INTRODUCTION BY DANIEL GOLEMAN

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

Author of *Man's Search for Meaning*

YES TO LIFE

In Spite of Everything

Copyrighted material

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

YES TO LIFE

In Spite of Everything

INTRODUCTION BY DANIEL GOLEMAN
AFTERWORD BY FRANZ VESELY

BEACON PRESS, BOSTON

Copyrighted material

Beacon Press
Boston, Massachusetts
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books
are published under the auspices of
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Copyright © Viktor E. Frankl, 2019

Original title of the German edition: "Über den Sinn des Lebens" published by © 2019 Beltz Verlag in the publishing group Beltz Weinheim Basel.
First published in English in 2020 by Rider, an imprint of Ebury.
Ebury is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies.

Introduction © Daniel Goleman, 2020

Translated from the German by Joelle Young.

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the uncoated paper ANSI/NISO specifications for permanence as revised in 1992.

Text design and composition by Kim Arney

Note on language: For this new edition, some individual terms of Professor Frankl's that were a natural part of the German general and medical vocabulary at the time of the original publication of the lectures have been carefully changed, as these are no longer acceptable. However, in the English translation, to preserve the flow of Frankl's arguments and the original tone and character of the language he uses, the instances of "he" and "him" have not generally been changed to gender-neutral terms.

Library of Congress control number: 2019059317.

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

Introduction by Daniel Goleman 1

ON THE MEANING
AND VALUE OF LIFE I

19

ON THE MEANING
AND VALUE OF LIFE II

51

EXPERIMENTUM CRUCIS

83

Afterword by Franz Vesely 109

About Viktor E. Frankl 117

Further Works by Viktor E. Frankl 119

About the Viktor Frankl Institute 121

About Daniel Goleman and Franz Vesely 123

Notes 125

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

INTRODUCTION

Saying Yes to Life

IT'S A MINOR MIRACLE THIS BOOK EXISTS. THE LECTURES that form the basis of it were given in 1946 by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl a scant eleven months after he was liberated from a labor camp where, a short time before, he had been on the brink of death. The lectures, edited into a book by Frankl, were first published in German in 1946 by the Vienna publisher Franz Deuticke. The volume went out of print and was largely forgotten until another publisher, Beltz, recovered the book and proposed to republish it. *Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything* has never before been published in English.

During the long years of Nazi occupation, Viktor Frankl's audience for the lectures published in this book had been starved for the moral and intellectual stimulation he offered them and were in dire need of new ethical coordinates. The Holocaust, which saw millions die in concentration camps, included as victims Frankl's parents and his pregnant wife. Yet despite these personal tragedies and the inevitable deep sadness these

Copyrighted material

losses brought Frankl, he was able to put such suffering in a perspective that has inspired millions of readers of his best-known book, *Man's Search for Meaning*—and in these lectures.

He was not alone in the devastating losses and his own near death but also in finding grounds for a hopeful outlook despite it all. The daughter of Holocaust survivors tells me that her parents had a network of friends who, like them, had survived some of the same horrific death camps as Frankl. I had expected her to say that they had a pessimistic, if not entirely depressed, outlook on life.

But, she told me, when she was growing up outside Boston her parents would gather with friends who were also survivors of the death camps—and have a party. The women, as my Russian-born grandmother used to say, would get "gussied up," wearing their finest clothes, decking themselves out as though for a fancy ball. They would gather for lavish feasts, dancing and being merry together—"enjoying the good life every chance they had," as their daughter put it. She remembers her father saying "That's living" at even the slightest pleasures.

As she says, "They never forgot that life was a gift that the Nazi machine did not succeed in taking away from them." They were determined, after all the hells they had endured, to say "Yes!" to life, in spite of everything.

The phrase "yes to life," Viktor Frankl recounts, was from the lyrics of a song sometimes sung *sotto voce* (so

Copyrighted material

as not to anger guards) by inmates of some of the four camps in which he was a prisoner, the notorious Buchenwald among them. The song had bizarre origins. One of the first commanders of Buchenwald—built in 1937 originally to hold political prisoners—ordered that a camp song be written. Prisoners, often already exhausted from a day of hard labor and little food, were forced to sing the song over and over. One camp survivor said of the singing, we "put all our hatred" into the effort.

But for others some of the lyrics expressed hope, particularly this:

. . . Whatever our future may hold:
We still want to say "yes" to life,
Because one day the time will come—
Then we will be free!

If the prisoners of Buchenwald, tortured and worked and starved nearly to death, could find some hope in those lyrics despite their unending suffering, Frankl asks us, shouldn't we, living far more comfortably, be able to say "Yes" to life in spite of everything life brings us?

That life-affirming credo has also become the title of this book, a message Frankl amplified in these talks. The basic themes that he rounded out in his widely read book *Man's Search for Meaning* are hinted at in these lectures given in March and April of 1946, between the time Frankl wrote *Man's Search* and its publication.

Copyrighted material

For me there is a more personal resonance to the theme of *Yes to Life*. My parents' parents came to America around 1900, fleeing early previews of the intense hatred and brutality that Frankl and other Holocaust survivors endured. Frankl began giving these talks in March of 1946, just around the time I was born, my very existence an expression of my parents' defiance of the bleakness they had just witnessed, a life-affirming response to those same horrors.

In the rearview mirror offered by more than seven decades, the reality Frankl spoke to in these talks has long gone, with successive generational traumas and hopes following one on another. We postwar kids were by and large aware of the horrors of the death camps, while today relatively few young people know the Holocaust occurred.

Even so, Frankl's words, shaped by the trials he had just endured, have a surprising timeliness today.

Recognizing a "Big Lie" was a homework assignment in the civics class at my California high school, the Big Lie being a standard ploy in propaganda. For the Nazis, one Big Lie was that so-called Aryans were a supposed "master race," somehow ordained to rule the world. The defeat of the Nazis put that fantasy to rest.

As World War II ended and the specter of the Cold War rose, with it came the threat that Russians, too, would

Copyrighted material

make propaganda a weapon in their arsenal. And, so, high school students of my era learned to spot and counter malicious half-truths.

As an inoculation against lies coming from Russia at the time, we learned to spot the rudiments of such disinformation, the Big Lie among them. Propaganda, as we learned in my civics class, relies on not just lies and misinformation but also on distorted negative stereotypes, inflammatory terms, and other such tricks to manipulate people's opinions and beliefs in the service of some ideological agenda.

Propaganda had played a major role in shaping the outlook of people ruled by the Axis powers. Hitler had argued that people would believe anything if it was repeated often enough and if disconfirming information was routinely denied, silenced, or disputed with yet more lies. Frankl knew well the toxicity of propaganda deployed by the Nazis in their rise to power and beyond. It was aimed, he saw, at the very value of existence itself, asserting the worthlessness of life—at least for anyone, like himself, who fell into a maligned category, like gypsies, gays, Jews, and political dissidents, among others.

When he was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl himself became a victim of such systematic lies, brutalized by guards who saw him and his fellow prisoners as less than human. When he gave the lectures in this book a scant nine months after his liberation from the Turkheim labor camp, Frankl began his talk

Copyrighted material

by decrying the negative propaganda that had destroyed any sense of meaning, human ethics, and the value of life.

As he and all those in his Viennese audience knew well, the Nazis had honed their propaganda skills to a high level. But the kind of civics lesson that taught how to spot such distortions of truth is long gone.

Throughout the centuries, as today, the same disinformation playbook has been put to use by authoritarian rulers worldwide. The signs are clear: shutting down opposition media, quashing dissident voices, and jailing journalists who dare to report something other than the prevailing party line. The danger of substituting for real, objective news instead sets of lies, flimsy conspiracy theories, and us-versus-them hatreds has been amplified by digital media, where those who share beliefs in some or another distorted outlook can find online refuge among others whose minds are likewise set in a sympathetic worldview—and encounter no disconfirming evidence. Niche propaganda rules.

I don't recall the specific Big Lie that turned up in my homework. But I can think of several that were revealed in successive decades. One was about smoking. The US government had made a point of giving cigarettes to Allied troops in Europe and Asia—and so hooked a generation on a habit that, in the end, shortened their lives. When I was young, smoking was seen as glamorous (advertising, too, can partake of the Big Lie). Now we know that habit heightens the likelihood of cancer and heart disease, and an earlier death.

Copyrighted material

Another Big Lie had to do with my local power company, PG&E. When I was young, that utility had the image of being trustworthy. These days we know once that public utility became a private company, greed and the bottom line meant that profits were taken rather than putting money into repairing and maintaining the outfit's infrastructure. And today that once reliable organization has been the cause of countless wildfires—and has gone into bankruptcy.

The kind of lesson I had in spotting propaganda has long since dropped off the school curriculum. Yet it seems the time has again come when simple truths and basic human values need defending against the dangerous tides of hatred-spewing propagandists. Is it time again to bring back civics—lessons in speaking up, being a responsible citizen, and spotting today's Big Lies?

That's happening a bit already: new initiatives all over the country—indeed the world—are working to ensure that middle and high school students are taught lessons in these crucial areas.

In an age when media of every kind have become tools of persuasion and propaganda, these are the kinds of questions any of us might do well to ask.

It might seem odd to readers today that Frankl spends a good deal of time refuting the assumption underlying euthanasia—not in its literal meaning, a "good," gentle, and painless death but rather in its perverse sense: that

Copyrighted material

certain lives have no value, including those of the mentally ill and developmentally challenged, and so their deaths are justified.

The Nazis had murdered such people, no doubt a fact quite fresh in Frankl's mind just months after the war ended. As a psychiatrist, Frankl would have been acutely aware of the "euthanasia" policy that killed people like his former charges at the institution where he had worked before the war.

Frankl argues that suffering, even incurable illness and the inner dignity of dying "one's own death," can prove meaningful. In the face of death, for instance, there can still be an inner success, whether in maintaining a certain attitude or given the fulfillment of that person's life's meaning. So, he contends, no one has the right to judge another person's life as meaningless, or to deem another as unworthy of the right to life. Frankl himself had just recently been freed from the camps where the lives of inmates like him "counted for nothing."

While the Holocaust rightly counts as an evil perpetrated on ethnic, political, and religious groups deemed by the Nazis as worthless, the extermination policy was also applied to those with mental handicaps in huge numbers—several hundred thousand by some counts. The approach had, oddly, originated in the American "eugenics" movement, a form of social Darwinism that justified a society in ridding itself of those who were deemed unfit, often through forced sterilization. That

Copyrighted material

argument was carried to its logical, if horrific, fulfillment by the Nazis.

Murdering such people has, blessedly, largely vanished around the globe as a tactic for dealing with those once deemed "undesirable." Today's disputes around euthanasia revolve around the "good death" sense of the term, in which a terminally ill person, typically in great pain, opts for suicide to put an end to their own suffering.

Frankl's main contribution to the world of psychotherapy was what he called "logotherapy," which treats psychological problems by helping people find meaning in their lives. Rather than just seeking happiness, he proposed, we can seek a sense of purpose that life offers us.

Happiness in itself does not qualify as such a purpose; pleasures do not give our life meaning. In contrast, he points out that even the dark and joyless episodes of our lives can be times when we mature and find meaning. He even posits that the more difficult, the more meaningful troubles and challenges can be. How we deal with the tough parts of our lives, he observes, "shows who we are."

If we can't change our fate, at least we can accept it, adapt, and possibly undergo inner growth even in the midst of troubles. This approach was part of a school known as "existential therapy," which addresses the larger issues of life, like dealing with suffering and dying—all of

Copyrighted material

which Frankl argued are better handled when a person has a clear sense of purpose. Existential therapies, including Frankl's version, blossomed particularly as part of the humanistic psychology movement that peaked in the 1970s and continued in successive decades. To be sure, a robust lineage of logotherapy and existential analysis continues to this day.

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. In short, our lives take on meaning through our actions, through loving, and through suffering.

Here I'm reminded of life advice from the Dalai Lama on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, when I wrote *A Force for Good: The Dalai Lama's Vision for Our World.* First, he recommended, gain some internal control over your own mind and how you react to life's difficulties. Then, adopt an ethic of compassion and altruism, the urge to help others. Finally, act on that outlook in whatever ways your life offers.

Copyrighted material

Frankl cites a converging formulation from Rabbi Hillel almost two thousand years ago. The translation I know best goes: "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. The scope and range of our actions matter less than how well we respond to the specific demands of our life circle.

A common thread in these disparate words of wisdom comes down to the ways we respond to life's realities moment to moment, in the here and now, as revealing our purpose in an ethics of everyday life. Our lives continually pose the question of our life's meaning, a query we answer by how we respond to life.

To be sure, Frankl saw human frailty, too. Each of us, he notes, is imperfect—but imperfect in our own way. He put a positive spin on this, too, concluding that our unique strengths and weaknesses make each of us uniquely irreplaceable.

The great majority of those who, like Frankl, were liberated from Nazi concentration camps chose to leave for other countries rather than return to their former homes, where far too many neighbors had turned murderous. But Viktor Frankl chose to stay in his native Vienna after being freed and became head of neurology at a main hospital in Vienna.

Copyrighted material

The Austrians he lived among often perplexed Frankl by saying they did not know a thing about the horrors of the camps he had barely survived. For Frankl, though, this alibi seemed flimsy. These people, he felt, had *chosen* not to know.

Another survivor of the Nazis, the social psychologist Ervin Staub, was saved from a certain death by Raoul Wallenberg, the diplomat who made Swedish passports for thousands of desperate Hungarians, keeping them safe from the Nazis. Staub studied cruelty and hatred, and he found one of the roots of such evil to be the turning away, choosing not to see or know, of bystanders. That not-knowing was read by perpetrators as a tacit approval. But if instead witnesses spoke up in protest of evil, Staub saw, it made such acts more difficult for the evildoers.

For Frankl, the "not-knowing" he encountered in postwar Vienna was regarding the Nazi death camps scattered throughout that short-lived empire, and the obliviousness of Viennese citizens to the fate of their own neighbors who were imprisoned and died in those camps. The underlying motive for not-knowing, he points out, is to escape any sense of responsibility or guilt for those crimes. People in general, he saw, had been encouraged by their authoritarian rulers not to know—a fact of life today as well.

That same plea of innocence, *I had no idea*, has contemporary resonance in the emergence of an intergenerational tension. Young people around the world are angry at older generations for leaving as a legacy to

Copyrighted material

them a ruined planet, one where the momentum of environmental destruction will go on for decades, if not centuries.

This environmental not-knowing has gone on for centuries, since the Industrial Revolution. Since then we have seen the invention of countless manufacturing platforms and processes, most all of which came to be in an era when we had no idea of their ecological impacts. Advances in science and technology are making ecological impacts more transparent, and so creating options that address the climate crisis and, hopefully, will be pursued across the globe and over generations.

Such disruptive, truly "green" alternatives are one way to lessen the bleakness of Earth 2.0—the planet in future decades—a compelling fact of life for today's young. Were Frankl with us today (he died in 1997), he would no doubt be pleased that so many of today's younger people are choosing to know and are finding purpose and meaning in surfacing environmental facts and acting on them.

In light of the wholesale madness that afflicted too much of the "civilized" world during the great war that had just passed, Frankl felt the younger generation of his day no longer had the kind of role models that would give them a sense of enthusiastic idealism, the energy that drives progress. The young people who had witnessed the war, he felt, had seen too much cruelty, pointless suffering,

Copyrighted material