

## VIKTOR FRANKL: “DEFIANCE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT” IN THE FACE OF DEATH

### Far more than “just” Resilience

As Viktor Frankl pointed out shortly after his release from World War II’s Nazi concentration camps in April 1945:

*“Not only am I a medical doctor in two specialized areas (neurology and psychiatry with a focus on depression and suicide), I am also a survivor of four camps—concentration camps, that is. So I know something about the human freedom to transcend all conditions, even the worst and the toughest, and the ability to oppose the crushing ‘powers that be’ by virtue of what I like to call the ‘defiance of the human spirit’.”*

Foto: Dachau KZ Liberation, 29 April 1945



And yet it all began quite idyllically for young Viktor.

### Resilient Young Years: “The World’s mine Oyster”

Born in 1905 as the second of three children into a good bourgeois Viennese Jewish family, Frankl held some aces in his hand so that, by the 1920s, Viktor—smart, charismatic and self-confident as he was—was on the “Fast Track to Fame”—or at least to medical and societal success.

Even as a teenager in Vienna, he had carried on a lively correspondence with Austria’s psychoanalytic icon, Sigmund Freud. Then he became an Alfred Adler acolyte; and *then* he achieved something the Viennese fall into a faint over: a triple Dr. Dr. Dr. of Neurology, Psychiatry and Philosophy. Austrians do adore—and cling to—their (imperial) titles, even if and when they no longer apply! But for him, of course, the medical/academic ones very much *did!*



So, in his young years, as Shakespeare put it: *“Why then, the world's mine oyster, which I with sword will open.”* (Source: *“The Merry Wives of Windsor.”*)

His star seemed to be inexorably on the rise. The world (and also any number of pretty Viennese girls) lay symbolically at his feet. Surely NOTHING could stand in his way ... except the emerging Anti-Semitism of one Austrian-born Adolf Hitler. Jews were Hitler's chosen scapegoat-victims ... and Frankl was a Jew.

### Enter "FATE": Frankl's "Fall from Grace" into the Abyss

"Wrong place, wrong time, wrong religion". These unavoidable "fate factors" forced him into his first life-changing crisis. Although he soon saw the writing on the wall, he didn't see the full Nazi impact on Austrian society or even the implications for himself and his family until too late. He had longed to travel to America to make his international mark there... but he didn't follow through (see below); a fateful decision as it turned out because in—

- **1939.** He let his freedom-and-success-promising American visa expire in order to stay and protect his parents living in Vienna. This honor-based decision is precisely what later landed him in the concentration camps.
- **1940 – 1942:** Despite the Nazi occupation of Austria, Frankl took over the management of the neurological ward at the Rothschild Hospital (where only Jewish patients were treated). There, at the risk of his own life, he sabotaged the euthanasia of "mentally ill" patients ordered by the Nazis by using false diagnoses in his medical reports.
- **1942.** The Nazis forced Frankl and his new young wife, Tilly, to abort their first child. Traumatic. But it was precisely at this time that he began to write the draft of his seminal book, "*Ärztliche Seelsorge*" ("*The Doctor and the Soul*"), which promoted the doctor's humanistic role in pastoral care.
- **1943 - 1945.** But then they came for him and his family, almost all of whom were sent to the the



Theresienstadt near Prague.



concentration camps, starting with

#### *Spiritual Defiance—a Question of Attitude*

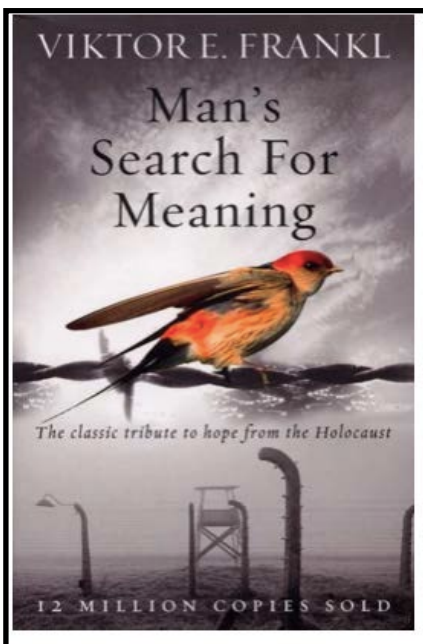
*"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing:  
the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude  
in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

- All told, Frankl himself survived 2.5 years in **four** Nazi concentration camps. Under such inhuman circumstances, either the utterly desperate prisoners gave up and died—as most tragically did—or, rarely, some higher spirit would break through and take over. This is the classic “spiritual pivot”.
- As for Frankl, he was determined to ‘give birth to his spiritual child’, the ‘*Ärztliche Seelsorge*’ manuscript he had completed and smuggled into the camps but then saw confiscated and destroyed. Re-constructing this 352-page manuscript from memory on tiny concealed scraps of paper, he later said that embracing these ideas **prior** to his arrest and detainment helped him overcome the existential crises of losing everything dear to him; allowed him to overcome his despair and turn his back on death. Now these insights pulled him forward towards the promise of a new life.
- **1945.** With the Second World War finally over, Frankl was freed from the concentration camp Türkheim (near Dachau in Bavaria) in April and returned to Vienna ... only THEN to learn that he had meanwhile lost virtually all of his family, including his beloved mother and his young wife, to the camps. Would this be the final blow? Devastated, Frankl hit an all-time low, even seriously contemplating suicide. What finally saved him? Like a phoenix-out-of-the-ashes came his own hard fought, self-transcending “spiritual pivot,” which he tearfully shared with a close friend as follows:



### *Frankl's “Spiritual Pivot”*

*“When such things happen to someone, when a person is tested in this way, it must be good for something; it MUST have a purpose. I feel—and it's almost impossible to describe it—that I have a MISSION waiting for me... I have a strong feeling that I'm destined to DO something. - Viktor Frankl Vienna, 1945)*



And DO something, he DID, starting with the tsunami-like dictation of his instant best-seller book, “*Man’s Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust*” that was completed in only nine days in 1945! The original German title is “*Trotzdem JA zum Leben Sagen*”, which translates literally as “Whatever, Say YES to Life!”. It has meanwhile sold 16 million copies in over 50 languages.

Its most famous existentialist quote? “*Ultimately, man should not ask to know what the meaning of his life is; rather must recognize that it is HE who is being asked*” and must himself provide the answer.

Here is what one reader had to say about it: “*This book is an absolute treasure. There are few such explicit, overwhelming and absolutely honest accounts of life in the concentration camps. Frankl's description of the emotional,*

*spiritual and social dynamics of his experience, as well as that of other prisoners, is tremendously humbling and beautiful.”* - Sharath Patil

## WAY beyond Resilience’s just “brightly bouncing back”

Frankl had certainly encountered both the term and the concept of “resilience”, which was first coined by Emmy Werner in the late 1950s in a study on disadvantaged children in Hawaii, USA. But was his KZ survival no more than “resilience”? He never used that word as it was clearly too superficial for what he had been through.

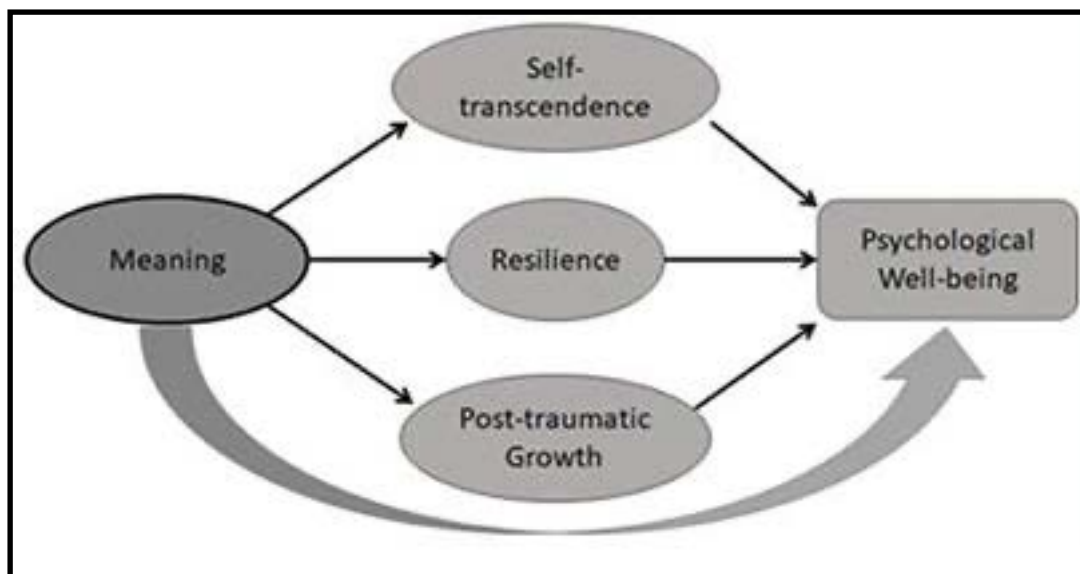
Frankl said that resilience would “never be the **end** goal, but rather a welcome **by-product** of one’s unconditional sense of openness towards life”.

## From Fate’s Blows to Destiny’s Calling

Frankl’s “Phoenix” was there with him in the ashes of the Nazi concentration camps. Indeed, it was there in that very darkness that it began to arise out of these, its own ashes, fueled by a **will to meaning** that caused him to turn towards a future as yet unimagined. This determination enabled him to survive and resurrect—

- his lost manuscript of his own “spiritual child” (“*Ärztliche Seelsorge*”);
- his medical reputation and professional standing;
- his health, as he somehow found the will to survive his final KZ incarceration days while deathly ill with typhus fever; and finally,
- his very life when he staved off despair and didn’t give in to suicide after learning that his family in Europe had perished and only he remained—ALONE.

That’s why Frankl never invoked the term “resilience”. In his eyes, was there even any equivalence between “resilience” and “spiritual defiance”? Frankl’s answer was an unequivocal: “NO”.



Why? Because, up close and frighteningly personal, Frankl had experienced, suffered and survived the horrors of the concentration camps firsthand. This "**experimentum crucis**"—as he described his 2.5-year KZ experience—gave him the "spiritual defiance" to transform internally and take the conscious decision to remain "human", both in the camp and later throughout his long and meaning-imbued life.

### The Art of Surviving "Spiritually Intact"

In his later writings and talks, Frankl often quoted the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who said: "Whoever has a why to live can endure almost any how." But "being open" was not always easy, especially not in a concentration camp.

After so many of his fellow sufferers in the camp—"the best", as he often emphasized—died before his eyes while he himself did not, Frankl became increasingly concerned with the "arbitrariness of dying" and the "undeserved grace of surviving". So he also looked for the possibility of "surviving unavoidable suffering **mentally, even spiritually, intact**".

His answer, with unconditional realism, was as follows:

1. It must be crystal clear to us that suffering in life is not a special case that can be skipped or eliminated by any simple "bounce-back resilience". Instead, suffering is part and parcel of human existence. Sooner or later, we all—all-powerful or not—will be confronted with the "**Tragic Triad**"—sorrow, guilt, death. No "normal mortal" will escape this. Therefore ...
2. We must be convinced from the start, at the core of our being, that—despite its suffering—**life is meaningful**. Only then, according to Frankl, "would it even be *worth* the trouble of struggle and pain...."
3. Thus, the "trick" is not to repress suffering but to **appreciate** it; not to overlook the "remaining good" in suffering; instead to look at life's "*hidden possibilities of meaning*". This encourages us "not *because* of and not *against*, but **in spite of suffering** to explore and realize each person's freedom of meaning."

### From "Spiritual Defiance" to "Self-Transcendence"



Frankl described this evolution as a "self-transcendence of human existence", saying: "*A human being only truly becomes human when he **grows beyond himself** through devotion to a creative task, in service to a cause or through love for another person. It is then that he transcends and forgets himself. Thus, this is possible even for those who are physically weakened or seriously ill.*"

That's not all. He also stood the usual approach on its head by saying that it's not our expectations of Life that are primary; rather it's the questions that **Life** poses and "*what Life expects of US*".

Frankl insisted that each of us is singular. No person, no personal destiny is comparable with another; each of us is a unique “one-off”. In the philosophical “hot house” of the cold concentration camps, Frankl and his fellow inmates couldn’t help but recognize that the life also included death. So, not only the meaning of life but also that of suffering and dying was guaranteed. No one could escape it.

“The tragic triad of human existence—suffering, guilt and death—must be encountered positively with the right attitude. Right in its apocalyptic midst. Because precisely where helplessness and hopelessness spread, we are called upon to change *ourselves*. So it is that suffering takes on meaning then when one becomes “larger than self”.

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Perhaps it is then—in the depths of our loss—then that we feel it: that spiritual pivot.

### **“Spiritual Pivot”**

**(Sunrise image on the text box background?)**

*Sudden spiritual awakening? Those with Christian backgrounds may instantly think of that dramatic “Damascus experience”, the biblical conversion of Saul from Tarsus to Saint Paul en route to Damascus (AD 33-36). For Asians, it may be “Satori”: a sudden “understanding” experience of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. Such a lightning event—also known as an “aha! moment” in the vernacular—conveys an instant ‘awakening’ that catalyzes an abrupt and positive change in one’s life direction.*

*For the many people who don’t know what to do with the term “Damascus experience”, never mind the Japanese notion of “Satori”, let us here introduce the novel expression of a “spiritual pivot” and present a relevant human example. But first, the process...*

*We humans usually view the world through a certain “picture window” – outwardly but also inwardly. Because we are immersed in it, we don’t realize how much it “frames” and shapes us, this picture window. But then there may come a point—often triggered by trauma—when we realize that a tectonic psychic shift is already underway.*

*The triggers are different: sometimes they are negative and come at us from the outside (e.g. a tsunami, loss of a loved one or fleeing our home country). Sometimes they are more subtle, coming at us from within, trying to shift our perspective from shadow into light. Then the realization may arise that something is pulling us forward into unknown new territory. Our response to this “prompt” can be a “spiritual pivot”. But we have to be open to it. To embrace it.*

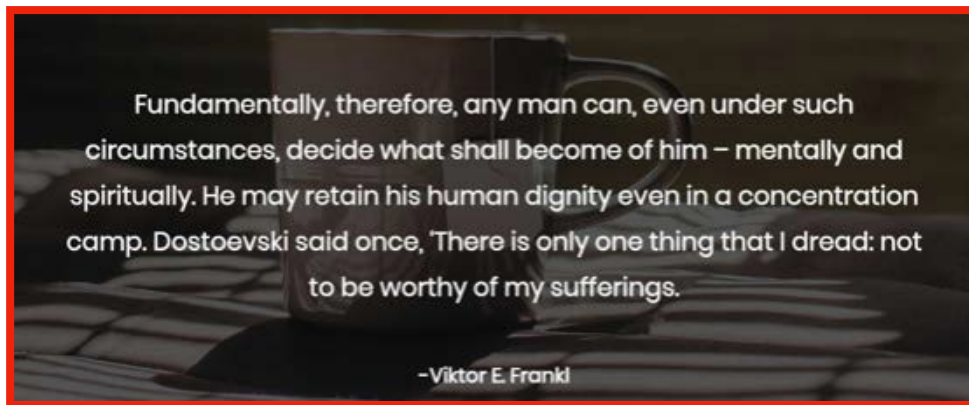
**“Only that day dawns to which we are awake.”**

**- Henry David Thoreau**

How did Frankl do it? Turn from a devastated past towards a promising future? He gave us the answer, saying that “man can only realize himself to the extent that he **finds meaning beyond himself in this world: purposeful work, love and courage in the face of difficulty**. He was a medical doctor/psychiatrist with a spiritual conscience, a relatively rare phenomenon. So, instead of suicide, he re-committed to his career and rebuilt his life.

He described this process as the “self-transcendence of human existence” that often manifested itself as a reaching out with compassion to others. As a psychologist-psychiatrist-philosopher, Frankl held an almost reverent view of his fellow humans: he tried to **“protect the dignity of the broken man—the man who has reached his limits—**

***from the grip of suffering"; to provide "the best possible help" for the suffering person*** by helping him to find meaning, even in the darkest hell-holes of life.



## The Long and “Happy End”

After the war, Frankl remained based in Vienna for the remaining 54 years of his life. During that “re-birthing” interim, he rebuilt his life from the ground up, re-marrying and having a daughter with his wife, Elly. He travelled the globe, went mountain climbing, got his pilot’s license and kept “working on himself”, with one of his best-known sayings being:

*“Ich muss mir nicht alles von mir selbst gefallen lassen.”*  
*“I don't have to put up with everything from myself!”*  
 - Viktor Frankl

According to the Viktor Frankl Institute in Vienna, “between 1946 and 1970 Frankl served as director of the Vienna Neurological Polyclinic, at the same time creating the first meaning-oriented school of psychotherapy, “Logotherapy and Existential Analysis”, often called the “Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy”, after Freud’s Psychoanalysis and Adler’s Individual Psychology.

Viktor Frankl:

- authored **40 books**, which have been published in over **50 languages**; his international best seller, “Man’s Search for Meaning” alone sold a dazzling **sixteen million copies** worldwide and still counting;
- held lectures at **209 universities** on all continents;
- was awarded **29 honorary doctorates**;
- held four **visiting professorships in America** (at Harvard University, the University of Pittsburgh, Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX) and the U.S. International University, San Diego, California); and
- received some **two dozen awards**, including the John F. Kennedy Star.



He rebuilt and expanded, not only his life and professional standing, but also his psychoanalytic practice and authorship, his most famous book once again being

“Trotzdem JA zum Leben sagen” (English title, “Man’s Search for Meaning”). He embraced life—both its ups and downs—saying:

*“Usually, to be sure, man considers only the stubble field of transitoriness  
and overlooks the full granaries of the past, wherein he had salvaged  
once and for all his deeds, his joys and also his sufferings.  
Nothing can be undone, and nothing can be done away with.  
It’s all there.*

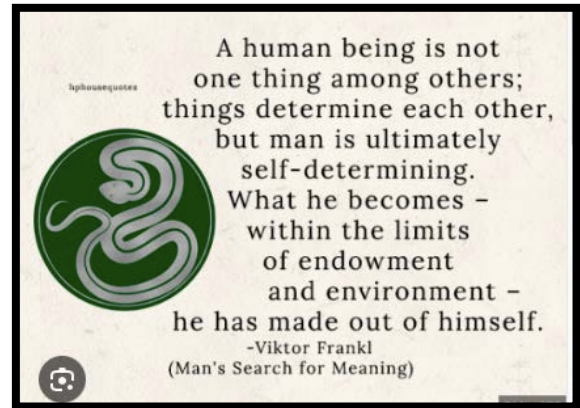
Viktor Frankl lived a full life until his passing in 1997 at the age of 92. Despite his earlier concentration camp experiences—or perhaps **because** of them—he could look back on nearly a century-long life and, as his most famous book title did, “say an unconditional YES to life”.

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## Viktor Frankl. Readers Interactive Workbook

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with these historic or contemporary profiles can spice up your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived with bruisingly useful “lessons learned”. This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Dare to explore Frankl’s “spiritual defiance”*



1. As he once described himself shortly after his 1945 KZ release, Austrian psycho-analyst and founder of Logotherapy, Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, famously said: *"I am not only a medical specialist in two fields (i.e. Neurology and Psychiatry), but also a survivor of four camps—i.e. **concentration** camps. So I know something about human freedom and man's ability to to confront, counteract and ultimately rise above even the hardest and worst 'fates'. This inner power comes from what I call **spiritual defiance**."* **Have you ever been in a life-threatening situation that you overcame through sheer will power, the power of your own human spirit? If not, could you IMAGINE it?**
  
2. Viktor Frankl was familiar with the concept of “resilience” though he never used it himself because he was grappling with much more extreme situations. Resilience is rather a ‘social coping mechanism’ (See the Prologue of this book) that includes everything from buoyancy to flexibility to hardiness. **In terms of your life, how would you evaluate your own resilience on a scale of 1-10? Give two examples.**

3. By all first-hand accounts, Frankl was something of a patriarch who, on one occasion, even allegedly ordered his wife per *dictaphone* from his bed to draw him a bath! Today women's rights are more center stage. **How might YOU—young or old, male or female—deal with a similar top-down situation? in your own life, how do you respond to authoritarianism? Has your response mode changed over time? Why or why not?**
  
4. Frankl, as psychologist/psychiatrist/philosopher, assumed an incredibly honoring stance vis-à-vis humanity. He strove to support "*the dignity of the broken man, that person who **pushes the outer boundaries of his existential limits ... to protect them from the grip of suffering.***" **As a family member, care provider or simply a friend, how would YOU guarantee the "best possible help" for suffering fellow-humans? Or would you just say, "Every man for himself?"**
  
5. Frankl's consistent message that runs through all his writings and personal/public interactions is that each individual life is unique and must have meaning. "*Whoever has a WHY to live can endure almost any HOW*", his oft-cited quote from Friedrich Nietzsche. **What did Frankl say about "beyond resilience ... when and how the Phoenix rises"? And what do YOU say? Bring personal examples if you can.**

(**Nota bene:** Sense of humor sometimes improves with age. Frankl's did ... as mine does.. The following piece is a product of that. It's called "**A Rather Irreverent Interview with Viktor Frankl's Ghost**". ENJOY!!!)