

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Looking for meaning in suffering

Six weeks into the lockdown because of the pandemic, we're all wondering when this is going to end.

Seemingly overnight, millions of Americans lost their jobs, and many are wondering if employment will still be there when the lockdowns end.



Commentary by
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Experts warn it may be years, not months, before life returns to pre-pandemic norms.

There's a lot of fear and suffering out there.

No one knew more about human suffering and despair than Viktor Frankl.

As a young Viennese psychiatrist, Frankl and his family were deported in 1942 to the first of several concentration camps where he was imprisoned until liberated by the American Army in April 1945.

His mother, father, brother, and wife were among millions of Jews killed in the camps.

Frankl related his experiences and philosophy in his 1946 book, "Man's Search For Meaning." Nearly 75 years later, the book is still in print. It has been translated into a score of languages and has sold more

than 12 million copies. It is considered one of the most influential books of the 20th century.

It's a short book. The first half described Frankl's experiences in the concentration camps. Upon arrival at a camp, the vast majority of prisoners were gassed naked, given up their clothes and all their possessions, and had their heads shaved before heading into the "showers."

The "lucky ones," like Frankl, were assigned to work camps, where most eventually died from cold, starvation, brutality, suicide (often by running into electrified wire fences) or diseases like typhus which swept through the camps.

Frankl said he lost everything that could be taken from a person "except the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Although the odds of surviving a work camp were less than 1 in 20, some did survive.

And when they returned to their home towns, they learned that the loved ones they had dreamed about were gone, never to return. The general populace was indifferent — "We did not know about it."

"A man who for years thought he had reached the absolute of all possible suffering now found that suffering has no limits, and that he could suffer still more, and still more intensely," Frankl wrote.

The second half of Frankl's book gives his prescription for finding meaning and the will to live, even in suffering.

"We had to learn ourselves, and furthermore we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life but instead to think of ourselves who were being questioned by life, daily and hourly.

"Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill tasks which it sets for each individual."

During his post-war years as a therapist dealing with severely depressed patients, Frankl would ask, "Why do you not commit suicide?" The answers he received — love of one's children, a talent to be used, or perhaps only fond memories, Frankl employed to help people find their own meaning in life, even a troubled life.

Meaning, Frankl preached, is deeper than logic.

