

Viktor Frankl – “Man’s Search for Meaning”

We are now 78 years from the end of World War 2 and our knowledge of the world is far different from the generation represented by Viktor Frankl. Science presents us with a godless cosmos which appears to be expanding toward a life-less frozen eternity. The rather better news is that the earth is likely to be habitable for another Billion years if we can crack climate change. The image presented by science is “descriptive” – we know a lot of stuff about the scaffolding constructed by science, but the universe does not come with a section marked “Morality, Meaning and Ethics.” For this neuroscience may help. Moral decision making may be reducible to the way our brains are wired, and over time we have evolved to have values and be moral – even to favour pro-social behaviour. (See Steven Pinker “The Better Angels of our Nature” or the Dutch Historian Rutger Bregman – “Humankind – a Hopeful History”)

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist, arrested by the Nazis in Vienna and imprisoned in Auschwitz, and against all the odds survived. Based on what he saw and experienced every day you might expect he would despair of humanity, but he didn’t. He wrote a short book called “Man’s Search for Meaning” which has sold more than 9 million copies and changed the lives of millions of men and women. He contends that higher order principles and values – what we try and live by, and even die for cannot be defined by scientific reductionism. There are instincts, drives and environmental/social conditioning which are uniquely human and personal, and he offered three ways to recover a sense of meaning:

1. Active Creation. Join U3A and write a philosophy paper! Work, as we discussed in the last session can provide us with meaning. Frankl coined the term “unemployment neurosis” for lack of opportunity to work.
2. Love. Take your pick. Love of another person, nature, art, literature. For many years I was a member of the Bronte Society. I didn’t just read the books, I visited the places that featured them, including Ireland. I studied the history of Haworth and the social context in which they lived and wrote their novels. At Hull University (1965-68) I lived round the corner from Phillip Larkin, a really gloomy man who was pre-occupied with death all his life. In his poem “The Arundel Tomb” he comes face to face (so to speak) with the stone effigies of a Lord and Lady, and the poem is a speculation of how they may have lived their lives. The last line is the one that everyone remembers “What will survive of us is love.”
3. Take a stance – when faced with unavoidable suffering. I find it really difficult when I see the television pictures from Gaza night after night portraying suffering on an industrial scale. I haven’t forgotten the attack of 7th October, but I find it impossible to place myself in the position of a parent whose child has been killed or horribly mutilated by the Israeli military. Frankl lost his pregnant wife, father, mother and brother, which is again something I can’t even begin to imagine, and yet, he never lost his faith in the idea that life had purpose and meaning

In 1984 Frankl introduced the world to the idea of “Tragic Optimism”. Simply stated it posits that there is hope and meaning to be found in life, whilst acknowledging the existence of pain and suffering In the UK, Jessica Mead, a PhD student in psychology at Swansea University sought to measure changes in wellbeing

amongst the residents. Wellbeing plummeted, but she found that participants who displayed tragic optimism coped more effectively.

So, as we face the “Tempests of Chaos” in the future, can we help ourselves, our families, friends and communities by looking seriously at Frankl’s ideas. After all he saw the very worst of the human condition, but until his own death continued to say “yes” to life