



Prisoners of Our Thoughts

Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work

By Alex Pattakos

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Introduction

Life, it seems, just happens to us. Not only do we rationalize our responses to life but we also fall prey to forces that work to limit our potential as human beings. By viewing ourselves as relatively powerless and driven by our instincts, we find it difficult to grasp the possibility that we create, or at least co-create, our own reality.

Instead, we lock ourselves inside our own mental prisons. We lose sight of our own natural potential, as well as that of others. Viktor Frankl wrote that "each of us has his own inner concentration camp," which we must deal with through "forgiveness and patience — as full human beings; as we are and as we will become."

It's through our own search for meaning that we're able to reshape our patterns of thinking, "unfreeze" ourselves from our limited perspectives, find the keys and unlock the doors of our metaphorical prison cells.

Viktor Frankl

Frankl was a psychiatrist who suffered through imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. He found meaning because of, and in spite of, the suffering around him. His life's work resulted in the therapeutic approach called Logotherapy, which paved the way to the knowledge of meaning as a foundation of our existence.

Frankl stressed that traumatic suffering such as

he experienced isn't a prerequisite for finding meaning in our lives. If and when we suffer, no matter what the severity, we have the ability to find meaning in the situation. Choosing to do so is the path to a meaningful life. And a meaningful life includes meaningful work.

Seven core principles emerge from Frankl's work:

1. We're free to choose our attitude toward everything that happens to us.
2. We can realize our will to meaning by making a conscious commitment to meaningful values and goals.
3. We can find meaning in all of life's moments.
4. We can learn to see how we work against ourselves.
5. We can look at ourselves from a distance and gain insight and perspective as well as laugh at ourselves.
6. We can shift our focus of attention when coping with difficult situations.
7. We can reach out beyond ourselves and make a difference in the world.

Labyrinths of Meaning

In the workplace we can either choose actively to look for and find meaning or we can see our jobs as something outside our "real" lives. If we choose the latter, we cheat ourselves out of an enormous amount of life experience.

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What if, however, our jobs are mundane — repetitive and boring?

Our first task is to stop complaining. If we're honest, we know how happy it can make us to find something to complain about at work. It's even more fun if we really do have something, or someone, to complain about.

We often make meaning by complaining. This can feel momentarily satisfying but ultimately it undermines the integrity of our experience. It takes the meaning out of our work and out of our relationship to our work.

That doesn't mean we don't need to complain once in a while, perhaps even to whine and groan about our jobs. What it means is that we need to be aware of when and why we're complaining. Is it to bring about a simple moment of relief? Or have we started to define our work by habitually negative perceptions? From now on, ask yourself why you complain and, perhaps more important, what's the payoff from your complaining?

Remember also that the great complaint carnival isn't a celebration, it's a bandwagon of misery. Our complaints trivialize our experience — both at work and in our personal lives. When we complain, we disconnect. We perpetuate an old community of victimization and helplessness.

But when we take time to communicate about our fears and insecurities — our real lives — we connect on a deeper, authentic level. When we connect through this deeper humanness, we create a new community of support and possibility.

Our lives present us with a labyrinth of meaning, and so do our jobs. And it's not always evident. Life and relationships unfold. They change. We change. Sometimes we embrace the process; sometimes we change our circumstances and start over again. This is true in work as well as in our private lives.

It's part of the labyrinth of our life. We're on one path and it takes us through many turns of fate and fortune, pain and pleasure, loss and gain. It's a path that shapes us, that uncovers our fears, that tests our courage and that leads us to this very moment.

1. Exercise the Freedom to Choose Your Attitude

The day Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, was watching and thought he detected a glimpse of anger for an instant

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as Mandela stepped out towards the waiting crowd. Later, when the two were presidents of their countries, and because Mandela had always been a model of reconciliation with no spirit of revenge or negativism, Clinton candidly asked for an explanation of what had seemed to occur that historic day.

Mandela confirmed that Clinton had been right: "That day when I stepped out of prison and looked at the people observing, a flush of anger hit me with the thought that they had robbed me of 27 years. Then the spirit of Jesus said to me, 'Nelson, while you were in prison you were free. Now that you are free don't become their prisoner.'"

Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but the last of human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way." The freedom to choose is ours in every aspect of our lives.

Here's an exercise to understand how this power is open to you. Think of a situation at work or in your personal life that was particularly stressful, negative or challenging for you, and write down 10 positive things that could result — or did result — from the situation. Then let those positive options become possible in your frame of reference for the situation.

2. Realize Your Will to Meaning

Many corporate leaders seek pleasure or power, following what Sigmund Freud called the "will to pleasure" path or Alfred Adler the "will to power" path. Frankl would say, however, that both paths are manifestations

that something is missing in the lives of people caught up in them. The need or drive to seek pleasure or power is really just an attempt to cover up, but not necessarily fill, a void of meaning that exists in their lives.

Put differently, because their will to meaning has been frustrated, for whatever reasons, they choose alternative paths to follow — paths based on the premise that pleasure and/or power will somehow be able to replace what has been missing.

The will to meaning comes from within. Only we ourselves can find it, control it and fulfill it. It's meaning that sustains us throughout our lives, no matter how little or how much power and pleasure come our way. Most important of all, meaning sustains us through any pain and suffering we must endure.

3. Detect the Meaning of Life's Moments

We don't create meaning; we find it. And we can't find it if we don't look for it. Meaning comes to us in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it looms big in our lives; sometimes it slips by almost unobserved.

But although we aren't always aware of it, meaning, Frankl would say, is in every present moment. It goes without saying — wherever we go. All we have to do, in daily life and at work, is to wake up to the meaning and take note.

On a broader scale, a catalyst for reflecting on the meaning of your entire life is to imagine what you'd want the obituary in your local newspaper to say after you've died. How do you want to be remembered?

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What are the most important things you've experienced in your life? This will help you step outside yourself and see the big picture of your life — the ultimate meaning, as Frankl would say.

By remaining aware of the need to detect and learn from the meaning of life's moments, you ensure that you don't become a prisoner of your thoughts. And by focusing on meaning's big picture, your search for ultimate meaning begins but never ends.

4. Don't Work Against Yourself

Have you ever worked so hard at something that the more you tried, the harder the task became and the farther away you seemed to get from your goal — one step forward, two steps backward?

When we look for meaning, there's meaning in the looking. It's right here all around us, with us, beyond us. But if we try too hard to create meaning, it can often backfire, especially at work.

We want to please, to perform well and to be effective at what we do. And it's often when we want to impress others the most that we undermine ourselves. Our thoughts go out beyond our situation. We become obsessed with results and overlook the very success we're searching for.

Fears and anxieties can also derail us. Frankl helped his patients overcome irrational fears and anxieties by welcoming or exaggerating the fear. That dramatically reduced or even eliminated the phobia. In your own life, try to lighten up, tap into your sense of humor and let go to see difficult situations from a different perspective.

5. Look at Yourself from a Distance

In one of his books, Viktor Frankl quoted an ad in a London newspaper: "Unemployed. Brilliant mind offers its services completely free; the survival of the body must be provided for by adequate salary."

The person who placed the ad turned a dire situation into something humorous because she was able to put some distance between herself and the issue at hand. She was able to look at herself from some distance as well, which, among other things, allowed her to find meaning in her plight and take appropriate action to remedy her situation.

Frankl believed that if there's one trait that distinguishes our humanness, it's our sense of humor. Humor about ourselves represents the essence of self-detach-

ment, telling others we don't take ourselves too seriously. It can take the edge off every serious work situation.

When we detach ourselves from ourselves and our situation, we don't diminish the circumstances, we go beyond them. We can see, feel and appreciate ourselves as separate from the distress. We don't deny it — we accept and rise above it.

6. Shift the Focus of Attention

As children we were naturally resilient — nothing kept us down for long. Our attention spans were short, our interests many, and our involvement with whatever was happening was complete.

Most of us knew instinctively how to “think of something else” should someone hurt our feelings, steal our toys or eat our candy. We might yell and scream for a few moments, but not for long.

It wasn't natural to hold on to our thoughts, to become obsessed about wrongdoings. We'd simply get on to the next big adventure. There was always something more exciting to think about.

It's when we're grown up that this skill gets shelved. As adults we learn to think things through, which is useful. But when thinking becomes obsession and we dwell repeatedly on negative things, it isn't useful anymore. We need to dust off those old childhood skills, think about something else and get on with life.

7. Extend Beyond Yourself

When we work creatively and productively with others, our experience of meaning can be profound. When we work directly for the good of others, meaning deepens in ways that reward us beyond measure. Whenever we go beyond satisfying our own personal needs, we enter the realm of what Frankl called “ultimate meaning.”

When we work to bring meaning to a company, beyond the bottom line, we bring meaning to everyone who works there and to life itself. That's a gargantuan task when it comes to the corporate world because the sole task of a corporation, as a legal entity, is to grow money. Growing meaning isn't part of its mission state-

ment. But the stockholders, executives and employees can, if they're heroic, grow meaning in the corporation.

Conclusion

Viktor Frankl's legacy was one of hope and possibility. There's something in us that can rise above and beyond everything we think possible. Our instinct for meaning, in our work and our everyday lives, is ours right now, at this very moment — as long as we aren't prisoners of our thoughts. **e**

About the Author: Alex Pattakos is founder of the Center for Personal Meaning, based in Santa Fe, N.M.

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