

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Your Attitude

You are in control of it.

### Create Meaning

Your potential is waiting.

### Logotherapy

How do you show up?

### Let It Ensurue

Don't seek success.

### Missions

What's yours?

### The "Why"?

Find it. Endure any "How."

### Endure the Burning

And give yourself!



# Man's Search for Meaning

BY VIKTOR FRANKL · POCKET © 1997 · 224 PAGES

"Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."

~ Viktor Frankl from *Man's Search for Meaning*

## Viktor Frankl.

He's one of my heroes and this book is incredible.

The man survived the horrors of Nazi concentration camps and, from that pain, brought the world his "Logotherapy"—A philosophy based on the fundamental precept that we have ultimate responsibility for choosing our responses to any given challenge AND equally powerful responsibility to determine how we will give ourselves to the world and create a truly meaningful life.

We're going to touch on a handful of my favorite Big Ideas here and I trust you will be inspired by and admire the beautiful man as much as I am and do.

Let's start with our attitude.

## YOUR ATTITUDE

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

This message is the cornerstone of Frankl's philosophy and, of course, is echoed among the great teachers we profile with these Notes.

Here are a few of my favorite thoughts on the subject:

From [Marcus Aurelius](#) in his [Meditations](#) (see Notes): "Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible." And: "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

To another Stoic philosopher (and former Roman slave), [Epictetus](#), in [The Enchiridion](#) (see Notes): "We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them."

To Jesus: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

To [Lao-tzu](#) in the [Tao te Ching](#) (see Notes): "Hold on to the center and make up your mind to rejoice in this paradise called life."

*"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."*

~ Viktor Frankl

To the [Buddha](#) in *The Dhammapada* (see Notes): “Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think.”

*“I don’t want to be saved, I  
want to be spent.”*

~ Fritz Perls,  
founder of Gestalt therapy

To Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort but where he stands at times of challenge and discovery.”

To [Dan Millman](#) in *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*: “Pain is a relatively objective, physical phenomenon; suffering is our psychological resistance to what happens. Events may create physical pain, but they do not in themselves create suffering. Resistance creates suffering. Stress happens when your mind resists what is... The only problem in your life is your mind’s resistance to life as it unfolds.”

To [Carlos Castaneda](#) in *The Wheel of Time* (see Notes): “The basic difference between an ordinary man and a warrior is that a warrior takes everything as a challenge, while an ordinary man takes everything as a blessing or a curse.” And: “The trick is in what one emphasizes. We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.”

To Norman Vincent Peale in *The Power of Positive Thinking*: “Become a possibilitarian. No matter how dark things seem to be or actually are, raise your sights and see possibilities—always see them, for they’re always there.”

And countless others.

Frankl is the poster child for the admonition that we MUST recognize the fact that we have responsibility to choose how we respond to any given situation. Frankl, a man who lost his entire family and barely survived the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps of WW II, developed this philosophy in the midst of the most brutal experience any human being will ever go through.

We’ve all experienced many things that we wish never happened. But the fact is only very few among us have experienced anything as ghastly as losing our entire family and nearly losing our own lives in the horrors of a concentration camp. And if this man can choose his attitude in his situation, we can certainly choose OUR responses. No?

So, what’s bothering you right now?

You get a parking ticket? Lose your job? Relationship not working? Kids being a challenge? Get sick?

Of course, any and all of the challenges we face in our day to day lives can bring us turmoil, but NEVER forget that, ultimately, how *you* CHOOSE to respond to the challenge is entirely *your* call.

DO NOT be a victim to the myriad of petty things that we can CHOOSE to let bother us. Own your attitude. CHOOSE how you will respond to any given situation.

My personal recommendation?

Flip it around and think about all the things for which you’re grateful.

Get a parking ticket? Be grateful you even have a car. Be grateful you’re going to be able to help pay for someone’s wages for part of the day. Stub your toe? Be grateful you HAVE a toe to stub and such a great life that that’s probably the worst thing that’s going to happen to you today. Kids being a little challenging? Be grateful they’re healthy enough to make so much noise and honor them for the growth you both experience together.

Whatever it is, choose your optimal response.

Now.

*"The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected."*

~ Viktor Frankl

## YOUR POTENTIAL IS WAITING

*"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him."*

Wow. Too often, we want to live in the "tensionless" state we can find watching television or, for some of us spiritual aspirants, in the state of meditation—transcending the throes of our daily challenges in some yogic bliss.

But that's not the point of life. The point? To find a goal worthy of us and to spend our lives "striving and struggling" to fulfill the potentiality within us.

Reminds me of [Robert Fritz's](#) brilliant book *The Path of Least Resistance* (see Notes). He says that the big problem is that we have this conflict between our desire to have something and this equally powerful belief we can't have it/aren't worthy of it/etc. We bounce back and forth between these two poles desperately trying to relieve the tension and not realizing that the only way to do that is to follow Frankl's advice and create a goal worthy of us—a goal that gets us out of bed in the morning and keeps us away from the sedatives we choke ourselves with (from the pills to the TV and the other things we use to "discharge" that tension).

But, news flash: The pain is not going away. Not until we commit to our highest self. To a goal worthy of our potential.

So, how about you? What's YOUR goal? Still refining it? Here's a short-cut: What would you do if you weren't afraid? Combine that with: If you were ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEED to succeed, what would you do? Answer those. I'll wait.

....

You do it? Good. That's your worthy goal. :)

Now, get to work!

(Oh, and the first time you hit a roadblock? You're going to want to go back to your old ways of discharging tension. Avoid that. Those old habits aren't gonna get you very far. Hold the tension and simply take the next baby step toward your worthy goal. :)

## LOGOTHERAPY

*"Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."*

Frankl's Logotherapy "... considers man as a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning and in actualizing values, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts."

Powerful stuff.

How about you? Are you looking for the meaning of life?

How about asking yourself: *"How can I serve? How can I give my highest self, my greatest strengths, in the greatest service to the world?!"*

My hunch is you'll have an idea or two.

It might be something as simple as *"I can volunteer in the soup kitchen this weekend."* OK. PERFECT. Google the soup kitchen. Call. Book yourself as a volunteer for THIS weekend. RIGHT NOW.

*"Be not afraid of going slowly but only afraid of standing still."*

~ Chinese Proverb

You have other instincts?

FOLLOW THEM.

As [Byron Katie](#) says in her brilliant book [Loving What Is](#) (see Notes): "What I call 'doing the dishes' is the practice of loving the task in front of you. Your inner voice guides you all day long to do simple things such as brush your teeth, drive to work, call your friend, or do the dishes. Even though it's just another story, it's a very short story, and when you follow the direction of the voice, the story ends. We are really alive when we live as simply as that—open, waiting, trusting, and loving to do what appears in front of us now...What we need to do unfolds before us, always—doing the dishes, paying the bills, picking up the children's socks, brushing our teeth. We never receive more than we can handle, and there is always just one thing to do. Whether you have ten dollars or ten million dollars, life never gets more difficult than that."

Did you have a "bigger" answer to your question of how you can serve?

Maybe start that conscious business you've been talking about or going back to school to become a teacher or finally signing up for the Peace Corps or to be a Big Brother/Big Sister? Awesome. Whatever it is, pay attention to what your intuition is telling you is the NEXT STEP.

Don't get bogged down with all the details of how it's going to come together. Just do the dishes. :)

And watch the momentum build!!

## LET IT ENSUE

"Again and again I therefore admonish my students in Europe and America: Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it."

Couple things here. First, it's so easy to spend all of our time asking what we can get out of a situation instead of what we can give. I don't know about you, but I feel stress when I'm just focused on myself. The moment I get out of my own little set of fears/issues and start thinking about how I can serve and give to those around me, my stress seems to evaporate.

Amazing. Try it out. The next time you're stressed, step back. See how you're focused on yourself and how you may not get what you wanted. Flip the situation around and see how you can give all of yourself to the situation. Irony here, of course, is that when you truly give yourself to the world, you'll get more than you ever dreamt of in return.

Second, STOP "trying" to be successful. Stop putting all your attention on the "prize."

As the vegan hip-hop mogul yogi [Russell Simmons](#) tells us in his brilliant book [Do You!](#) (see Notes): "I know some people say 'Keep your eyes on the prize,' but I disagree. When your eyes are stuck on the prize, you're going to keep stumbling and crashing into things. If you really want to get ahead, you've got to keep your eyes focused on the path."

Couldn't agree more. Take your eye off the prize. Put it on your next step.

Remember: "Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue..."

And it only does so as the "unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."

*"Your work is to discover your work and then, with all your heart, to give yourself to it."*

~ Buddha

## MISSIONS

"Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life... Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it."

What are YOU here to do?

What's your specific vocation or mission in life?

Clear? Write it down! Live it!

Stuck? Write down the question: "What is my specific mission in life?"

Then simply write down: "My specific mission in life is to ..." and let it flow. Don't censor yourself or need it to be "right." Just write.

The process of discovering who we are and what our greatest gifts are AND how we give those to the world is, at least in my experience, an arduous one.

We don't just snap our fingers and say: "Aha! That's it!"

At least I didn't...

I've had many amazing ideas/breakthroughs/distinctions, but they come in the midst of (pretty much constantly) living in the question of what my mission in life is. AND having the courage to start taking the baby (and/or BIG) steps I feel intuitively called to make.

So, please please please (please please please) spend some time today asking yourself the question of what you're here to do in this beautiful world of ours.

Let's live the question. And, the answer.

## THE "WHY"

"A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how.'"

What's *your* why?

What unfinished work inspires you? Who waits for your gifts to be delivered? What do you know you're here to do? What do you dare to dream when you really open up to the possibilities of life!?!?

What is your why? Find it. And you'll magically endure the burning...

## ENDURE THE BURNING

"What is to give light must endure burning."

How beautiful is that?

Reminds me of [Rumi](#)'s poem (see Notes):

*"Brother stand the pain  
Escape the poison of your impulses.  
The sky will bow to your beauty, if you do.  
Learn to light the candle. Rise with the sun.  
Turn away from the cave of your sleeping.  
That way a thorn expands to a rose.  
A particular glows with the universal."*

And, of course, George Bernard Shaw's infinitely genius rant:

*"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it over to future generations."*

You want to give light?

(I certainly hope that answer is an unequivocal "YES!!")

Then you must endure the burning. You must endure the challenges of discovering who you are and how you're going to fit into this world let alone really LIVE in this world. How you're going to trek out into the forest of your own hero's journey again and again and again. Each time facing your demons and coming back to the world with your gifts. Again and again and again.

It's not going to be "easy." But who wants that anyway?

Remember, we're no longer looking for a way to discharge our tension at any cost—we're looking for a goal worthy of us... a goal that sets us on fire and lights our splendid torches!!! Right?!? :)

To our burning, my friend.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

[Rumi](#)

[Do You!](#)

[The Gifted Adult](#)

[Authentic Happiness](#)

## About the Author of "Man's Search for Meaning Meaning"

VIKTOR FRANKL



Viktor Emil Frankl, M.D., Ph.D., (March 26, 1905 - September 2, 1997) was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. Frankl was the founder of logotherapy and Existential Analysis, the "Third Viennese School" of psychotherapy. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* (first published in 1946) chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate and describes his psychotherapeutic method of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most sordid ones, and thus a reason to continue living. He was one of the key figures in existential therapy.

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).