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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Trans-Material References in Victor Frankl's Work

To the Editor:

As a hospice social worker I have often returned to the writing of Victor Frankl. His emphasis on the capacity of individuals to find meaning in life during times of suffering, his insistence that we humans ask big questions about why we are here and how we should live, as well as his invitation to take seriously the spiritual dimension of life have never failed to bring new insights as I serve those who are dying and their loved ones.

I must have read his best known work, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1984), more than a dozen times prior to recently returning for another visit. The basic outline of the biographical part of the book was familiar: Frankl's nightmarish persecution in the Nazi death camps; his struggle to make sense of the horror and violence; his grief as he fought to retain his humanity and survive, separated from loved ones, unsure whether they were alive or dead.

This time, however, I was struck by a trans-material perspective that I had not previously noticed. I guess this former oversight makes sense; I've become interested in such things only in the years since my most recent readings—a fact that underscores the way, if we are not paying attention, these things may easily be missed or discounted.

For Frankl (1984), the axis around which this perspective rotates is the capacity of prisoners to inwardly “retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom” (p. 55). Contrasting the brutality of the concentration camp with his awakening inner life, he recounted being marched through a cold morning by machine gun wielding guards as

my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. (pp. 56–7)

As he inwardly interacted with the image of his wife,

A thought crossed my mind: I didn't even know if she were still alive. I knew only one thing—which I have learned well by now: Love goes

very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance. (p. 58)

Though what he meant may be debated, to me, his sensing the presence of his wife and his certainty that this connection transcended space, time, and death suggests a widening of consciousness that allows a glimpse into the same realms of experience reported by those who have experienced near-death experiences (NDEs), death-bed synchronicities/nearing-death awareness, and after-death communication. This similarity is evidenced in part by the hyper-realism of the images, the profundity of the felt-connection across space, the power of the experience to bring comfort and peace, and the realization of the primacy of love and its transcendence of death.

This felt-connection with his wife was no one-time event and, as he understood it, no conjuration of an imagination motivated to seek escapism. He recalled another episode:

For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was *there*. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me. (p. 60–1)

Frankl's (1984) attention to, and imbuing significance in the arrival of the bird was no anomaly. Throughout the book he noticed the natural world. Occasionally, he commented on ways that nature, amidst the harsh brutality of Auschwitz, could evoke deeper states of knowing, unitive consciousness, or could deliver important messages. In the passage below he offered an example:

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't know quite how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously, I asked her if the tree

replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me 'I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.' (p.90)

Frankl's (1984) other observations encompassed examples of prognostic dreams, sudden intuitive insights, and the spontaneous sense of connection with the Transcendent. He made no references to NDEs, but we know enough from research conducted in the last 40 years to suppose that beneath the surface brutality awash in complex trauma and sudden death, there was likely a hidden story of many people whose consciousnesses encountered such visions as their lives ended.

In part two of *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1984) encouraged readers to open themselves to the question: "Is it not conceivable that there is still another dimension, a world beyond man's world; a world in which the question of an ultimate meaning of human suffering would find an answer?" (p. 141)

For me, the value of Frankl's work for those of us interested in NDEs and related phenomena is implicit in his discovery of this trans-material realm within the most horrifying and dehumanizing of situations. As I enter the lives of others who are asking question about suffering and struggling with challenges at the end of life, he has reminded me to be alert not just to the world visible to the senses but also to the possibility that those with whom I am visiting may, like Frankl, be having insights and experiences beyond explanation by philosophical materialism.

References

Frankl, V. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

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