

“Man’s Search for Meaning”

by Victor Frankl

Reading Notes and Discussion Questions

Matt Henegar, June 2023 -

I. Introduction and Preface - Let’s start by noting that any attempt to outline and organize discussion materials around a topic and a book such as this should be approached with a high degree of humility and a recognition at the beginning that it will be wholly inadequate. As Victor himself points out, when talking about the need for some level of detachment when speaking on the subject of the concentration camps, “[s]uch detachment is granted to the outsider, but he is too far removed to make any statements of real value”. So forgive my ineptitude at the outset and let’s do our best to make it a meaningful and respectful time of observing and reflecting on Victor’s experience.

1. Victor seemed surprised that this particular book, one that he had intended to write anonymously, wound up being as successful as it was. In fact he writes that it’s success is more a commentary on the misery of our time than a personal triumph for Frankl: “if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails”. Why do you suppose this book resonates with so many people across so many cultures and so many generations? Do you struggle, as Frankl seems to presume his many readers do, with finding meaning or purpose in life? Does one’s station in life or other life circumstances make this struggle easier or more difficult to navigate?

2. What do you think of Victor’s lesson to be taken from the surprising success of his book? “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*, [emphasis mine] and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s 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 of it.” Do you agree? Do you find that your definition “success” can change as you change your perspective on how to achieve it? Do you think of success as an end-point, a destination of sorts, or is it something else? Does success sometimes only come when we are far enough removed from the experience that we can properly contextualize and understand it? In other words, do you think we sometimes experience success without realizing it? And do we sometimes think we have achieved success when in reality it is something quite different?

3. Victor writes that his decision to stay and face the wrath of Hitler and the Nazis was driven primarily by his love for his parents. And, in finally making the decision to stay, he tells the story of finding a piece of marble in his family home and then learning that it was from the

site where a synagogue had been burned down. When he learned that the gilded Hebrew letter that remained on this lone piece of marble stood for the commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother”, he knew he had to stay with them. How did you react to that story? What can we learn from it and do you think it's still applicable today? Or has our culture headed in a different direction as it pertains to our parental relationships and duties? What is your reaction to that?

II. Experiences in a Concentration Camp

A. The Average Prisoner - Victor begins the story by pointing out that he isn't necessarily concerned with the “great horrors” of the holocaust, or the heroes or well-known victims, but only how everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the “average prisoner”. He describes heroes and martyrs and “Capos” (the prisoners who sublimated themselves to do the bidding of Nazis in order to receive preferential treatment). But he wants us to know about “the sacrifices, the crucifixion and the deaths of the great army of unknown and unrecorded victims”.

1. Why do you suppose Victor decided to make the nameless victims the point of his book? What about their silent suffering makes the story more meaningful and impactful as you experienced it?

2. Do you think Victor was concerned primarily from the perspective a psychologist... or how it could inform his “Logotherapy” research? Or was there more to it?

3. In what ways does Victor's decision to give voice to these nameless souls restore the dignity that was stolen from them by their captors? In what ways does our discussing these stories and issues today (and in some small way reliving them) bring dignity to the souls who were “floating up to Heaven” in the form of “sinister smoke” from a chimney inside a concentration camp?

B. A Loss of Meaning, Identity and Dignity - Victor (or “Prisoner Number 119,104”) notes that, upon “their admission to the camp (at least this was the method in Auschwitz) [each prisoner's] documents had been taken from them, together with their other possessions”. When prisoners were loaded onto transports, it didn't matter to the guards who they were... each was just a number. In his foreword, Howard Kushner (rabbi emeritus at Temple Israel in Massachusetts), describes a similar scene from an Arthur Miller play, in which a Nazi guard takes from a prisoner his university degrees, his letters of reference, his other credentials and then asks if it is everything he has. When the man confirms that it is, the guard replies “good, now you have nothing.”

1. Do you agree with Rabbi Kushner (in interpreting Frankl) that we are never “left with nothing” as long as we “retain the freedom to choose how we will respond”? Does that make your own problems seem less significant and more manageable?

2. In what ways were the Capos' identities and dignity stolen from them, even though they had maintained some of their possessions and maintained a comparatively comfortable

existence?

3. How would you compare and contrast the concepts of “meaning”, “identity” and “dignity” for the average prisoner in a concentration camp? What about for you? Are there times when any or all of those have been stolen from you? What about times when you have stolen them from others? What about times when you have been silent or passive as they were being stolen from others?

4. Do you think that Victor intended for these lessons about meaning, identity and dignity to be applied inwardly on personal level in terms of how we view ourselves? Or outwardly on a societal level in terms of how we view and treat others? Or is it both?

5. Victor writes that prisoners in concentrations camps, because they were just numbers and because all of their symbols of status, achievement and identity had been taken from them, “had an opportunity to claim a fictitious name or profession; and for various reasons many did this”. Why do you suppose this happened? Do you think it happens in other contexts? What about with you or your friends? In what ways does this happen in our churches and in what ways are Christians often incentivized to adopt false identities? What about Black Christians and other Christians of color? LGBTQ Christians?

C. Turned Against Their People and Themselves - In dealing with the fear of being added to a convoy about to depart (presumably for the gas chamber or the crematorium), Frankl talks about how so many prisoners were forced to act in ways that were contrary to their character. “There was neither time nor desire to consider moral or ethical issues. Every man was controlled by one thought only: to keep himself alive for the family waiting for him at home, and to save his friends. With no hesitation, therefore, he would arrange for another prisoner, another “number,” to take his place in the transport.”

1. In what ways is being robbed of our character or our “moral or ethical” center worse than being robbed of our identity or dignity? Do you think that, in the long run, the experience of the Capos may have been worse than that of the average prisoner because of this reality? What about those other nameless prisoners who did things to others that they had previously imagined would be unthinkable?

2. What are some circumstances in our current environment and culture in which we are robbed of our moral or ethical centers? What about the drive for professional or material success? What about social status... online, in our jobs, in our families, in our churches?

Victor writes, “[o]n the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves. We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles—whatever one may choose to call them—we know: the best of us did not return.”

D. The First Selection - “The significance of the finger game was explained to us in the evening. It was the first selection, the first verdict made on our existence or non-existence. For the great majority of our transport, about 90 percent, it meant death. Their sentence was carried out within the next few hours. Those who were sent to the left were marched from the station straight to the crematorium.” When asking where one of his friends sent to the left had gone, the reply came (while pointing up to a “sinister” cloud of smoke), “[t]hat’s where your friend is, floating up to Heaven.” Even then, Victor didn’t understand the true meaning, “until the truth was explained to [him] in plain words.”

1. At a societal level, in what ways is what was happening in that first stage of the lives of concentration camp prisoners similar to the experiences of Black Americans during the lynching era as was described in the James Cone book? What about the hungry and the poor that we learned about in the Sara Miles book? What about LGBTQ communities in Christian Churches as described in Sally Gary’s book?

2. What do you think was happening at an individual level? How do you suppose a fellow prisoner could have become so calloused that he would simply point to a smoke stack in describing the location of another human being? What about the guards or Capos who were in charge of running the gas chambers and crematoriums?

3. What do you think the message was to those prisoners who were sent to the right once they learned about what had happened to those that were sent to the left? In what ways is that similar to the messages sent to Black Americans, the poor and those in LGBTQ communities in the way their peers have been treated historically?

E. Nakedness and the Indomitable Nature of the Human Spirit - “While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies—even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence.” “Thus the illusions some of us still held were destroyed one by one, and then, quite unexpectedly, most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculously naked lives.”

1. How do we properly contextualize and understand just how degrading and disorienting this must have been to experience? Are you able to imagine yourself in a similar situation? Are there experiences in your own life where you felt a similar sense of shame and disorientation? What about times in which you may have taken advantage of someone else who was in a similar situation? What about the opposite, where your access to empathy allowed you to see, understand and console someone else in a similar situation?

2. Victor talked about how in the first phase of camp life, prisoners held on to the notion to “the last moment that would not be so bad” or that they would be reprieved or saved from what seemed to be a horrifying fate. But that those were slowly stamped out. “Thus the illusions some of us still held were destroyed one by one ... we knew that we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculously naked lives.” What were your reactions to this? What applications do these insights have in other areas of our lives? What about in terms of how we see and treat others?

3. Victor writes: "I would like to mention a few similar surprises on how much we could endure: we were unable to clean our teeth, and yet, in spite of that and a severe vitamin deficiency, we had healthier gums than ever before. We had to wear the same shirts for half a year, until they had lost all appearance of being shirts. For days we were unable to wash, even partially, because of frozen water-pipes, and yet the sores and abrasions on hands which were dirty from work in the soil did not suppurate (that is, unless there was frostbite)." What lessons can be taken from this aspect of camp life? Despite their attempts, and the horrific atrocities carried out by them, in what ways were the Nazi's abject failures in their attempts to destroy the human spirit and to control, subdue and ultimately destroy an entire race of human beings?

F. Running into the Wire - In describing the horrors of camp life, Victor says that almost everyone thought of and many attempted suicide. "The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions which will be mentioned later, I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not "run into the wire." This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide—touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence." He goes on to say that "[e]ven the gas chambers lost their horrors for [prisoners] after the first few days—after all, they spared [them] the act of committing suicide."

1. What do these passages teach us about the horrors of life in a concentration camp? How do you suppose it is that Victor has both the mental awareness and the emotional capacity to describe this reality with such clarity?

2. What lessons do you think Victor would want us to take from it? Do you find his example inspiring? In what ways does it inspire you? In what ways does it break you? Where do you suppose God was in the midst of it? Where is God now in the midst of your own experience of it?

G. Don't be a "Moslem" - A "Moslem" was a person who "looks miserable, down and out, sick and emaciated, and who cannot manage hard physical labor any longer." Victor and his peers were warned early on that they needed to do everything they could to look fit and ready for work, or otherwise they would be "gassed". "Sooner or later, usually sooner, every 'Moslem' goes to the gas chambers." And, ironically, the person who warned them of this was sure that Victor wouldn't last in camp.

1. What was your reaction to this? How would you have handled the news? Would it have motivated you to look fit, even with blisters on your feet? Would you have gone the other direction in order to speed up the end and just get it over with?

2. What do you think it was about Victor that allowed him to prove his friend wrong? Was it physical? Mental? What lessons do we draw from that? Victor writes, "I think it was Lessing who once said, "There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose." An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior. Even we psychiatrists expect the reactions of a man to an abnormal situation, such as being committed to an asylum, to be abnormal in proportion to the degree of his normality."

H. The Second Stage of Psychological Reactions - Victor talks about the "boundless longing" each prisoner for home and about the feelings of "disgust with all the ugliness" that surrounded them. He talks about the filth between the huts in the camp and how any attempt to clear it away just resulted in more contact with it. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that filth. Victor leaves many of the details out, although he does talk about human excrement splashing onto their faces as the transports bounced from place to place. He talks about a feverish prisoner being brutally punished for reporting to the sick bay at the wrong time.

1. Victor writes that prisoners in the first stage had to turn away from the horrors in front of them ... or wipe the excrement from their faces when splashed. But that prisoners in the second stage could just let the excrement rest on their faces (out of fear of being punished) and could more easily look on as their fellow comrades were treated so brutally. He even goes on to say that if his own emotional reactions had not interested him at a professional level, he likely would not have remembered them. What is happening here? Victor says that their feelings had been blunted. What do you think he means by that?

2. Thinking more broadly about our current situations, what are some examples of psychological trauma or blunted feelings in the face of atrocities that we are dealing with currently? Do you think you have become blunted to them? Is that a good thing? Or should we try to move our hearts in a different direction? What about society at large? What about our church communities? "The sufferers, the dying and the dead, became such commonplace sights to him after a few weeks of camp life that they could not move him any more." "The man with the corpse approached the steps. Warily he dragged himself up. Then the body: first the feet, then

the trunk, and finally — with an uncanny rattling noise — the head of the corpse bumped up the two steps.”

3. What about abuse in the context of relationships? In what ways does the blunting effect result in greater damage? How does one get out of that kind of doo-loop? What does the healing process look like ... for those prisoners, for victims of racial and social oppression and injustice, for victims of abuse in the context of relationships?

I. The Mental Agony of Injustice - Victor writes (about being struck on the head by a Capo) that it was “not the physical pain which hurts the most (and this applies to adults as much as to punished children); it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all ... the most painful part of beatings is the insult which they imply”. [pg 23-24]

1. Victor discusses lots of specific examples of this and note in particular his reflection about children. Why do you suppose we are so jarred by injustice? How is that fact used against us by those who implement it to abuse and control us? What about children?

2. In what ways does this relate to Tom's description in his sermon and in our discussions last week about the “narrow gate”? In what ways is injustice intuitive and in what ways does it violate our core identity as children of God? How does that make it more difficult to process? In what ways does that make it all the more shocking that so many would use injustice as a means of intimidation, manipulation and control?

3. Victor writes “I shall never forget how I was roused one night by the groans of a fellow prisoner, who threw himself about in his sleep, obviously having a horrible nightmare ... I wanted to wake the poor man ... [but] I became intensely conscious of the fact that no dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality of the camp”. [pg 28-29] Have you experienced that kind of mental anguish? Where your dreams couldn't possibly be worse than your reality? How does that affect the human mind ... spirit ... soul?

4. Victor talks about how prisoners were deprived of nourishment and how that affected their mental state. [pg 29] What are some other types of nourishment (biological, spiritual, emotional) the deprivation of which can affect our mental state? “Then they would exchange recipes and plan the menu for the day when they would have a reunion—the day in a distant future when they would be liberated and returned home.”

J. Cultural and Physical Hibernation; Spiritual Awakening - Victor discusses the impact of starvation on prisoners' mental and physical state. In particular that there was a complete absence of sexual desire or interest in anything cultural. The lone exceptions were politics and religion. The former out of an understandable interest in the trajectory of the war. The latter seemingly out of a desire to understand one's place in a larger context than that found in the camp. "The religious interest of the prisoners, as far and as soon as it developed, was the most sincere imaginable ... improvised prayers or services in the corner of a hut, or in the darkness of the locked cattle truck in which we were brought back from a distant work site, tired, hungry and frozen in our ragged clothing." [pg 34]

1. Why do you suppose the religious vigor of the prisoners was able to continue and even thrive in camp? "In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less." [pg 36]

2. Victor writes that he "grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love." [pg 37] He is speaking about his wife (or his "beloved") here but why do you suppose this observation follows so closely after and within his discussion of religion? Why do you suppose those who had religion and a "beloved" fared better in camp? How does that play out in our daily lives? "For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory." ... Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance." [ph 38] How does this tie into your own experiences of the love for and from a beloved? How about your faith journey? Had you connected this aspect of a loved one and your faith journey before reading this passage?

3. Thinking about the prisoners' deep experiences of the spiritual life, or intense feelings for a beloved, or the euphoric experience of the beauty of nature, do you imagine it is purely psychological? Is it the Holy Spirit? What is happening to them in those moments? How about your own experience in this regard? "If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty." [pg 39]

K. Capacity for Suffering - In writing about the psychological impact of suffering on human beings, Victor makes the following analogy: "a man's suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the "size" of human suffering is absolutely relative." [pg. 44]

1. What does he mean by this? And in what ways does filling our "chambers" with other thoughts, experiences and activities thus increase our capacity to handle different types of suffering?

2. Victor talks about art in camp (impromptu cabarets, poetry, etc.) and humor ("Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation"). [pg 43] What do you suppose is happening in the camp when they are signing, listening to music, laughing at jokes, etc, using the analogy that Victor outlined above? In what ways do those experiences fill up the chamber so to speak, thus increasing our capacity for suffering?

3. Do those types of experiences that fill our chamber and increase our capacity for suffering necessarily need to be happy or humorous? In what ways do other experiences of art fill those chambers? Victor writes about one such experience: "Suddenly there was a silence and into the night a violin sang a desperately sad tango, an unusual tune not spoiled by frequent playing. The violin wept and a part of me wept with it, for on that same day someone had a twenty-fourth birthday. That someone lay in another part of the Auschwitz camp, possibly only a few hundred or a thousand yards away, and yet completely out of reach. That someone was my wife." [pg 43]

4. What about Taylor Swift? In what ways does her "secret sauce" (i.e., the magic that enables her to draw millions to the Eras tour and/or to wait eagerly for "Taylor's version" of songs they've listened to for years, for example) derive from her ability to connect with her audience through this idea of crowding out suffering with other emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, hope, love, etc)? What about Oppenheimer? In what ways does that movie somewhat ironically fill our chambers with something other than our own suffering, thus increasing our capacity to tolerate and manage it?

L. Those We Love; Those Who Love Us - Victor talks about the ways in which the relative suffering of others often made each prisoner's individual suffering more manageable and how prisoners would act to protect their own interests, even if it meant the suffering of other prisoners might increase. In particular, he talks about "prisoner-cook F_____" and how he never looked at the other prisoners when labeling their soup bowls. "He was the only cook who did not look at the men whose bowls he was filling; the only cook who dealt out the soup equally, regardless of recipient, and who did not make favorites of his personal friends or countrymen, picking out the potatoes for them, while the others got watery soup skimmed from the top." [pg 47]

1. Do you think it's possible for one's "chamber" (or capacity for suffering) to increase or expand with intentional practice? Do you suppose it increased or expanded for those prisoners suffering alongside Victor without their consent or intention? How does that look? How would an intentional practice look for you in this regard? Circling back to our discussion last week about our salvation being found "in love and through love", what are some methods we could employ as part of such a practice?

2. Do you think these ideas have application in other lesser forms of suffering (outside of conditions like those found in concentration camps)? What about more basic daily psychological, mental and spiritual forms of suffering?

3. As you think about Victor's experience and example of love in the midst of suffering, which direction do you imagine the love was flowing? Was it primarily Victor's love for his beloved? Or was it his beloved's of Victor? Or was it both?

4. Do you (or do you imagine that others) sometimes define your (or their) existence and your (or their) capacity for suffering through the willingness or capacity of others to demonstrate their love for you (or them)? What does that look like? In what ways does this explain the tendency of many prisoners to protect their own and those they loved (or, more likely, those that loved them)? What does Jesus' example teach us in this regard?

"But it is not for me to pass judgment on those prisoners who put their own people above everyone else. Who can throw a stone at a man who favors his friends under circumstances when, sooner or later, it is a question of life or death? No man should judge unless he asks himself in absolute honesty whether in a similar situation he might not have done the same." [pg 47]

5. Circling back to Taylor Swift, and really to popular culture and politics more generally, do you think we have become unbalanced culturally in terms of our expectations of love? In other words, have our expectations shifted (or maybe always been) mis-aligned in terms of the type of love that will crowd out suffering? Does that explain any of the issues we are dealing with today in terms of our churches, our families, our country?

M. Craving Solitude - Victor writes: "There were times, of course, when it was possible, and even necessary, to keep away from the crowd. It is well known that an enforced community life, in which attention is paid to everything one does at all times, may result in an irresistible urge to get away, at least for a short while." [pg 50]

Have you found this to be the case in your life? Is that something you do ... seek out solitude? Or do you find yourself constantly seeking the attention of others?

Did you find it surprising that during Victor's alone time he was able to crowd out and ignore things going on around him that most would be unable to bare ... like corpses covered in lice or patients denied medicine during his rounds because they were too sick and going to die?

N. Fate and Avoiding it - Victor tells a story about being willing to leave with a transport of his friends as opposed to seeking to have his name crossed off the list, headed for what seemed like certain death. It turns out that the camp he went to ended up being much safer than at his old camp where famine quickly spread and killed many. He then tells the story of Tehran ...

"Does this not bring to mind the story of Death in Teheran? A rich and mighty Persian once walked in his garden with one of his servants. The servant cried that he had just encountered Death, who had threatened him. He begged his master to give him his fastest horse so that he could make haste and flee to Teheran, which he could reach that same evening. The master consented and the servant galloped off on the horse. On returning to his house the master himself met Death, and questioned him, "Why did you terrify and threaten my servant?" "I did not threaten him; I only showed surprise in still finding him here when I planned to meet him tonight in Teheran," said Death." [pg 55-56]

1. What was your reaction to this? Was Victor allowing fate to decide? What about the servant who fled to Tehran not knowing it would be the place where he would meet his demise? Are there other examples you can think of from your life, from history or from popular culture? What about the fires in Lahaina?
2. What about the conditions in camp made it such that prisoners often avoided making decisions at all? Victor writes: "Apart from its role as a defensive mechanism, the prisoners' apathy was also the result of other factors. Hunger and lack of sleep contributed to it (as they do in normal life, also) and to the general irritability which was another characteristic of the prisoners' mental state." [pg 62]

Victor talks about the decision prisoners often had to make in camp of whether to seize an opportunity to escape or to remain. Why do you suppose they most often stayed and let fate decide? What about in your life? Are there times when you have felt like a prisoner and chose not to attempt to escape out of fear that what waited on the other side would be worse? What about Victor's first opportunity/attempt at escape? What caused him to decide to stay? Do you think it was the fellow prisoner who seemed to be accusing him of abandoning his comrades? Why do you suppose the decision to stay brought Victor an "inward peace that [he] had never experienced before"? In a tired voice he asked me, "You, too, are getting out?" I denied it, but I found it difficult to avoid his sad look. After my round I returned to him. Again a hopeless look greeted me and somehow I felt it to be an accusation." [pg 58]

What was your reaction when you learned that the International Red Cross had foiled his second attempt at escape? [pg 60]

O. Self-Awareness and Inferiority Complexes - Victor notes that the majority of prisoners “suffered from a kind of inferiority complex”. [pg 62] As he points out, they all had previously thought highly of themselves but that over time the camp robbed them of that. He goes on to point out that while the “consciousness of one’s inner value” is usually found inwardly at spiritual and psychological levels that can’t be shaken, even by the depravity of camp life, many (even outside of prison camps) never really possess it. [pg 62]

1. Does it help you in your own life to better understand your self-doubts and lack of self-confidence in certain situations when you read Victor’s explanation of this phenomenon in camp? “Without consciously thinking about it, the average prisoner felt himself utterly degraded. This became obvious when one observed the contrasts offered by the singular sociological structure of the camp.” [pg 62]
2. What about in the lives of others ... who are in abusive relationships? who were raised in oppressed communities? who are victims of manipulative and controlling co-workers or supervisors in the work place? Does your perspective change about your own experience when you consider that of others?
3. How does the concept of grace come in to play here? In what ways have churches mis-understood the concept of grace and thus perpetuated these kinds of issues? In particular, I’m focused on the notion of grace as a “ticket to heaven” as opposed to the possibility of seeing grace as a salve to one’s self-doubt.
4. What about in society at large and the various social circles that have been created over the course of human history ... and in our own country, communities, clubs and churches? Are churches different in this regard? Should they be?
5. What about reactive abuse... “Whenever the degraded majority and the promoted minority came into conflict (and there were plenty of opportunities for this, starting with the distribution of food) the results were explosive”? [pg 62]

P. Human Liberty; Spiritual Freedom and Freedom of Choice - Victor believes that, ultimately, even circumstance as cruel as those found in a death camp cannot rob one of their spiritual freedom or their freedom of choice (“the last of human freedoms”). As he points out, every day an opportunity was presented whether to make “a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.” And he points out that there were many examples pointing to the conclusion that human beings “can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress”. [pgs 64-65]

1. Do you agree? Or do you believe that human beings are simply “a product of many conditional and environmental factors — be they of a biological, psychological or sociological nature”?

2. Even assuming Victor is right (that human beings are “capable” of retaining spiritual freedom), do you believe that some have been robbed of that most basic of human rights? At what point is it the responsibility of the individual to act for their own freedom? And at what point are they rightly described as victims of circumstance?
3. Is the fact that human beings are “capable” of overcoming circumstances relevant to understanding how to navigate circumstances of suffering or oppression or abuse? What about this quote from Dostoevsky: “There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings”? [pgs 65-66]
4. What about the woman who was dying in the concentration camp and spent each day talking to a chestnut tree outside her window? When asked if it responded to her, she said it “said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.’” Why do you suppose Victor included this particular story and this particular quote? [pg 68]
5. In what ways have political, religious and family systems contributed to the robbing or degrading of human liberty, spiritual freedom and freedom of choice? Victor might point you to the quote below in searching for an answer ... what do you think he means by it? What did Dostoevsky mean by his quote”
6. “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.”

Q. Defining and Maintaining an “Inner Hold” - Having established that it’s possible to retain spiritual freedom and liberty even in the most impossible of circumstances, Victor begins to discuss how to define what it means to retain spiritual freedom or an “inner hold” on one’s “moral and spiritual self” and how to go about it. [pgs 68-69] And he seems to think the key resides somewhere in the ability to see a future that is quite different than present circumstances ... “The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.” [pg 73]

1. What do you think Victor meant by “provisional existence” when he wrote that a “man who could not see the end of his ‘provisional existence’ was not able to aim at an ultimate goal in life”? According to Victor, that person “ceased living for the future, in contrast to a man in normal life”. Have you lived a “provisional existence” at times, even if not as desperate as a person in a prison camp? What was that like?
2. What about the experience of time? Victor says that for prisoners each day passed excruciatingly slowly and yet weeks seemed to last shorter than a day. Have you had similar experiences? What about raising or caring for children?
3. Assuming that Victor is right, i.e., that the ability to define and retain spiritual freedom is derived from one’s ability to be future- or goal-focused, what lessons can we learn from his observation? In what ways does the substance of our goals or our focus on the future impact our spiritual freedom or “inner hold”? What are some examples from your life?
4. Thinking about the meaning of suffering and the idea of defining and seeking goals that are oriented around spiritual freedom and liberty, how did you react to the words

of Bismarck: "Life is like being at the dentist. You always think that the worst is still to come, and yet it is over already"?

5. In what ways is the purest form of "spiritual freedom and liberty" simply the process of continually seeking to be spiritually free with the passing of each day and in each moment? In what ways has our tendency to focus on other more ephemeral goals robbed us of the very thing we seek? Some examples I am thinking of include biblical/scriptural knowledge and debate skills, highly successful professional careers, financial freedom, perfect church attendance, avoidance of sin, becoming an excellent parent.

Victor writes: "I remember a personal experience. Almost in tears from pain (I had terrible sores on my feet from wearing torn shoes), I limped a few kilometers with our long column of men from the camp to our work site. Very cold, bitter winds struck us. I kept thinking of the endless little problems of our miserable life. What would there be to eat tonight? If a piece of sausage came as extra ration, should I exchange it for a piece of bread? Should I trade my last cigarette, which was left from a bonus I received a fortnight ago, for a bowl of soup? How could I get a piece of wire to replace the fragment which served as one of my shoelaces? Would I get to our work site in time to join my usual working party or would I have to join another, which might have a brutal foreman? What could I do to get on good terms with the Capo, who could help me to obtain work in camp instead of undertaking this horribly long daily march? I became disgusted with the state of affairs which compelled me, daily and hourly, to think of only such trivial things. I forced my thoughts to turn to another subject. Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past. Both I and my troubles became the object of an interesting psychoscientific study undertaken by myself. What does Spinoza say in his Ethics? — "Affectus, qui passio est, desinit esse passio simulatque eius claram et distinctam formamus ideam." Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it." [pgs 72-73]

R. The False Dichotomy - we've talked about how in order to attain an inner hold one must in each day and each moment engage in the process of seeking spiritual freedom. In terms of how to go about that, Victor goes on to write that what one needs on that journey a fundamental change in our attitude toward life - "that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us".

1. I'm curious to know in what ways is our inability to do this at times the result of our becoming engaged in false dichotomies, either self-imposed or enforced by others? In other words, do we at times find ourselves in turmoil because we become vexed in trying to choose which of two choices to make when there is third or multiple other choices, or the possibility of making no choice, or the possibility of choosing both?
2. In what ways is our interpretation of the atrocities in Israel and Palestine emblematic of this? Is it possible that happened with the block warden that Frankl talked about,

who'd had a dream that he could predict the war would end in March 30, and then died the next day when his prediction turned out not to be true? In what ways does the warden's experience teach us that giving in to the false dichotomy paradigm often represents the beginning of the loss of hope or an inner hold?

3. How does all of this jive with Victor's notion that, in trying to understand the mentality and psychology of prison guards, he writes that there are two types of men - decent and indecent - and that these types can be found in all walks of life? [pg 86] Do you agree? Or are people more complicated than that? What would Victor say? Is it possible that those who were "indecent" had simply their inner hold in the same way that prisoners who lost hope had lost their inner hold?
4. How interesting is it to you that this process of losing an inner hold can physical consequences (e.g., the warden's experience or the increased death rates at Christmas time)? Victor writes that "individual psychotherapeutic attempts were often a kind of "lifesaving procedure.""
5. Do you agree with Victor's prescription? "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."
6. In what ways is the process of obtaining an inner hold or an inner freedom really just the process of getting to know ourselves, and loving the person we get to know, and knowing that in knowing ourselves we reveal something about God ... and the God learns something about God's creation?

"When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." [pg 77]

S. Group Therapy - Victor talks about the fact that there were few opportunities for collective psychotherapy in camp, but also of the deep need to take advantage of them when they appeared. He tells the story of the evening after a day of fasting, the result of a theft of a few potatoes where no one would give up the perp. Victor was called upon by the senior block warden to instill upon prisoners the need to maintain hope and stave off death and suicide. [pgs 80-83]

1. What is your experience with group therapy? In what ways is this book discussion group a form of collective psychotherapy?
2. What was your reaction to Victor's words to the prisoners? What would your reaction have been if you were one of those in camp that night?

T. Moral Deformity, Bitterness and Disillusionment - Victor writes "Apart from the moral deformity resulting from the sudden release of mental pressure, there were two other fundamental experiences which threatened to damage the character of the liberated prisoner: bitterness and disillusionment when he returned to his former life." The moral deformity he speaks about is typified fairly innocuously in the story about Victor's friend who was willing to destroy oats in a field in exchange for the pleasure of walking thru it. But we can imagine more sinister and damaging forms. The bitterness stemmed primarily from realizing that people either weren't aware of their suffering or just didn't care about it. And disillusionment from the realization that things might not be as good outside of camp as one had hoped. "Woe to him who found that the person whose memory alone had given him courage in camp did not exist any more! Woe to him who, when the day of his dreams finally came, found it so different from all he had longed for!"

1. Where do we go from here? How does one find meaning or an "inner hold" when the thing they've hoped for all this time turns out to be much less than we thought it would?
2. What about violence? Or immoral righteousness? How do we think about the man who wanted to stomp on a few oats? What about examples from your life?
3. What about the notion of being in bleak conditions looking forward or backward to better times? As compared to being in better conditions and looking back or forward to bleaker moments? "As the day of his liberation eventually came, when everything seemed to him like a beautiful dream, so also the day comes when all his camp experiences seem to him nothing but a nightmare." How does one find the right balance?
4. What does the lesson of spiritual freedom or inner hold teach us about all of this?

III. Logotherapy in Nutshell

A. In a Sentence, What is Meant by Logotherapy - When asked to describe Logotherapy in a sentence, Victor responds that “logotherapy, in comparison with psychoanalysis, is a method less retrospective and less introspective. Logotherapy focuses rather on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his [or her] future. (Logotherapy, indeed, is a meaning-centered psychotherapy.) ... At the same time, logotherapy defocuses all the vicious-circle formations and feedback mechanisms which play such a great role in the development of neuroses. Thus, the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic is broken up instead of being continually fostered and reinforced.”

1. Logos denotes “meaning” and so the focus of Logotherapy, according to Victor, is the search for the meaning of one’s existence and Victor calls it a “will to meaning” (Logotherapy) as compared to “will to pleasure” (Freudian psychology) a “will to power” (Adlerian psychology). Were you familiar with these principles before reading Victor’s book?
2. What is your experience in therapy as it relates to these core concepts or schools? To which do you most closely relate? Do you believe that any are simply invalid? Or does each have a role in the development of one’s overall mental health?
3. Have you read “The Courage to be Disliked” by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga?

B. The “Will to Meaning” - “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.”

1. Do you agree with Victor that meanings and values are more than “defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations”? What do you think about the notion of being willing to live and die for the sake of your ideals and values?
2. How does one go about finding those ideals and values? Do you know it intuitively? Or do you intellectualize yourself to it? Do facts and circumstances sometimes dictate our willingness or need to find it?
3. Victor talks about “pseudovalues” in the lives of those for “camouflage of hidden inner conflicts” and the need to unmask those kinds of things. What comparisons can you think of in the faith context here? Is there a difference between longing for meaning and fearing one’s condemnation within this psychological framework? What happens in this context when the framework we’ve believed or the place in which we’ve poured our sense of meaning turns out to be much different in reality than we have been taught? I’m thinking in particular of a theological framework that ultimately conflicts with our own internal understanding and awareness of God and the divine.
4. What do you think of Victor’s idea of existential frustration and “noögenic neuroses”? Recall the American diplomat who had been told by his prior therapist

that his aversion to his work in foreign policy that it all had to do with unresolved issues with his father. "After a few interviews, it was clear that his will to meaning was frustrated by his vocation, and he actually longed to be engaged in some other kind of work." In what ways do we see this play out in faith traditions and churches? What about in the context of relationships ... friendly and romantic?

"[I]n logotherapy's attempt to make something conscious again it does not restrict its activity to instinctual facts within the individual's unconscious but also cares for existential realities, such as the potential meaning of his existence to be fulfilled as well as his will to meaning."

C. Noö-Dynamics - "To be sure, man's search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium. ... Thus it can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being."

1. What happens in the context of this tension when the things we seek to accomplish reside solely within our own needs and desires? What happens when the thing we determine we need seek or prioritize is convincing others of what their source of meaning should be and then trying to convince them to pursue or adopt it? I'm thinking of things like parenting (or over-parenting), evangelism, coaching, manipulating, therapy, etc. "No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism)."
2. In what ways does our tendency to over-think cause us to fall into cycles of suffering and turmoil ... especially when we are attempts at finding meaning revolve around issues over which we have no or little control?

"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task. [emphasis mine] 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. What man needs is not homeostasis but what I call "noö-dynamics," i.e., the existential dynamics in a polar field of tension where one pole is represented by a meaning that is to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it."

D. The Meaning of Life - "I doubt whether a doctor can answer this question in general terms. For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."

1. Easy light-hearted topics for today, no? What is your "specific vocation or mission in life to carry out"? What are the parts of you, to use Victor's analogy, that are (or would be) pressed together (as in an arch) to firm up your mental wellness in times of distress?
2. What happens in life if you don't achieve or realize those goals or missions? What happens if you never reach the top of the mountain? How do we find meaning in each moment as Victor points out? Victor writes "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he 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. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence." What the heck does he mean by this???
3. Victor seems to think that we ought to live as though we had been given a second chance? Does this work? What about those who actually have second chances and then are overcome by fears of screwing it up again (maybe this time even worse than before)? Can the key to understanding this be found in this quote from Victor "[the logotherapist] will never permit the patient to pass to the doctor the responsibility of judging?"
4. Assuming Victor is right, in what ways have societal structures (e.g., family systems, churches, social clubs, schools, etc) robbed generations of their capacity for mental health and wellness? How do we thread the needle between letting individuals judge and yet still create a functioning and safe society? "Logotherapy is neither teaching nor preaching. It is as far removed from logical reasoning as it is from moral exhortation. To put it figuratively, the role played by a logotherapist is that of an eye specialist rather than that of a painter."
5. How does the notion of "letting what is be" help us here? "[T]he meaning of life always changes, but ... never ceases to be."

E. A "How-to" Guide - "According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."

1. In finding meaning by experiencing something or someone, Victor points to love ... or experiencing another human being in their very uniqueness. How does one go about that? In what ways can our understanding (or misunderstanding) of love set us down the wrong path here?

2. Thich Nat Hahn, in his book "Anger", talks about true love (and by extension, inner peace) forming from deeply listening compassionately to another human being? What do you think he means?
3. Victor describes it this way ... "By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true." In what ways do you see risks in the approach that can trend toward totalitarianism? In other words, is there a risk that in "loving" someone we can become more of a painter than an eye-doctor? How do we avoid that? Are Hahn's insights helpful in that regard?
4. What about suffering? In what ways does defining meaning in each moment help us in the context of suffering? Think back to the notion of setting life goals but being unable to achieve them prior to life's end? "In accepting this challenge to suffer bravely, life has a meaning up to the last moment, and it retains this meaning literally to the end."
5. Did you find meaning in this story ... "This was the case when I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber immediately after his arrival at the Auschwitz railway station. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in a pocket of the newly acquired coat one single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer, Shema Yisrael. How should I have interpreted such a "coincidence" other than as a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

F. Human Problems - Frankl talks about how during the time he was writing the second half of his book, the world seemed to be transitioning from calling solely on clergy for human problems, they were starting to look to therapists and psychiatrists. Previously, psychiatrists had treated what he referred to as "neurotic symptoms".

1. What did you think about the story of the woman who had attempted suicide after the death of one of her sons, only to be stopped by her other son, who was suffering from a physical disability and yet still wanted to live?
2. What, if anything, can we learn about this from having conversations with fast talkers? How is that like looking at your life as an 80-yr old? How did the woman's story about her two sons change the arch of that conversation?
3. Do you think humans are the "terminal point in the evolution of the cosmos"? In what ways is Frankl's concept of "super-meaning" mirror Christian concepts of heaven? How do we get beyond the problem posed by Frankl's daughter ... that the Good Lord both sent and cured her of measles.

G. Tying it All Together - “Logotherapy, keeping in mind the essential transitoriness of human existence, is not pessimistic but rather activistic. To express this point figuratively we might say: The pessimist resembles a man who observes with fear and sadness that his wall calendar, from which he daily tears a sheet, grows thinner with each passing day. On the other hand, the person who attacks the problems of life actively is like a man who removes each successive leaf from his calendar and files it neatly and carefully away with its predecessors, after first having jotted down a few diary notes on the back. He can reflect with pride and joy on all the richness set down in these notes, on all the life he has already lived to the fullest.”

1. Why do you think Victor juxtaposes pessimism against activism, as opposed to optimism here? Do you think there are lessons here in terms of understanding and contextualizing our experiences of God? What about prayer?
2. In what ways are Americans, especially Christian Americans, even more susceptible to the burdens of expectations and fear of what they might not accomplish, as over-and-against, feeling gratitude for things they have? How do shame and envy come into play here? What do the lessons of Jesus teach us about all of this?
3. Victor writes about “anticipatory anxiety” and its capacity to destroy our ability to function effectively... as romantic partners, as parents, as professionals, etc. He also points out that learning to laugh at oneself can be the key to self-management and a cure to all different kinds of neurosis. What lessons did you draw from that in your own life? Do you have any examples where excessive attention and taking yourself too seriously may have led you down a path of frustration?
4. What about paradoxical intention (or the practice of aiming for the very thing we fear)? Do you have issues falling asleep? Have you ever tried staying awake as means to cure it? Are there lessons for our faith journey here?
5. Having worked your way through Victor’s book and our conversations about it, do you feel more able to defy and brave the “even the worst conditions conceivable” as Victor did? How has or will your own capacity for self-determination aided you in that process? Are you a swine, a saint or little of both? And to which of those do you aspire? Do you agree that whichever one you become, it will depend on your decisions and not on the conditions in which you find yourself?

“A human being is not one thing among others; things determine each other, but man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes—within the limits of endowment and environment—he has made out of himself. In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions. Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.”