The story of daily life in the concentration camps has been recorded in many books of testimony. Camp inmates were subjected to long days of arduous work while surviving on a diet of thin soup and moldy bread. Always subjected to continual humiliation from the SS guards, inmates had to learn to withstand an environment created to dehumanize them before they were killed.

This selection by Dr. Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, begins to answer the question of how the inmate adjusted to life in the concentration camp. Frankl argues that the inmates had to find meaning in their suffering as a reason to go on living. Those who lost faith in the future were those most likely to die. Yet Frankl's testimony goes far beyond the issue of survival in camps to the larger question of how humans deal with life itself.

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. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment—not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds...No blows. No threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. If this crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sickbay or to do anything to help himself. He simply gave up. There he remained, lying in his own excreta. And nothing bothered him anymore.

I once had a dramatic demonstration of the close link between the loss of faith in the future and this dangerous giving up. My senior block warden, a fairly well-known composer and librettist, confided in me one day: “I would like to tell you something. Doctor. I have had a strange dream. A voice told me that I could wish for something, that I should only say what I wanted to know, and all my questions would be answered. What do you think I asked? That I would like to know when the war would be over for me...I wanted to know when we, when our camp, would be liberated and our sufferings come to an end.”

“And when did you have this dream?” I asked.

“In February, 1945,” he answered. It was then the beginning of March.

“What did your dream voice answer?”

Furtively he whispered to me. “March thirtieth. When F—told me about his dream, he was still full of hope and convinced that the voice of his dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer, the war news which reached our camp made it appear very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March twenty ninth, F—suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March thirtieth, the day his prophecy had told him that the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March thirty-first, he was dead. To all outward appearances, he had died of typhus.

The ultimate cause of my friend's death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his body's resistance against the latent typhus infection. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralized and his body fell victim to illness—and thus the voice of his dream was right after all.

Any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all...efforts regarding prisoners. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life. No aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost...

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather
what life expected from us... Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross... 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. For us, as prisoners, these thoughts were not speculations far removed from reality. They were the only thoughts that could be of help to us. They kept us from despair, even when there seemed to be no chance of coming out of it alive. There was plenty of suffering for us to get through. Therefore, it was necessary to face up to the full amount of suffering, trying to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum. But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer. Only very few realized that...

A very strict camp ruling forbade any efforts to save a man who attempted suicide. It was forbidden, for example, to cut down a man who was trying to hang himself. Therefore, it was all important to prevent these attempts from occurring.

I remember two cases of would-be suicide. Which bore a striking similarity to each other. Both men had talked of their intentions to commit suicide. Both used the typical argument—they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them. We found, in fact, that for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing. Not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child’s affections.

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the “why” for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any “how.”


QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why did the senior block warden die on March 31st?
2. What is meant by Nietzsche’s statement, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”
3. What does Frankl say about crying?
4. How can Frankl’s comments about suicide in the camps relate to the issue of increasing suicide today?

DEFINITIONS

furtively: slyly
psychohygiene: the relationship between individual health and state of mind