

An enduring legacy



Illustration by Steve Derrick

John Badir

Mr. Badir is a fourth-year medical student at Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC.

My favorite book is *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl, who was a psychiatrist cast into a Nazi concentration camp, and who miraculously survived. The book discusses the hard facts of what Frankl lost and suffered, but it is ultimately a book about finding meaning in a world with the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and one in which bad things happen to good people.

The book conveys that life holds a potential meaning under any condition—even the most miserable ones. It describes everyday life in a concentration camp, and everyday life inside of the mind of a concentration camp prisoner. It is an incredibly intimate book with Frankl discussing his fears, frustrations, and sources of hope, specifically his wife and how he would think about her waiting for him at home. Frankl, who is considered one of the greatest contributors to human psychology and philosophy, believed that there are three possible sources

for meaning: in work through doing something fulfilling and significant, in love through caring for others, and in finding courage during the most difficult of times.¹

I recently encountered a 15-year-old boy diagnosed with osteosarcoma who told me that his favorite book was also *Man's Search for Meaning*. His PET scan that lit up the entire spine, showing osteosarcoma that could not be cured, and frankly could not even hope to be treated. The rest of his medical team and I planned to have an end-of-life conversation with the young man and his parents, both of whom only spoke Spanish. It was not going to be a conversation that offered any options other than comfort care.

When I first encountered the young man, it did not take long to realize that he would not accept the option we were presenting to him. From a medical perspective, the side effects of the chemotherapy would have caused him to grow weaker, to suffer, and instead of abating his pain (of which he had a lot) only cause it to get worse. Also, chemotherapy would fail to shrink the cancer.

From this medical perspective, there was not anything else to think about; his treatment had to be stopped. The young man's words, "So you're giving up on me?" tore into my heart. So poignantly, he wanted to survive. The translator in the room translated every word to his parents, but neither of them said anything during the conversation other than, "We will do whatever you want," to their son when he asked for their advice.

The young man's doctor, who is kind, graceful, and has a calming presence, reassured the patient that we weren't giving up on him, we simply didn't want to continue the pain of a futile treatment. "I don't care about the pain," the young man exclaimed. "The chemotherapy wasn't that bad the last time," he said looking at his mom.

His physician listened to him with kindness in his eyes.

"Would I still be dying if my parents weren't poor?" the patient asked.

Admittedly, I too wanted to know the answer to this poignant question.

The physician reassured everyone in the room that cancer treatment throughout the country is standardized to offer any patient, in any hospital, regardless of socioeconomic status the same quality of treatment. The patient then asked if any experimental trials were available. He had read about them and wanted to know if he qualified. The physician informed him that he would look for research trial options, but that he wasn't sure he could promise anything given that these trials often wanted

patients with an expected life span of at least eight to 12 weeks. Desperate to survive, the young man started to cry. "So I won't be here in eight weeks?" he asked. "So I am here dying, and everyone else will just keep living their life and forget about me? No one will even know I existed."

I had never come face-to-face with such a raw and palpable desire to live. However, in the coming encounter with this patient, the young man showed his exceptional character and showed what a courageous, wise, and intelligent man he was at such a young age. He apologized to the attending for asking if he was quitting on him earlier. "I am not mad at you. I am just so mad at my situation. I love you and all you have done for me. I know you are trying your best. Can you just promise you will keep trying to look for something to help me?" "I love you too, and I promise that I will continue," the attending replied. It was clear the two had developed a very special relationship over time.

"I wrote these letters for each of the nurses to show them how much I appreciate what they have done for me," the patient said, handing envelopes to the physician.

He went on to thank everyone who had been involved in his medical care. He listed several names, wanting to include everyone who had cared for him during his time in the hospital. He emphasized how important it was that each of them got their special letter. This young man had been given the most unfavorable and unfair hand in life, yet he proved how honorably a person can act in the darkest and most terrifying of times.

The physician offered him a booklet about dealing with the end of life, but he declined. "I already have a book that speaks to me right now, *Man's Search for Meaning*. I don't remember the name of the guy who wrote it."

"Victor Frankl," I chimed in.

We immediately bonded over our shared favorite book, as I stated, "Isn't it such a great book?" He excitedly agreed.

I was impressed that a 15-year-old was reading such a book, but after listening to him talk, it made a lot of sense that the book resonated so deeply with him.

The young man talked to me about feeling like he connected with Frankl's experience as both of their experiences seemed hopeless, but that Frankl had shown him that there is always a way to find optimism and meaning.

He explained he had been reading the book every day. It was clear to me that Frankl was a companion to the patient in that room, and the best companion he could

have because Frankl actually understood his suffering, his fear of death, and his fear of being an unknown and unrecorded victim to some cruel, external, and unfair force. The patient repeatedly expressed the fear of dying without anyone knowing who he was, and the pain associated with experiencing all of this suffering while the rest of the world continued on like nothing was happening.

The young man expressed that he did not want “to die for nothing,” and Frankl reminded him that he didn’t have to.

I have always felt that much of the book’s power comes in the message that life’s transitory nature in no way makes it less meaningful, but that we all have the ability to decide, at any moment, what we will make of the transitory potentialities that we have been given. For better or for worse, we can always choose what Frankl calls “the monument of our existence.” When I think of how the patient chose to live his last days in the hospital writing letters to his nurses and doctors, profusely thanking his medical team, and reassuring his parents, I see a young man who chose to leave a substantial monument of existence. The osteosarcoma couldn’t be undone, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t act.

At the attending’s request, the intern, physician assistant, and I all expressed our thoughts in some moments

of quiet reflection. A week later, the patient had gone home to spend his last days of life with his family. The patient had expressed to me in my last moments with him how all he had wanted was a simple life, a family of his own, and to live on a ranch somewhere. His last words to me were, “Don’t take life for granted.”

This patient told all of us on his medical team that he did not want to be forgotten while we all continued living our lives. I write this piece to honor him and fulfill his wish.

“He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”¹ These are the words embraced by Frankl after he had survived a network of Nazi extermination camps while keeping hope alive by summoning up thoughts of his wife and the prospect of seeing her again one day.

Man’s Search for Meaning is a book about the power of hope and the necessity for all of us to have a “why” in our lives. I will never take for granted that I have found mine.

References

1. Frankl, Viktor E., author. *Man’s Search for Meaning : An Introduction to Logotherapy*. Boston(MA): Beacon Press, 1962.

The author’s E-mail address is jbadir@wakehealth.edu.