Author of the classic 16 million copy bestseller
Man's Search for Meaning

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

YES TO LIFE

In Spite of Everything



'A path to finding hope
even in these dark times'
The New York Times



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In Spite of Everything

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Viktor Frankl, 1946

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VIKTOR E. FRANKL

With an Introduction by
Daniel Goleman



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1

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To my late father

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Contents

Introduction by Daniel Goleman 1
Editorial Note 21

On the Meaning and Value of Life I 23
On the Meaning and Value of Life II 59
Experimentum Crucis 97

Afterword by Franz Vesely 125
Notes 133
About Viktor E. Frankl 135
Further Works by Viktor E. Frankl 137
Viktor Frankl Institute 139
Acknowledgements 143

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Introduction by Daniel Goleman

It's a minor miracle this book exists. The lectures that form the basis of it were given in 1946 by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl a scant nine months after he was liberated from a labor camp where, a short time before, he had been on the brink of death. The lectures, edited into a book by Frankl, were first published in German by a small publisher. The volume went out of print and was largely forgotten until that same publisher recently recovered it from its archives. *Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything* has never before been published in English.

During the long years of Nazi occupation, Viktor Frankl's audience for the lectures published in this book had been starved of the moral and intellectual stimulation he offered them and were in dire need of new ethical coordinates. The Holocaust, which saw millions die in concentration camps, included as victims Frankl's parents and his pregnant wife. Yet despite these personal tragedies and the inevitable deep sadness these losses brought Frankl, he was able to put such suffering in a perspective that has inspired millions of readers of

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his best-known book, *Man's Search for Meaning* – and in these lectures.

He was not alone in the devastating losses and his own near death but also in finding grounds for a hopeful outlook despite it all. The daughter of Holocaust survivors tells me that her parents had a network of friends who, like them, had survived some of the same horrific death camps as Frankl. I had expected her to say that they had a pessimistic, if not entirely depressed, outlook on life.

But, she told me, when she was growing up outside Boston her parents would gather with friends who were also survivors of the death camps—and have a party. The women, as my Russian-born grandmother used to say, would get "gussied up," wearing their finest clothes, decking themselves out as though for a fancy ball. They would gather for lavish feasts, dancing and being merry together—"enjoying the good life every chance they had," as their daughter put it. She remembers her father saying "That's living" at even the slightest of pleasures.

As she says, "They never forgot that life was a gift that the Nazi machine did not succeed in taking away from them." They were determined, after all the hells they had endured, to say "Yes!" to life, in spite of everything.

The phrase "Yes to life," Viktor Frankl recounts, was from the lyrics of a song sometimes sung *sotto*

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voce (so as not to anger guards) by inmates of some of the four camps in which he was a prisoner, the notorious Buchenwald among them. The song had bizarre origins. One of the first commanders of Buchenwald—built in 1937 originally to hold political prisoners—ordered that a camp song be written. Prisoners, often already exhausted from a day of hard labor and little food, were forced to sing the song over and over. One camp survivor said of the singing, we "put all our hatred" into the effort.

But for others some of the lyrics expressed hope, particularly this:

> "… Whatever our future may hold:
> We still want to say 'yes' to life,
> Because one day the time will come —
> Then we will be free!"

If the prisoners of Buchenwald, tortured and worked and starved nearly to death, could find some hope in those lyrics despite their unending suffering, Frankl asks us, shouldn't we, living far more comfortably, be able to say "Yes" to life in spite of everything life brings us?

That life-affirming credo has also become the title of this book, a message Frankl amplified in these talks. The basic themes that he rounded out in his widely read book *Man's Search for Meaning* are hinted at in these lectures given in March and

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April of 1946, between the time Frankl wrote *Man's Search* and its publication.

For me there is a more personal resonance to the theme of *Yes to Life*. My parents' parents came to America around 1900, fleeing early previews of the intense hatred and brutality that Frankl and other Holocaust survivors endured. Frankl began giving these talks in March of 1946, just around the time I was born, my very existence an expression of my parents' defiance of the bleakness they had just witnessed, a life-affirming response to those same horrors.

In the rearview mirror offered by more than seven decades, the reality Frankl spoke to in these talks has long gone, with successive generational traumas and hopes following one on another. We postwar kids were by and large aware of the horrors of the death camps, while today relatively few young people know the Holocaust occurred.

Even so, Frankl's words, shaped by the trials he had just endured, have a surprising timeliness today.

Recognizing a "Big Lie" was a homework assignment in the civics class at my California high school, the Big Lie being a standard ploy in propaganda. For the Nazis, one Big Lie was that so-called Aryans were a supposed "master race," somehow ordained to rule the world. The defeat of the Nazis put that fantasy to rest.

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As World War II ended and the specter of the Cold War rose, with it came the threat that Russians, too, would, make propaganda a weapon in their arsenal. And, so, high school students of my era learned to spot and counter malicious half-truths.

As an inoculation against lies coming from Russia at the time, we learned to spot the rudiments of such disinformation, the Big Lie among them. Propaganda, as we learned in my civics class, relies on not just lies and misinformation but also on distorted negative stereotypes, inflammatory terms, and other such tricks to manipulate people's opinions and beliefs in the service of some ideological agenda.

Propaganda had played a major role in shaping the outlook of people ruled by the Axis powers. Hitler had argued that people would believe anything if it was repeated often enough and if disconfirming information was routinely denied, silenced, or disputed with yet more lies. Frankl knew well the toxicity of propaganda deployed by the Nazis in their rise to power and beyond. It was aimed, he saw, at the very value of existence itself, asserting the worthlessness of life—at least for anyone, like himself, who fell into a maligned category, like gypsies, gays, Jews, and political dissidents, among others.

When he was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl himself became a victim of such

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systematic lies, brutalized by guards who saw him and his fellow prisoners as less than human. When he gave the lectures in this book a scant nine months after his liberation from the Turkheim labor camp, Frankl began his talk by decrying the negative propaganda that had destroyed any sense of meaning, human ethics, and the value of life.

As he and all those in his Viennese audience knew well, the Nazis had honed their propaganda skills to a high level. But the kind of civics lesson that taught how to spot such distortions of truth is long gone.

Throughout the centuries, as today, the same disinformation playbook has been put to use by authoritarian rulers worldwide. The signs are clear: shutting down opposition media, quashing dissident voices, and jailing journalists who dare to report something other than the prevailing party line. The danger of substituting for real, objective news instead sets of lies, flimsy conspiracy theories, and us-versus-them hatreds has been amplified by digital media, where those who share beliefs in some or another distorted outlook can find online refuge among others whose minds are likewise set in a sympathetic worldview—and encounter no disconfirming evidence. Niche propaganda rules.

I don't recall the specific Big Lie that turned up in my homework. But I can think of several that were revealed in successive decades. One was about

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smoking. The US government had made a point of giving cigarettes to Allied troops in Europe and Asia—and so hooked a generation on a habit that, in the end, shortened their lives. When I was young, smoking was seen as glamorous (advertising, too, can partake of the Big Lie). Now we know that habit heightens the likelihood of cancer and heart disease, and an earlier death.

Another Big Lie had to do with my local power company, PG&E. When I was young, that utility had the image of being trustworthy. These days we know once that public utility became a private company, greed and the bottom line meant that profits were taken rather than putting money into repairing and maintaining the outfit's infrastructure. And today that once reliable organization has been the cause of countless wildfires—and has gone into bankruptcy.

The kind of lesson I had in spotting propaganda has long since dropped off the school curriculum. Yet it seems the time has again come when simple truths and basic human values need defending against the dangerous tides of hatred-spewing propagandists. Is it time again to bring back civics – lessons in speaking up, being a responsible citizen, and spotting today's Big Lies?

That's happening a bit already: new initiatives all over the country—indeed the world—are working to ensure that middle and high school students are taught lessons in these crucial areas.

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In an age when media of every kind have become tools of persuasion and propaganda, these are the kinds of questions any of us might do well to ask.

It might seem odd to readers today that Frankl spends a good deal of time refuting the assumption underlying euthanasia—not in its literal meaning, a "good," gentle, and painless death but rather in its perverse sense: that certain lives have no value, including those of the mentally ill and developmentally challenged, and so their deaths are justified.

The Nazis had murdered such people, no doubt a fact quite fresh in Frankl's mind just months after the war ended. As a psychiatrist, Frankl would have been acutely aware of the "euthanasia" policy that killed people like his former charges at the institution where he had worked before the war.

Frankl argues that suffering, even incurable illness and the inner dignity of dying "one's own death," can prove meaningful. In the face of death, for instance, there can still be an inner success, whether in maintaining a certain attitude or given the fulfillment of that person's life's meaning. So, he contends, no one has the right to judge another person's life as meaningless, or to deem another as unworthy of the right to life. Frankl himself had just recently been freed from the camps where the lives of inmates like him "counted for nothing."

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While the Holocaust rightly counts as an evil perpetrated on ethnic, political, and religious groups deemed by the Nazis as worthless, the extermination policy was also applied to those with mental handicaps in huge numbers—several hundred thousand by some counts. The approach had, oddly, originated in the American "eugenics" movement, a form of social Darwinism that justified a society in ridding itself of those who were deemed unfit, often through forced sterilization. That argument was carried to its logical, if horrific, fulfillment by the Nazis.

Murdering such people has, blessedly, largely vanished around the globe as a tactic for dealing with those once deemed "undesirable." Today's disputes about euthanasia revolve around the "good death" sense of the term, in which a terminally ill person, typically in great pain, opts for suicide to put an end to their own suffering.

Frankl's main contribution to the world of psychotherapy was what he called "logotherapy," which treats psychological problems by helping people find meaning in their lives. Rather than just seeking happiness, he proposed, we can seek a sense of purpose that life offers us.

Happiness in itself does not qualify as such a purpose; pleasures do not give our life meaning. In contrast, he points out that even the dark and joyless episodes of our lives can be times when we mature

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