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Man's Search for Meaning

I'm sure that many of you will recognize the title of this chronicle. It was the title of Viktor Frankl's famous book about his time in four Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz, in the 1940s.

You may also be wondering how a story about concentration camps has anything to do with climate change. That is what I intend to explore. The key is in the idea of "meaning".

We all find ourselves in situations that we never expected, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not. When a situation is challenging, we must first determine how it relates to us and then we must find ways of adapting to what is happening. Our reaction to the situation depends on whether we find a way to see our lives as still meaningful.

About Frankl's Experience

Viktor Frankl, a young Austrian Jewish psychiatrist, may have suspected that he might end up in a concentration camp. But it was only when he was an actual prisoner that he found himself searching for a meaning to his life: for a way to understand and come to terms with such a radical and daunting change. How could he understand what was happening to him; how could he respond in order to survive? His actions in the camp as a doctor and psychiatrist helped other prisoners find meaning. And he also found meaning for himself. He shares a number of his observations. Here is one that stayed with me.

One day when he returned tired and exhausted from a work detail, Frankl noticed another prisoner who had been too sick to work that day. The man was sitting on his bunk smoking a few cigarettes.

In the concentration camp cigarettes were like money. You could use them to barter for other things—like a potato, an extra bowl of soup, or some other food that had been smuggled in. As Frankl watched the prisoner smoking his last few cigarettes he knew the man had given up. Frankl realized that without a purpose/meaning to his life this prisoner would soon die.

Our Search for Meaning

None of us today, at least in our part of the world, is experiencing what Frankl had to deal with in concentration camps. But the search for meaning is not unique to that setting. Frankl was telling us that each one of us must search for meaning every time we find ourselves in a challenging situation. And these days the search is becoming ever more intense because so many stressful things are happening at the same time.

Today we are facing the Covid-19 pandemic, an economic recession with hundreds of thousands of people out of work and a looming climate challenge. We don't even know where to start because these realities are so intertwined.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution we have developed our economic systems to protect us and keep us safe and secure. But it has turned out that the very systems we were depending on for safety are what cause our problems. This is not a new scenario.

Centuries ago the Roman poet Juvenal asked, "*Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodies?*" —But who will guard the guards? We have created the systems to protect us but they are now working against us. Statistics from Oxfam tell us that currently [twenty-six people](#) own as much wealth as half the entire world's population.

One major source of our predicament is the carbon economy we have developed and benefited from.

The Carbon Economy

On August 4, 2020 a hundred of the world's leading economists published a dramatic document entitled "[Letter from economists: to rebuild our world we must end the Carbon Economy](#)". In relatively few words it describes the world in which we live, the problems we are facing and the steps we must take to turn things around. Here is an excerpt from the beginning of the article.

From deep-rooted racism to the Covid-19 pandemic, from extreme inequality to ecological collapse, our world is facing dire and deeply interconnected emergencies. But as much as the present moment painfully underscores the weaknesses of our economic system, it also gives us the rare opportunity to

reimagine it. As we seek to rebuild our world, we can and must end the carbon economy.

The article goes on to note that the fossil fuel industry has been lying about climate change for decades. It has opposed efforts to cut back on coal, oil and gas production and has continued to promote a fossil fuel dependent future.

But there is plenty of blame to go around. Governments have been supportive and complicit through bailouts, subsidies, and so forth. Banks, other financial institutions, and many prestigious educational institutions have provided the fossil fuel industry with economic support and social capital.

The document notes that the carbon economy is having a devastating influence in terms of crop failures, water shortages, rising tides, wildfires, severe weather, rising temperatures and so forth.

In concluding, the document states that governments must actively phase out bailouts and subsidies for the fossil fuel industry and institutions of financial power must end their fossil fuel investments. People must build political power at the local level to advocate for a fairer economic system, to create change, bring about a greener world and create new and better systems that respect Earth and provide a better future for everyone.

The article ends on a determined and hopeful note:

By achieving a large scale transformation that dismantles the carbon economy and brings about a greener world, we have an opportunity to begin the process of economic recovery while working to undo the injustices at the heart of our modern system. As the undersigned experts in economics, we call on our policy makers to recognize the role that meaningful climate action has to play in rebuilding our world—to recognize that a healthy economy and society requires a healthy planet.

The above statement shows that these economists have found meaning in the complex challenges facing society. They see this as an opportunity to create a new world.

On a final note, here is a story from Frankl describing how one dying prisoner found a meaning to her ordeal and a way to accept her death.

One day I was called to the side of a young woman who was dying. 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 the 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. I was startled and didn't know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes", she said. "It said to me, 'I am here—I am here—I am here—I am life eternal'."

~Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network