The Miracle of Suffering

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All of us suffer in life. No matter how hard we try, we don't exactly get what we want--whether it's love, success, health, happiness, money, approval, recognition, and so on. Or, maybe we get what we want, and then we want more--we're still not satisfied. Our neighbor has a better car; our friend has a more exciting lover. On top of all these normal disillusionments and disappointments, life adds the realities of loss, aging, deteriorating health, and ultimately death. Is there any way out of our pain and suffering?

Yes, there is, according to one of the greatest psychiatrists in our era, Viktor Frankl, a remarkable individual who knew the depths of suffering first-hand. Dr. Frankl was a survivor of the Jewish concentration camps during World War II's Nazi Germany, where millions of innocent men, women, and children suffered the most horrible conditions, ending in merciless deaths in the infamous gas chambers of the camps.

Yet, despite spending three grueling years in so much suffering, depravity, and death--his friends and all his immediate family (pregnant wife, brother, and parents) died in the camps-- Dr. Frankl, not only survived, but kept his good humor and optimism all throughout. When Dr. Frankl was finally rescued from the camps at the end of World War II, he created the groundbreaking school of psychology called Logotherapy.

Logotherapy means the therapy of meaning. According to Dr. Frankl, the true cause of suffering in our life is not the suffering itself, but the meaning we ascribe to the suffering; how we perceive it, what we do with that suffering.

It is not good to suffer, said Frankl, but if we have to suffer, we should do something good with it. Frankl is talking about the unavoidable sufferings in life--things we cannot avoid, like accidents, mistakes, or just plain bad luck. Despite what happens to us, we can still find a positive meaning in it somehow: we learned a valuable lesson; we became a stronger and more compassionate person. By finding a positive meaning in our suffering, Frankl says, we can recreate our past, and bring light and happiness back into our lives, instead of holding on to regrets, frustrations, and the terrible feeling of deprivation that keeps so many people stuck in fear and depression.

Here is a transformative technique you can use: The Deathbed Movie. Imagine that you're on your deathbed, years from today. See your life as an epic movie, complete with credits (think of the people you would most like to thank). Look over all the highlights--the good and happy times; your love, your children and family, career satisfaction, the friends you made, the people you helped.

But, also see the dark and dramatic parts--the people you lost, the pain you suffered, the loves you shattered, the mistakes you made. See all of it as a beautiful, sad, tragic, lovely, wonderful film that perfectly portrays the imperfectness, yet perfectness, of a human life--Yours. You learned so much from your failures and mistakes--they made you grow; they made you a better person. Now, you can finally embrace your pains and sufferings as being all part of your Life Story. The story that ultimately wins you the Academy Award of Life, and leaves you in a complete state of peace and contentment.

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