

The Inspirational Life of

Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997)

by William Hansen

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Psychiatrist



Humanitarian

Viktor Frankl, 1975. Copyright:IMAGNO/Viktor Frankl Institut

A Courageous Decision

In order to begin to understand the extent to which his life and work stand today as symbols of strength and unwavering determination in the face of unimaginable suffering, one might first try, as much as it is possible, to imagine what life must have been like for Viktor Frankl living in Vienna in the months and weeks leading up to his internment in a Nazi concentration camp.

In 1942, at the age of thirty-seven, less than one year after being married, Frankl was granted a visa from the United States Consulate in Vienna. Emigration to the United States would allow the gifted doctor to escape the pervasive anti-Semitism by which he was surrounded in his daily life, as well as imminent imprisonment by the Gestapo. The visa, for which Frankl had waited years, also meant that he would be able to continue his very important psychiatric work in a relatively free and unabated intellectual environment.

The one thing that emigration would not allow him to do, however, was to help his family. He would have to leave them to fend for themselves in Vienna.

As the story goes, finding himself at this crucial impasse, Frankl spent hours walking around the city in deep thought. When he arrived at home, he saw that his father had recovered a piece of wreckage from the local synagogue, which had recently been desecrated and burned by the Nazis. As it happened, the piece of debris that Viktor's father had recovered contained an inscription of one of the Ten Commandments: "Honor thy father and mother." The moment he saw the inscription, Frankl knew exactly what he had to do.

Within a few short months, he and his family were deported to the camps.

Founding Principles

Viktor Frankl was one of those rare individuals who had the power to change a person's entire outlook on life using only a few insightful words. During the three years he spent interned in the concentration camps, Frankl was able to provide countless of his fellow prisoners with something that would otherwise be completely improbable while living under such conditions: a belief in the

meaning of their lives and their suffering. Upon being liberated, he would use his experiences in the camps to help innumerable people over the course of the next fifty years, until his death in 1997.

The experiences of the first thirty-five years of Frankl's life would come to play an integral role in honing the skills he would put to use in order to maintain for himself and others the kind of psychological strength needed to survive in the camps. Born in Vienna in 1905, Frankl's early interests in psychology and philosophy eventually led him to the University of Vienna, where he spent a number of years studying medicine, psychiatry, and neurology. In 1933, at the age of twenty-eight, Frankl arrived at the General Hospital in Vienna, where he presided over what was known as the "suicide pavilion"—a job that involved him, on a daily basis, with patients who could no longer find meaning in their lives and who had lost the will to live.

During his four years at this hospital, Frankl has stated that nearly 12,000 patients had been under his care, each of whom could not be released without his authorization. To deal with this "tremendous responsibility," as he called it, he developed a series of questions that he claimed could determine the condition of the patient's mental state in only five minutes. In patients who were asked why they thought they were ready to be released, Frankl would observe two distinct responses: the first type would "sink into the chair, unable to look me in the eye," and would simply say in a "toneless voice" that they would not commit suicide; the other type would "immediately state that he had a duty...some meaning to fulfill," such as something related to their family or their work or their religion, something outside of themselves that gave them a reason to live.

As would soon become the founding principle of Logotherapy, the school of psychology Frankl was to introduce to the world a number of years later, it became clear to the doctor early on that, regardless of the specific circumstances of a person's life, there are three distinct ways in which all humans go about discovering meaning: by creating something or doing a good deed, by experiencing a profound connection with another

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Everything can be taken from a person except what Frankl calls “the last of the human freedoms”—the ability to choose how we approach any situation in which we find ourselves.

person, or by taking a strong stance against and thus remaining spiritually impervious to suffering.

Frankl spent his time in Vienna's General Hospital imparting the philosophy of a “will to meaning” on people who had lost their ability to perceive their own worth. This meant essentially that the doctor would allow the patient to discover meaning in their own way, by their own volition. Frankl believed in a more passive role for the psychiatrist, in a sense that it was his or her task to guide their patient but not to force them. To distinguish between the psychoanalyst and the logotherapist, Frankl would later use the metaphor of the difference between a painter and an eye specialist. “A painter tries to convey to us a picture of the world as he sees it; an ophthalmologist tries to enable us to see the world as it really is.” Instead of looking for an inward meaning, one based in the past, Logotherapy motivated a patient to find meaning outside of him or herself, in some future purpose.

Frankl carried this innovative approach to psychiatry into a private practice that he began in 1937 and then in 1940 to the Rothschild Hospital—at the time, the only remaining hospital in Vienna that would admit Jews. It was in the midst of this environment of extreme hostility and discrimination that Frankl would make the most courageous decision of his life, in a sense sacrificing himself to the uncertainty of imprisonment while nonetheless knowing that in doing so he was giving himself the opportunity to help an enormous group of people for whom all hope would soon be lost.

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To view the entire article, please see the Spring 2007 Issue.