up? If so, how did you react to that?

AM: Crushed, caved-in ideals? Like recurrent earthquakes? Oh! More than once. People who are idealistic are confronted with this repeatedly. But it was precisely in these dark hours that I came across your quote:—

VF: Dear prospective colleague, you have understood, experienced and embraced my “defiant power of the human spirit” with your heart. All due respect.

AM: But you, Professor, YOU experienced much worse in the concentration camps than I could ever imagine: i.e. the Darwinian "survival of the fittest", often not the “best” survived. But you didn't just accept the bitter, internally feuding fate of a concentration camp, you made full use of your remaining intellectual "freedom" and made a conscious decision to remain “human” no matter what. To re-construct your book on medical pastoral care (“Ärztliche Seelsorge”). Despite hanging onto life by a thread in the midst

of fatal chaos, what a will-full attitude; an outstanding "spiritual turning point" on your part!

VF: "Spiritual turning point"?? But such a concept doesn't appear directly anywhere in MY teachings. What's this supposed to be?

AM: Dear Professor, at 76 years old and full of my own life experiences, am I not old enough to give birth to a few ideas of my own? Or am I, as a woman, perhaps not witty or wise enough for you?

VF: Are women not "good" enough? Please, the spirit is not gender specific! Just think of Dr. Elisabeth Lukas, who did excellent work in the early 1970s. Using new statistical methods, her groundbreaking dissertation in 1972 scientifically proved that **the correlation between fulfilling the meaning of life and mental health is 99%!** Today, Prof. Lukas is, practically speaking, my successor in logotherapy.

AM: Yes! "Dharma-esque" as we shall see later! But for now, I know her personally as well and have already discussed this concept of "spiritual pivots or turning points" with her. And she likes it.

VF: Well then, out with it! I listen spellbound with full attention!

AM: Good. Here's my hypothesis. As I grappled with the psychological concepts, including the term "resilience... and beyond", it became clear to me that resilience alone, the "bouncing back" after loss or trauma, is only part of the process. In order to make truly great life changes, there has to be an *inner spiritual turning point*, a moment of clear vision—"Aha! Experience"—where one clearly sees what is pulling one *back*, what will undermine us if I don't break free.

On the other hand, we are able to see, perhaps for the first time, what draws us *forward*, what positively awaits us if we are to fulfill "our destinies" in the highest sense. Then, it remains for us to choose, to decide, and to let one's own soul draw us on. This, I believe, was what the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, meant when he said,



VF: Cool! But what if one couldn't find the strength to choose...?

AM: Can my answer be direct? "Straight talk"? Even at the risk of invading your privacy?

VF: Huff! I'm not so sure... but OK, go on then.

AM: Because—from what I've read about your life—you hit an absolute low point in 1945 at the end of World War II. You were only 40 years old and still resilient when you were liberated after two and a half horrific concentration camp years. But then you returned with hope to Vienna only to learn that virtually your entire family had been exterminated by the Nazis. I'm afraid that—without this "spiritual pivot" I'm positing—you might NOT have survived. You **did** want to take your own life back then, didn't you?



VF: (Long silence. Then softly...) That's right. And—very empathetic of you—your "spiritual turning point" hypothesis mirrors exactly what I went through in 1945 at those pivotal moments in my life (*Nota bene*: The quote below was previously cited on p. 3 of the narrative).

AM: That means you **had** to turn spiritually in those darkest moments...and you **did**. And in doing so, you foresaw your "destiny" and tearfully confided it to your friend, Paul Polak:

"When things like this happen to someone, when a person is put to a crucial test, then it must be good for something; it MUST make sense, take on meaning. I feel—it's almost impossible to describe—that a MISSION is waiting for me... I have this unshakable feeling that I am destined for something, destined to DO something."

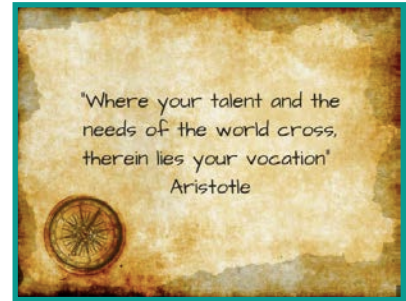
- Viktor Frankl, 1945, Vienna



VF: Few people know this, but since 1945—when I was only 40 (and still had 52 years of life before me)—every success, every honor I've enjoyed since then has been not only for the "new" family that I built, but also dedicated to the sacrificed members of my original family - those lost to the Holocaust.

AM: With deepest respect. **"Attitude and action"**—you said it yourself, that's what matters in such pivotal moments. And now comes the next part. In itself it's nothing new—thousands of years old actually—but the "dots" need to be "connected" here with the Asian concept of Dharma—a Sanskrit word full of meaning and energy.

Depending on the context, the word “dharma” is translated as the “Way”, the “Teaching” or the “Law”, but more importantly, dharma means “Truth”—with a capital “T”. Dharma says that each individual has a unique calling or destiny. An inner promise, a sacred duty inherent in his soul. A yogi believes that his greatest responsibility in this life is to fulfill that inner promise, that calling. Thus, there is that wonderful quote:



VF: This bears a striking resemblance to a quote in the English translation of my book, “Man’s Search for Meaning”—original German title actually reads, “Trotzdem JA zum Leben sagen” or “Say YES to life—no matter WHAT”. There the second section says the following about the meaning of life:

"The meaning of life differs from person to person, from day to day, from hour to hour... Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment, which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it."

AM: The yogic tradition goes even further, saying that it is our duty—our highest honor even—to live our very personal dharma “fully, completely, through and through, without exception”. After our spiritual turning point, it is this vocation that draws us, pulls us forward during dark times. Every soul is drawn to step into this “idiosyncratic” Dharma image, embody it and live it to its fullest!

VF: And so to transcend oneself!

AM: Yes! This is exactly what we see in dramatic fashion in the Indian classic, the “Bhagavad-Gita”—The Song of God—2,000-year-old Hindu yoga wisdom. There, the archetypal warrior and hero figure, Arjuna, meets his God, Krishna, concealed as the chariot driver on the legendary battlefield of Kurukshetra. The resulting battlefield dialogue between (God) Krishna and (warrior for justice) Arjuna is actually a masterpiece of psychoanalysis...

VF: Psychoanalysis?! 2,000 years ago? Imagine that!!

AM: Again, YES! Despair and discord—but also your “spiritual defiance”—were also there back then. Also “spiritual pivots” and “self-transcendence”! Because the “unconscious God” can become conscious within each of us, allowing us to penetrate upwards to our “higher self”, mentally comprehend what needs to be DONE and DO it with 100% commitment.



VF: It will not have escaped your notice that I have been dealing with the concept of our "unconscious God" for most of my life. It bears a certain resemblance to the term Dharma, doesn't it?

AM: Absolutely, esteemed Professor. As far as I understand your concept of the "Unconscious God" vs. Hindu "Dharma"—and the book, *Psychotherapy, Psychiatry, and Religion: Across the Borderland between Mental Health and Faith* describes it—you actually mean "unconscious religiosity" in the sense of man's own unconscious God-relatedness. Not that *God* is unconscious; but that *WE* are; unconscious to the God within us. S/He may be repressed and hidden from our everyday "unreflective" consciousness for most of our lives. Sometimes such awareness emerges only on our deathbed. But realizing this only on our deathbed is way too late! Or did I misunderstand that?

VF: What do YOU think?

AM: Yes, I think I got it.. But here are your "Socratic Questions" always and again. You're well known for that, dear Professor; namely that YOU ask open questions and WE should provide the answers. I all but expected it! So, let's recall this story. "In a nutshell": Krishna's advice on the battlefield consists of four "pillars"—better "four arrows" since Arjuna was a master archer:

- First: "Look to your Dharma" ...
- Second: "Do It Full Out!" ...
- Third: "Let Go of the Fruits"...
- Fourth: "Turn It Over to God" ...

VF: Yes. That's exactly what I meant, too.

AM: But there's quite a difference—in terms of time—with the Dharma term. "Krishna" (aka God) says NOT to wait until your deathbed to actively search for and find meaning. Krishna says to search, reflect, discover and act on it from an early age. To evolve through lived creative and experiential values.

VF: There is a part to this study that has to do with individual imagination. So the question put to each participant is: If you could actually enrich your current age through increased resilience, what could this "self-transcendence" look like for you personally while you are still in this world? Now I'm curious.

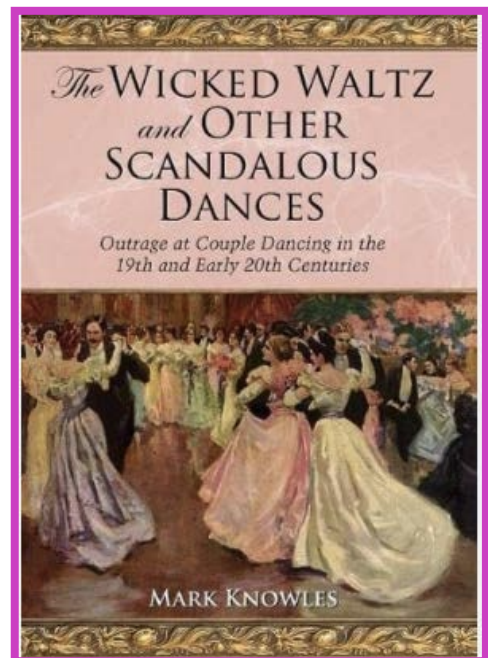
AM: Please, dear Viktor, you're becoming like the father/grandfather I never had. So don't laugh at me please. Promise? I see that YOU see things from a different, spiritual point of view, and you know what is possible! How sublime! So, I'll tell you: my lofty goal would be NOT to find the fountain of youth, but I would love to be a *jivan mukt*, "a soul fully awake in this lifetime". Someone who is capable of living a 100% "full life" in the HERE and NOW (not some longed-for "afterlife"). That means not just bouncing *back* (resilience), but bouncing *forward* and maybe even *levitating*! I'd be up for that!

Jokes aside—or subtly inserted, tongue-in-cheek—like Pippi Longstocking's creator, Astrid Lindgren, who lived to be 99, I would like to cheekily ask at some point, "*There's nothing in the Ten Commandments forbidding old ladies to climb trees, is there?*" Do you understand what I mean? Life up to now was serious enough; now my spirit longs to ascend on a "thermal" of humor!

VF: Your sense of humor speaks to my somewhat stuffy, old academic self! It even catalyzes a wish of my own! From my current spiritual perspective, I'd like to encourage everyone still alive on earth to:

"Never be too OLD, too OBEDIENT or too PASSIVE to aim for, create and experience something completely NEW, BEAUTIFUL! Despite an advanced age! Or precisely because of this: draw from the full earthly harvest of your life! There's a 'clearing' at the end of a life fully lived. A final unfolding 'spiritual turning point' towards eternity. Perhaps you might help me to pass on this encouragement from the Beyond."

And now, Mag. Mach, our interview is complete. With your permission, I would be more than happy to recommend you for this study on aging and resilience. And please stay on this spiritual wavelength with me and tell me about everything you learn and experience! Incorporeal or not, my spirit



remains always healthy, bright and receptive to others',
such as yours.



Finally, as in the old Viennese school, "*Kiss the hand,
gracious spirit-in spé*"

Source: Vijayan Ragavan. From a drawing in
"A Book of Modern Ballads, E. B. Browning 1892".