**Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything**

By Viktor E. Frankl

Book Excerpts

**Introduction:**

There are three main ways people find fulfillment of their life meaning, in Frankl's view, First, there is action, such as creating a work, whether art or a labor of love - something that outlasts us and continues to have an impact.  Second, he says, meaning can be found in appreciating nature, works of art, or simply loving people; Frankl cites Kierkegaard, that the door to happiness always opens outward. The third lies in how a person adapts and reacts to unavoidable limits on their life possibilities, such as facing their own death or enduring a dreadful fate like the concentration camps.

“if I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?”  For Frankl, This suggests that each of us has our unique life purpose and that serving others ennobles it.

Our lives continually posed the question of our lives meaning, a query we answer by how we respond to life.

Frankl's intuitive sense of how purpose matters has been borne out by a large body of research.  For instance, having a sense of purpose in life offers a buffer against poor health. People with a life purpose, data shows, tend to live longer.  And researchers find that having a purpose numbers among the pillars of well-being.

Whoever has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*, as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared.

The lesson Frankl drew from this existential fact: our perspective on life's events - what we make of them - matters as much or more than what actually befalls us. “Fate” is what happens to us beyond our control.  But we each are responsible for how we relate to those events.

**On The Meaning and Value of Life:**

Kant himself, in the second formulation of his categorical imperative, said that everything has value, but man has his dignity - a human being should never become a means to an end.

... inner progress is only actually possible for each individual, while mass progress at most consists of technical progress, which only impresses us because we live in a technical age. Our actions can now only arise from our pessimism; We are still only able to seize the opportunities in life from a standpoint of skepticism, while the old optimism would just slow us into complacency and induce fatalism, albeit a rosy fatalism.

... The fact of being is always more pivotal than the word…. each of us actualizes the content in our own act of being. That which is actualized is also much more effective. Words alone are not enough.

... As soon as we notice any pedagogical tendency in a role model, we become resentful; We human beings do not like to be lectured to like children.

What has come through to us from the past? Two things: everything depends on the individual human being, regardless of how small a number of like-minded people there is, and everything depends on each person, through action and not mere words, creatively making the meaning of life a reality in his or her own being.

Doubt about the meaningfulness of human existence can easily lead to despair.

That someone is tired, feels exhausted, is in itself not a reason for them to stop in their tracks. Rather, everything depends on whether carrying on does actually have meaning, whether that makes it worth overcoming the tiredness. What is needed here is simply an answer to the question of the meaning of life, of continuing to live despite persistent world-weariness.

... The average person experiences significantly more feelings of dissatisfaction than feelings of pleasure. Therefore, from the outset, it would not be possible to live only for the sake of pleasure.

Pleasure in itself cannot give our existence meaning; thus, the lack of pleasure cannot take away meaning from life…

Poem by Rabindranath Tagore:

*I slept and dreamt*

*That life was joy.*

*I woke and saw*

*that life was duty.*

*I worked- and behold,*

*duty was joy*

…life is somehow duty, a single, huge obligation. And there is certainly joy in life too, but it cannot be pursued, cannot be willed into being as joy; Rather, it must arise spontaneously, and in fact, it does arise spontaneously, just as an outcome may arise to: happiness should not, must not, and can never be a goal, but only an outcome; The outcome of the fulfillment of that which in Tagore's poem is called duty.

It was Kierkegaard who told the wise parable that the door to happiness always opens outward, which means it closes itself precisely against the person who tries to push the door to happiness “inward,” …

The question can no longer be *“What can I expect from life?”* But can now only be *“What does life expect of me?”*  What task in life is waiting for me?

Living itself means nothing other than being questioned; the whole act of being is nothing more than responding to - of being responsible toward- life.

Whether a life is fulfilled doesn't depend on how great one’s range of action is, but rather only on whether the circle is filled out ... In his specific life circle, every single human being is irreplaceable and inimitable and that is true for everyone. The task that his life imposes are only for him, and only he is required to fulfill them.

…we know how much “morality” means: the unshakable belief in an unconditional meaning to life that, one way or another, makes life bearable. Because we have experienced the reality that human beings are truly prepared to starve if starvation has a purpose or meaning.

It is not only through our actions that we can give life meaning - insofar as we can answers life specific questions responsibly - we can fulfill the demands of existence not only as active agents but also as loving human beings: in our loving dedication to the beautiful, the great, the good.

We give life meaning not only through our actions but also through loving and, finally, through suffering. Because how human beings deal with the limitation of their possibilities regarding how it affects their actions and their ability to love, how they behave under these restrictions - the way in which they accept their suffering under such restrictions - in all this they will still remain capable of fulfilling human values.

“There is no predicament which cannot be ennobled either by achievement or by endurance,” said Goethe. *Either we change our fate, if possible, or willingly accept it, if necessary.*

So, fate is a part of our lives and so is suffering; therefore, if life has meaning, suffering also has meaning. Consequently suffering, as long as it is necessary and unavoidable, also holds the possibility of being meaningful.

…life always offers us a possibility for the fulfillment of meaning, therefore there is always the option that it has meaning.

…the fact, and only the fact, that we are mortal, that our lives are finite, that our time is restricted and our possibilities are limited, this fact is what makes it meaningful to do something, to exploit a possibility and make it become a reality, to fulfill it, to use our time and occupy it. Death gives us a compulsion to do so. Therefore, death forms the background against which being active becomes a responsibility.

…it is precisely the uniqueness of our existence in the world, the irretrievability of our lifetime, the irrevocability of everything with which we fill it - or leave unfulfilled - that gives our existence significance. But it is not only the uniqueness of an individual life as a whole that gives it importance, but it is also the uniqueness of every day, every hour, every moment that represents something that loads our existence with the weight of a terrible yet so beautiful responsibility!

Kant’s well-known maxim, which goes like this: “*Live as if you were living for the second time and as if you acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now.”*

Individuality can only be valuable when it is not individuality for its own sake but individuality for the human community.

Hillel, a founder of the Talmud, made into his motto almost 2,000 years ago: If I do not do it, who else will do it? But if I only do it for me, what am I then?  And if I do not do it now, then where will I do it? “If not I” - therein lies the uniqueness of every single person;  “If only for me,” therein lies the worthlessness and meaninglessness of such uniqueness unless it is a serving uniqueness; “and if now,” therein lies uniqueness of every individual situation!

... life itself means being questioned, means answering; each person must be responsible for their own existence. Life no longer appears to us as a given, but as something given over to us, it is a sk in every moment. This, therefore, means that it can only become more meaningful the more difficult it becomes.

“Life is not something, it is the opportunity for something!”

**On The Meaning and Value of Life II:**

... If life has a meaning, then suffering must also have a meaning.

It is the case that the abnormal reaction (agitated, emotional) to an abnormal situation represents normal behavior.

We have already heard that the fulfillment of meaning is possible in three main directions: human beings are able to give meaning to their existence, firstly, by doing something, by acting, by creating - by bringing a work into being; Secondly, by experiencing something - nature, art - or loving people; and thirdly, human beings are able to find meaning even where finding value in life is not possible for them in either the first or the second way - namely, precisely when they take a stance toward the unalterable, fated, inevitable, and unavoidable limitation of their possibilities: how they adapt to this limitation, react toward it, how they accept this fate.

…the question that f life asks us changes both from person to person, and from situation to situation.

…illness does not necessarily involve a loss of meaning, an impoverishment in the ing of our existence; but depending on the possibilities, it is always something meaningful. That a loss of meaning does not necessarily have to occur, even when a person suffers a physical loss to his body…

For somehow all of our lives are ultimately unsuccessful, to the extent that we understand success as only being external success: no external success, no effect, that is to say,no biological or sociological influence out there in the world, is guaranteed to outlive us or even to last forever. However, inner success, the inner fulfillment of life's meaning, is something that, if at all, has been achieved “once and for always.” The fact that this goal is often only reached at the end of our existence does not detract from the meaning of life but rounds off this “end” to become a true completion.

…indeed, one cannot earn love; love is not a reward, but a blessing. On the path of love a person thus receives by “grace” the things he would otherwise have to strive for or obtain through action: the realization of both his uniqueness and his individuality. For it is the nature of love that makes us see our loved one in their uniqueness and individuality.

... Even where we as doctors are confronted with a fait accompli where a person has proved through his or her actions that they no longer have the will to live. I mean the suicides. And I take the position that even in the case of an actual suicide attempt, the doctor not only has the right but also the duty to intervene medically, and that means to save and help if, and to the extent that, he can.

If, at first, life as such proof to be meaningful to us, it later emerged that even suffering contributes to meaning and is part of the meaning of life. And then we saw that even dying can have meaning, that it can be meaningful “to die one's own death.” And finally, it has been seen that even illness, even incurable illness, yes even incurable mental illness, does not give anyone the right to judge a human life as being “unworthy of life” and deny them the right to life.

…the answers that we must give to life’s specific questions can no longer exist in words but only in deeds, and more than that in living, in a whole being! The questions of “our lives” can, as we felt, only by answered by each of us being responsible for our own lives.

I believe that here we are presented with two major options for a way of thinking, each of which is irrefutable, and unproveable! After all, we could well assert that everything is, in the end, completely meaningless, just as we could state that everything is not only highly meaningful but so meaningful that we can no longer comprehend the meaning of the whole, this universal meaning; That we could, in fact, only speak of an ultimate meaning of the world. Therefore, one could argue for the total meaninglessness of the world with the same justification as one could argue for the ultimate meaning of the world.

But we do know one thing: if a human being decides to believe in an ultimate meaning, in the super-meaning of being, then this belief, like every belief, will have a creative effect. Because belief is not just belief in one's “own” truth, it is more much more: belief brings into being that which is believed! Therefore, we can say that to decide on *one particular* option for our way of thinking is more than the *mere choice* of a possibility of thinking - it is the *bringing into being of this mere option of thought.*

**Experimentum Crucis:**

It is not true that the experience of the concentration camp drove people to regression out of a fateful necessity and forced them internally to take a step backward. I know of many cases - and even though they are individual ones, they still have fundamental evidential value - in which the people concerned, far from inwardly regressing, instead made inner progress, growing beyond themselves and achieving true human greatness, even in the concentration camp and precisely through their experience of the concentration camp.

... The person in the concentration camp is by no means under any external compulsion to get involved in directing his inner development toward the becoming of the Kretschmer’s typical schizoid, …but that instead, he retains freedom, the human freedom to adapt to his fate, his environment, in one way or another - and indeed there was a one way or another! And there were people in the camp, who for example, were able to overcome their apathy and suppressed the irritability, and in the end, it was a question of appealing to their ability to “do things differently” and not just the supposed compulsion to “do things this way!” Their inner ability, that real human freedom - they could not take that away from the prisoner, even if, in there, they could take everything else away from him and, in fact, did so.

Even if a man lapsed into the psychological conformity of the concentration camp, he nevertheless had the freedom to escape the power and influence of that environment and not to be governed by those rules but to resist them, to withdraw from them instead of obeying them blindly.

…not only life itself but also the suffering involved has a meaning, and in fact, the meaning that is so unconditional that it can be fulfilled even where the suffering does not lead to outward success, where it looks as though the suffering was in vain. And it was mainly such suffering that we had to deal with in the concentration camps.

…The human psyche seems to behave in some ways like a vaulted arch - and arch that has become dilapidated can be supported by placing extra load on it. The human soul also appears to be strengthened by experiencing a burden (at least to a particular degree and within certain limits). This is how, and this is the only way we can understand it, many a weakling was able to leave the concentration camp in a better, stronger state of mind, as it were, then when he had entered it.

... no human suffering can be compared to anyone else is because it is part of the nature of suffering that is the suffering of a particular person, that it is his or her own suffering - that its “magnitude” is dependent solely on the sufferer, that is, on the person; a person solitary suffering is just as unique and individual as is every person.

…It would be pointless to speak of differences in the magnitude of suffering; but a difference that truly matters is that between meaningful and meaningless suffering.

Should the decent person really be held accountable for the offenses of others, even if the offenders belong to the same nation? Was he, this decent man, not himself the victim of an offence, the object of a terror that is carried out by a ruling, leading class of his own people without him being able to stand up against the terror? Did he not suffer under it himself? Would not the establishment of collective guilt be a relapse into exactly that worldview that we want to combat?... Holding someone to account because of their nationality, native language, or place of birth must seem as ridiculous to us today as making them responsible for their own height.

…We have to make an important distinction: we have to differentiate between collective guilt and collective liability... Liability without guilt definitely exists. And it is a similar situation now with the collective of people who are collectively freed from terror. They could not liberate themselves; Other collectives, other freedom-loving nations had to step in, join the battle, and sacrifice their best people, their youth, to liberate a nation that was powerless against its own leadership, from those leaders. This powerlessness had nothing to do with guilt but would it be unfair, unjust, to have to pay for this liberation with some kind of sacrifice and to feel jointly liable even if you are not complicit and knew you were not guilty?

... In the final analysis, it was necessary to point out that the eternal refers back to the temporal- to the temporal, the every day, and the point of an ongoing encounter between the finite and the infinite. What we create, experience, and suffer, in this time, we create, experience, and suffer for all eternity. As far as we bear responsibility for an event, as far as it is “history,” our responsibility, it is incredibly burdened by the fact that something has happened that cannot be taken out of the world. However, at the same time an appeal is made to our responsibility- precisely to bring what has not yet happened into the world! And each of us must do this as part of our daily work, as part of our everyday lives. So everyday life becomes the reality per se, and this reality becomes a potential for action. And so, the metaphysics of everyday life only at first leads us out of everyday life, but then - consciously and responsibly - leads us back to everyday life

Responsibility is something that one is both drawn to and withdrawing from…If we delve into the nature of human responsibility, we recoil: there is something terrible about the responsibility of a human being - at the same time something glorious!

To say yes to life is not only meaningful under all circumstances - because life itself is - but it is also possible under all circumstances…and ultimately that was the entire purpose of these three parts: to show you that people can still - despite hardship and death (first part), despite suffering from physical or mental illness (second part) or under the fate of the concentration camp (third part)- siesta life in spite of everything.