

excerpt from

Prisoners of Our Thoughts

by Alex Pattakos

Chapter 1 Life Doesn't Just Happen to Us

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.

Every day, Vita delivers my mail-cheerfully. It's her trademark attitude. One day, in lousy weather, I heard her whistling as she went about doing her deliveries. Instinctively I shouted out to her, "Thank you for doing such a great job." She stopped dead in her tracks with surprise. "Thank you," she said. "Wow, I'm not accustomed to hearing such words. I really appreciate it."

I wanted to know more. "How do you stay so positive and upbeat about delivering mail every day?" I asked her. "I don't just deliver mail," she said. "I see myself helping to connect people to other people. I help build the community. Besides, people depend on me and I don't want to let them down." Her response was enthusiastic and proud. Vita's attitude about her work reflected the words inscribed on the General Post Office building in New York City: Neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds. It was the Greek historian Herodotus who wrote these words in the fifth century B.C. The ancient delivery of messages from one person to another is at the very heart of our Information Age; yet these days, it's the phrase "going postal" that we're more likely to recognize.

Fair or unfair, "going postal" has become the symbol of all the negativity a job has to offer: boredom, repetitiveness, exposure to the elements, dangerous dogs, irritated customers, and a kind of automated behavior that ultimately inspires an explosion of pent-up rage-a killing spree, retaliation against all the suffered injustice of the job.

What threatens contemporary man is the alleged meaningfulness of his life, or, as I call it, the existential vacuum within him. And when does this vacuum open up, when does this so often latent vacuum become manifest? In the state of boredom.

No matter what our opinions might be about the stature of any career or profession, it is the person doing the job that gives the job meaning. Vita is proof that those ancient words of Herodotus are alive and well in the twenty-first century.

But Vita's attitude goes beyond the "swift completion of her appointed rounds" (to paraphrase Herodotus). She experiences her work as serving a higher purpose. Her attitude about her job, and its "drudgery," goes far beyond an exercise in positive thinking. Vita sees her mail delivery responsibility as a personal, life-saving mission, one

that could be fulfilled by her, and only by her. She knows she is depended on, perhaps even by people who feel disdain for her work, and it means something. She brings meaning to her job, and in turn, it becomes meaningful.

I am convinced that, in the final analysis, there is no situation which does not contain the seed of meaning.

Why is it that some people, like Vita my mail carrier, experience their work-even mundane work-with passion and commitment? Why do some people have an easier time dealing with complex and challenging situations at work and in life? Why do some people deal more easily with change? Why do some people find meaning and fulfillment in their work and everyday life, while others do not? There are no simple answers to these complex questions; but there are meaningful answers. That is the goal of this book: to illuminate the search for meaning, as a path to meaning, whether in our work or in our everyday lives.

What This Book Is About

We are, by nature, creatures of habit. Searching for a life that is both predictable and within our "comfort zone," we rely on routine and, for the most part, learned thinking patterns. In effect, we create pathways in our minds in much the same way that a path is beaten through a grass field from repeated use. And because these patterns are automatic, we may believe these habitual ways of thinking and behaving to be "beyond our control." 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, the possibility that we create, or at least co-create, our own reality becomes difficult to grasp. Instead, we lock ourselves inside our own mental prisons. We lose sight of our own natural potential, as well as that of others. Each of us has his own inner concentration camp . . . we must deal with, with forgiveness and patience-as full human beings; as we are and what we will become.

The ways in which we hold ourselves "prisoners of our thoughts" are well documented in the work of many who explore the landscape of our psycho-spiritual lives. Physician Deepak Chopra, in the audiotape of his book *Unconditional Life*, says "We erect and build a prison, and the tragedy is that we cannot even see the walls of this prison."⁵ It is through our own search for meaning that we are able to reshape our patterns of thinking, "unfreeze" ourselves from our limited perspective, find the key, and unlock the door of our metaphorical prison cell.

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who suffered through imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, found meaning because of, and in spite of, the suffering all around him. His life's work resulted in the therapeutic approach called Logotherapy, which paved the way for us to know meaning as a foundation of our existence. Frankl is quick to say, however, that such traumatic suffering is not a prerequisite for finding meaning in our lives. He means that even if and when we do 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.

This book explores seven Core Principles that I have derived from Frankl's work: (1) we are 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; and (7) we can reach out beyond ourselves and make a difference in the world. These seven principles, which I believe form the foundation of Frankl's work, are available to us anytime, all the time. They lead us to meaning, to freedom, and to deep connection to our own lives as well as to the lives of others both in our local and global communities.

Viewing life as inherently meaningful and literally unlimited in potential requires a shift in consciousness. It also requires responsible action on our part for, as Frankl points out, the potential for meaning that exists in each moment of life can only be searched for and detected by each of us individually. This responsibility, he says, is "to be actualized by each of us at any time, even in the most miserable situations and literally up to the last breath of ourselves."

Frankl walked this path completely. By living a life with meaning right up to his last breath, he showed us how his philosophy and therapeutic approach were grounded in practice. His personal experiences throughout his long life, both as a survivor of the Nazi death camps and as a revered and respected thought leader, serve to illuminate the unlimited potential of a human being. His life gives us rich and ample evidence that the keys to freedom from life's "prison cells"-real and imagined-are within, and within reach. Whether we choose this path of liberation, however, is a decision that only we as individuals can make and for which only we can be held responsible. When we search out and discover the authentic meaning of our existence and our experiences, we discover that life doesn't happen to us. We happen to life; and we make it meaningful.

Humanizing Work The transformation of work in the twenty-first century is, in many respects, a call for humanity-a new consciousness that suggests more than simply trying to strike a balance between our work and our personal life. It is a call to honor our own individuality and fully engage our human spirit at work- wherever that may be. While this idea of empowering workers in body, mind, and spirit is not new, actually putting it to work is new. In some ways, our technological advances have redesigned work to better accommodate human factors. What we need now is a way to elevate the human spirit at work. The goal of this book is to bring meaning to work and, quite frankly, to do for the phenomenon of work what Frankl as a psychiatrist was able to do for psychotherapy. His unique approach is internationally recognized as a system of humanistic psychotherapy and Frankl himself has been referred to by some as the founder of humanistic medicine and psychiatry. Logotherapy, in short, seeks to make us aware of our freedom of response to all aspects of our destiny. This humanistic view of psychotherapy helps clients to find

concrete meaning in their lives. As a therapeutic system, it strengthens trust in the unconditional meaningfulness of life and the dignity of the person. By applying this philosophy to the workplace, we can more deeply humanize our working lives and bring deeper meaning to work itself.

From the perspective of Logotherapy, we can find unconditional meaning in our work/life situations and experience the unconditional value of our colleagues as unique human beings. This is not an easy task but when we celebrate our differences as cheerfully as we celebrate our similarities the result is a powerful synergy at work and in the workplace. Bestselling author Stephen R. Covey, who has also been influenced by Frankl's teachings, has astutely observed that "difference is the beginning of synergy."

When business leaders and managers on all levels bring this awareness to work, they are the catalysts for profound changes in the workplace—changes that enhance everyone's ability to search for and find meaning, on the job, at home, and within our entire human experience. Unconditional meaning, however, is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of the dignity of man. Just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her.⁸

Detecting Your Path Of course, being fully human and living an authentic life at home, at play, and at work are formidable challenges at best. They involve a willingness to embark down a path of selfdiscovery, drawing heavily upon what Frankl refers to as our "will to meaning," that is, our inherent capacity to continually search for meaning under all circumstances. This human quest for meaning in every moment creates a discerning path that runs through all aspects of our lives. It is a path that weaves a process, not a product, for during our lifetime there is no final destination where everything comes to rest. This book offers guideposts along the way.

In Chapter 2, Viktor Frankl's Lifework and Legacy, we get a glimpse into the life and work of Dr. Frankl. As a mentor and author, he had a profound impact on my way of thinking and dramatically influenced my work and my life. As the founder of Logotherapy, he brought powerful insights and compassion to the therapeutic world, leaving a legacy of wisdom that only increases over time.

The many pathways to meaning are explored in Chapter 3, Labyrinths of Meaning, which also makes reference to the seven core principles of Frankl's work that were introduced earlier. Each of these life-meaning principles is then more deeply explored in individual chapters: Exercise the Freedom to Choose Your Attitude (Chapter 4); Realize Your Will to Meaning (Chapter 5); Detect the Meaning of Life's Moments (Chapter 6); Don't Work Against Yourself (Chapter 7); Look at Yourself from a Distance (Chapter 8); Shift Your Focus of Attention (Chapter 9); and Extend Beyond Yourself (Chapter 10).

One may say that instincts are transmitted through the genes, and values are transmitted through traditions, but that meanings, being unique, are a matter of personal discovery.⁹ Chapter 4, Exercise the Freedom to Choose Your Attitude, examines the Logotherapeutic

concept of freedom of will. This concept is best described by Frankl's famous quote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Everything can be taken from a man but . . . the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."¹⁰ The key ingredient here is the responsibility for choosing our attitude, which lies solely and soundly with the self. Chapter 5, *Realize Your Will to Meaning*, explores Frankl's concept of our "will to meaning" and how we bring our values to life at work. Logotherapy, according to Frankl, "considers man as a being whose main concern consists of fulfilling a meaning and in actualizing values, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts."¹¹ Giving meaning to work, in this context, means more than simply completing a task to receive a tangible reward, such as money, influence, status, or prestige. By committing to values and goals that might appear intangible but are nonetheless "real" and meaningful, we honor our deepest needs. The fundamental presumption is that only as individuals can we answer for our own lives, detecting in them each moment's meaning and weaving our own unique tapestry of existence. Chapter 6, *Detect the Meaning of Life's Moments*, goes further—into the realm of ultimate meaning or "supermeaning."

Frankl's holistic views on the importance of intuitive capacity for love and conscience offer great insight into how meaning at work and in everyday life reveals itself. Frankl has written: "Love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. . . . The salvation of man is through love and in love."¹² Yet our ability to weave love into our lives, especially into our work lives, is not only sadly limited but also suspect in today's "measurable" world of work. Sometimes our most fervent desires and intentions are thwarted by our obsession with outcome. In Chapter 7, *Don't Work Against Yourself*, the technique known as "paradoxical intention" is examined and applied to work and everyday life. Frankl calls this form of self-sabotage "hyper-intention." The tendency to micro-manage the work of others, for example, may create hyper-intensive stress, performance anxiety, or even covert/overt actions of sabotage that can end up creating the opposite of the result sought by a manager. Sometimes focusing too closely on the problem can keep us from seeing the solution. Likewise, becoming obsessed with or fixated on a particular outcome, more often than not gets in the way of our best intentions.

Chapter 8, *Look at Yourself from a Distance*, focuses on the notion of self-detachment and how, among other things, it can help us to lighten up and not sweat the small stuff. Frankl observed that "Only man owns the capacity to detach himself from himself. To look at himself out of some perspective or distance."¹³ This includes that uniquely human trait known as a sense of humor. Frankl noted that "no animal is capable of laughing, least of all laughing at itself or about itself."¹⁴ A dose of self-detachment frees us to be more open and receptive about the universe of opportunities in our lives.

When Viktor Frankl was a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps, in order to cope with stress, suffering, and conflict, he learned to deflect his attention away from the painful situation to other, more appealing circumstances. In Chapter 9, *Shift Your Focus of Attention*, we explore this skill and how it can be effectively used in the workplace. Self-transcendence is explored in Chapter 10, *Extend Beyond Yourself*. This principle

goes far beyond shifting the focus of attention from one thing to another. It takes us into the spiritual realm of ultimate meaning, where we see how our lives connect seamlessly to the lives of others. We see how being of service, no matter what the scale, is where our deepest meaning is realized.

Finally, in Chapter 11, *Living and Working with Meaning*, I weave my own views into Frankl's lessons so that they can be integrated into daily work/life, bringing personal and ultimate meaning to all the moments of our lives.

So, let's first take a look at Dr. Frankl's lifework, explore more fully the foundations of his meaning-centered approach, and see how we can apply his groundbreaking philosophy to work, workplace issues, and our personal lives. Recall a situation in which you felt especially negative about your job or career. Perhaps you just didn't like the work that you were doing, or maybe you disliked your supervisor, boss, or co-workers (this may even be your situation today). Did you view yourself as a "victim" of circumstances that were outside of your control, or did you feel responsible in some way for "creating" the situation and therefore were ultimately responsible for dealing with it? What, if anything, did you do about it? As you think about the situation now, what did you learn from it? What would you have done differently?

Meaning Question: What can you do to make your current work or job more meaningful?

Ask yourself honestly, are you a "prisoner of your thoughts?" Do you hold other people, including co-workers, "prisoners of your thoughts?"

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