

Man's Search for Meaning

By Kimberly Fletcher



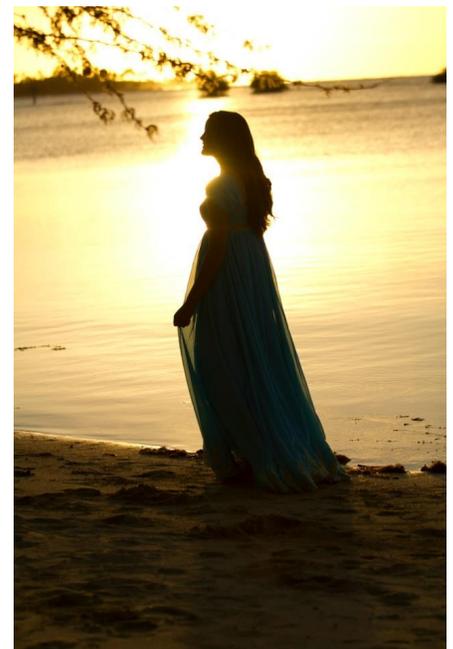
I was sitting in Church one day when our pastor suggested that during that week when we pray individually and as a family that we devote our prayers solely to thanking God for all our blessings. This was a message I have become familiar with around Thanksgiving but this was August—nowhere near Turkey time. And the Pastor's message had nothing to do with gratitude it was all about the "pure in heart". But as I listened to my heart as he expounded on his message it suddenly became clear to me how a pure heart is directly connected with how grateful we are.

I recently read the book "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl and found an even deeper understanding of the truthfulness of the tie between gratitude and a pure heart and how it directly impacts our actions.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish neurologist and psychiatrist who spent three years laboring in four different concentration camps including Auschwitz and Dachau. Dr. Frankl spends the first half of his book describing his experiences in the various camps where he was confined. The unique thing about this book however, is that, unlike other books that depict personal experiences in the concentration camps, this one is presented in third person. Dr. Frankl shares his experiences as if an observer looking in—not only at the other members of the camp, but at himself as well.

He observed the behaviors of those in the camp and witnessed how differently inmates reacted and responded to their brutal surroundings. What he learned and came to understand through his experiences led to his revolutionary theory known as *logo-therapy*, from the Greek word *logos* or "meaning". Unlike Sigmund Freud who maintained that our primary drive in life is pleasure, Dr. Frankl, through his own experience and personal discovery, found that it wasn't pleasure but purpose that gave meaning to life. Men who lived and suffered in the very same conditions would either give up, succumb to their worst selves, or in rare occasions, rise above their surroundings. Dr. Frankl realized it was something in the heart, something more powerful than the brutality and dire nature of their surroundings—a sense of peace within the storm.

Those that weathered the storm could find beauty in the simplest things—memories of family, a blade of grass, a sunset. For some this was survival, for others it generated feelings of profound gratitude. Dr. Frankl witnessed the way those who held on to these things, those who had purpose in their life, seemed not only to bear their horrific burdens better than most, but also, at great personal sacrifice, helped and comforted others. He shares this in his book. "We who lived in concentration camps," he recalled, "can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from 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."



This then, is the ultimate depth and definition of freedom. It is not the circumstances without but the determination within that ultimately define who we are and the kind of person we will be. It is our freedom to choose—not necessarily our specific conditions and environment—but how we will meet them. No one can take that away.

Viktor Frankl shares thoughts about his experiences in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning”.

...there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate...

...Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food, and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of camp influence alone.

Dostoevski said once, “There is only thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.” These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering in death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of sufferings; the way they bore the suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom that cannot be taken away, that makes like purposeful.

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross gives him ample opportunity even under the most difficult circumstances to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forego the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worth of his sufferings or not.

Do not think that these considerations are unworldly and too far removed from real life. It is true that only a few people are capable of reaching such high moral standards. Of the prisoners only a few kept their inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even one such example is sufficient proof that man’s inner strength may raise him above his outward fate. Such men are not only in concentration camps. Everywhere man is confronted with fate. With the chance of achieving something through his own suffering.

As I read Viktor Frankl’s words I suddenly realized just how beauty, gratitude, and freedom all tied together. No matter what trial, challenge or suffering we may face, there is always some thing we can point to, to be grateful for. Even when things are going well for us we often forget that beautiful gift that gratitude is. When we focus on our blessings, when we take time to feel and show gratitude for those blessings then we transcend beyond ourselves. Not only do we appreciate all we have so much more, we also develop a deep desire to share what we have with others. This allows our natural selfish nature to evolve into selflessness. Suddenly then, we find more beauty in life. We see it more often and more clearly in all that is around us and

Beauty becomes not just what we see outside, but what is actually in our hearts—it becomes our inner compass, who we are. Beauty in music, art, and nature penetrates our very soul when we have a spirit of gratitude. We see things differently. We face things differently.

The more grateful we are, the more we see and feel beauty around us—not just in the things we see, but in our interactions with others, in the trials we face. We look beyond ourselves, beyond our own suffering and instead of thinking of nothing but how miserable our conditions are, we think of the ways we can lift and help others who are suffering. We have a desire to serve more, to give more, to love more.

It has been said that gratitude is the cure for pride. I believe this with all confidence. But I also believe it is so much more. It is the cure for selfishness, for self-pity, doubt and despair. It allows us to see beyond our suffering. We actually become grateful for the opportunity to be challenged, wonder what we can learn from it, how we can remain true to ourselves in spite of it, and become a better person because of it. That is what Viktor Frankl learned, that is what he shares in his book.

It was the beauty within the hearts of the prisoners in the concentration camps that led them to think beyond themselves, to rise above and see beyond their dire conditions; to bear their burdens and see the need in others more than themselves—even though they were suffering equally, and sometimes even more. They found their purpose, their meaning, and beauty filled their soul—it became who they were inside and no concentration camp could take that away. When we can reach that place we can find beauty in everything, no matter how hard the world tries to hide it, and we will be filled with profound gratitude. When we reach that place we will have reached the pinnacle of self-governance and we will at last comprehend the true depth and nature of freedom.

“The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe.”

~H.L. Mencken



*Enjoy the little things,
for one day you may
look back and realize
they were the big things.*

~Robert Brault



*Those who sacrifice
liberty for security
deserve neither and
will lose both.*

~Ben Franklin

