

Living Life with a Purpose

During our 170th anniversary dinner some 19 months ago in the Literary Club clubhouse, I sat next to my good friend Nick Ragland who, in the course of the evening, offered this wise advice: “When you wake up each day, you need three things. First, something to do that day; second someone to love and third something to look forward to.” This pithy wisdom seemed especially appropriate for me personally. For some time I had been contemplating what to do with the purported “Golden Years” chapter of my life. I am often asked “when are you going to retire or at least slow down”? Many of my contemporaries have already done so and seem to be coping reasonably well or so they tell me. However, my inner psyche tells me that I am not cut out for weeks, months or perhaps years where every day seems like Sunday. What if I have no sense of accomplishing anything of merit, especially for the betterment of others? What if no one really needs my advice or assistance? What would be my real purpose for getting up each day? Nick’s proverbial words brought these fears and trepidations into clear focus and I have been thinking about these three daily challenges ever since.

Then a few short months later, the Pandemic took hold of all our lives. For most of us, these three questions: What am I going to do today, who or what am I going to love (especially physically), and what do I have to look forward to, became life altering quandaries. I personally am aware of several individuals and couples who became emotionally paralyzed during their months of lock down because of one or more of

these questions. It has been widely documented that in the first year of the Pandemic, mental health issues afflicted a wide swath of individuals who had never previously experienced any signs of depression or lethargy. So much of what had previously given them purpose and meaning had, abruptly and without warning, been taken away and left them to try to lead a life without direction.

As I began thinking about individuals, no longer living, who I would like to spend time with over dinner, it occurred to me that having the opportunity to seek advice and counsel from those who had led a purposeful life would be incredibly helpful. One person immediately came to mind, the eminent 20th century Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankel. One could say he wrote the seminal book on this subject immediately following surviving the horrors of four concentration camps. The book, originally titled “Say Yes to Life in Spite of Everything”, was first published in 1947. Written from the perspective of a skilled psychoanalyst, it is an introspective memoir through almost four years of his confronting inexplicable daily atrocities and inhuman existence. While well received when initially published as a primer in exploring perseverance in the face of hopelessness, it was not until 1964, when Frankel added a second section to the book explaining his unique form of psychotherapy, he termed Logotherapy, that it became a best seller. It was retitled “Man’s Search for Meaning” and has sold over 12 million copies and translated into 45 languages.

We will get to know Victor Frankel and his extraordinary advice for living a meaningful life shortly. First, I would like to tell you

about two people I would want to join in this dinner conversation. They are my parents, Justin Friedman and Frances Friedman Schloss. They exemplified the core tenants of Frankel's Logotherapy throughout their lives without ever having the benefit of meeting or even knowing anything about him. What a treat it would be to have the three of them together and for me to be there listening to the conversation and applying their lessons on living to the fullest to my own questioning.

First, a little background. Both of my parents were born and raised in Cincinnati. Although they grew up within a quarter of a mile from one another, they never met until they were at UC and immediately fell madly in love. My father was selected as the outstanding undergraduate for his theatrical exploits and chosen to appear on the Fred Allen Hour, the nationally top rated weekly radio show in America in the early 1940's. Upon graduation in 1943, he immediately enlisted into the Navy as a commissioned officer. From his first day of midshipmen training through almost three years of service stateside and in the South Pacific, he wrote my mother a combination love letter and insightful eyewitness news dispatch almost every day. She kept every one of the over 500 letters. They are literary masterpieces in their description of his innermost feelings both for her as well as for the world he was living in each day. I have only read a few of them. However, a theme runs throughout. That was his searching, even in his early 20's, for the essential meaning of life, both for himself and humankind.

Here is an abbreviated excerpt from a letter he wrote April 22, 1945 several months after one of the tumultuous and deadly battles of World War 2.

“Dear Darling,

You have asked about Iwo Jima and I think I have mentioned it would be nigh impossible to relate many actual experiences due to rigid censorship onboard ship. One event, which happened about the third or fourth day, stands out in my mind now and I imagine it will forever. This particular morning I was able to watch with the aid of my binoculars from the bridge of our ship, the movement of a small, determined group of marines as they slowly inched their way onward and upward the tallest peak on the island. I turned away for a time to tend to my own work and the next time I glanced far up the summit of Mt. Suribachi, there silhouetted against the beautiful clear blue sky, a few tiny figures were seen cautiously taking the final steps to the top. One marine stepped forward with a rough pole stop, to which was fastened what appeared to be a patch of cloth...a beautiful patch of cloth it turned out to be...the American Flag waving so majestically over the whole of Iwo Jima. I can hardly describe how moving was the sight of the flag fluttering so boldly in the cold February morning. But, my reaction was no different than the others for unconsciously my breath came short and at once I joined in the celebration, yelling hysterically at the top of my voice. The cry of enthusiasm, of joy, of confidence that arose spontaneously from the men on Iwo was the most spectacular thing I have ever witnessed. Talk about patriotism! It was there in all its glory. Take a look at the flag Frances! She is a mighty beautiful

sight. That day far atop Suribachi, blowing so freely in the breeze, she was genuinely exquisite.”

In March 1964, almost exactly 19 years after the searing experience of Iwo Jima, while serving as President of Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati, my father was asked, to present a “Layman’s Sermon” to the Temple’s Brotherhood. It was entitled “This I Believe” and in it he posed the following: “All too well we know that an easy capture of knowledge cannot be ingested like a magic pill to the questions that bother us, such as “What’s the purpose of life, Who are today the thinkers, the martyrs and what did they stand for and believe in? What is expected of us---of our children? Why suffering, why injustice, why pain and especially untimely death?” He told his audience about an experience prior to the invasion of Iwo Jima. The 150 men under his command were about to pilot the landing craft to take the marines ashore for the initial perilous invasion. As there was no chaplain on board ship, the men asked him to say a prayer before going over the side and into withering fire. He quickly decided to recite to the assembled men of all religions and creeds the 23rd Psalm – “The Lord is my shepherd...” He then recounts to his audience the following: “Some ten days later when the battle was over, we stood on deck and pulled anchor of the now nearly deserted troop ship, and took a muster of the men to account for our losses and battle casualties, I can thankfully say that in that fierce battle, where we had lost thirteen of our fourteen landing craft, either from being sunk or shattered on the beaches by wave and gunfire, that not one man had been injured, not one man had been killed, that all had returned safely, weary but sound of body

and limb. I asked myself, was this mere chance of fate? Or somehow, could we interpret this as the will of God, the answer to prayer?" He concluded by saying "Prayer, understanding of my heritage, belief in God, have made my life more meaningful. What about you?"

Fast-forward another 19 years and my father was confronting his own untimely death at the age of 62 under the grip of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis – ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Even without the use of his limbs, tethered to a ventilator and feeding tube, unable to speak or even mouth words, he was still determined to communicate and compose letters. He used the only muscles still working in his body, those above his eyebrows in his forehead, to manipulate a headband connected to a cursor on a primitive 1983 PC. It would take him a day or more to compose even one or at most two sentences, patiently moving the cursor over one character at a time. However, the thoughts he was able to share were those of a person who had an almost incomprehensible will to live life to the fullest, even in the depths of the prison he was condemned to by the disease. The pinnacle of this spiritual clinging to living was when, in a letter to good friends, after describing the utter uselessness of his body, that "my voice is gone – nobody understands me" and lamenting his total dependence on others, he concluded with these haunting words: "My spirits are up and to good friends like you it makes no difference. A little life is better than no life at all. Thank you God."

I would have so welcomed my father and mother hearing firsthand Victor Frankel's interpretation of the three essential ways to find meaning in life. First is through action or creation, a sense of pride in accomplishing something of lasting value. A deed we do - a work we create. Second is experiencing the world around us, by encountering someone or something that leads to passion, joy and abiding love. Third is finding meaning in unavoidable suffering by summoning up personal resilience – and then turning tragedy into triumph. Frankel believed in the possibilities people can create out of their own reality rather than emphasizing their flaws and dark demons. A key principle of Logotherapy is the acceptance of personal responsibility. Frankel did not believe in allowing his patients to feel sorry for their plight. Instead, he helped them find something or someone to look forward to and thereby provide a sense of hope and pathway to a positive life. Living life for a purpose and focusing on future possibilities will help one get through adversity he was fond of saying. I believe Frankel would have agreed that my parents fully exemplified his core principles.

Of Frankel's three answers to the question posed by my father in his 1964 sermon, "What is the purpose of life", it is Frankel's third elucidation that is the perhaps the most difficult to grasp. How do we find meaning in the midst of unavoidable suffering? How do we turn tragedy into triumph? It is for this reason that I would have wanted Frankel to spend time with my mother. During the long years of my father's illness, she provided a life that kept his dignity intact. She always made sure he was included in public functions, dinner parties and entertainment opportunities that came their way. She was a tireless advocate

for his being at the forefront of ALS research making fourteen trips with him to participate in National Institutes of Health experimental trials. She created an in-home triage unit that provided better skilled care than any hospital could have offered. The ultimate fulfillment of her exemplifying Frankel's core teaching was that after the eight years of her husband's debilitating illness was over, she took it upon herself to write and publish a comprehensive guide for in-home care of terminally ill degenerative neurological patients. This guide was quickly adopted as core curriculum by numerous nursing schools. In retrospect, this was her way of finding a purpose in the suffering and tragedy they had both endured. She indeed turned "tragedy into triumph" as best she could.

Interestingly, Frankel described a type of condition he termed "Sunday Neurosis" which he defined as an "existential vacuum – life without meaning or purpose." It occurs to people who do not know how to cope with the one day of their week devoid of content or direction, away from the structure, hubbub and purpose of their daily work life. It becomes debilitating when every day of the week is meaningless. Reflecting back on the life motivators of the three people invited to dinner, and how they so effectively lived a life of purpose and meaning, I feel that I now know how I can avoid this condition where every day could feel like Sunday. Specifically I plan to keep the dinner conversation going with my guests for a long while. Moreover, with Nick's admonition in mind, I most certainly will have something wonderful to look forward to every day.

James J. Friedman – May 24, 2021

