

FROM TERROR TO MEANING AND HEALING – A FRANKLIAN VIEW

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Terrorism has a direct impact on human rights, denying individuals the right to life, liberty, and physical integrity (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2008). For the survivors who personally experience such horrific attacks, terrorism threatens their existence, shatters their sense of coherence and meaning, and shakes the foundation of who they are; making them face helplessness and mortality (Serlin & Cannon, 2004). For each of those who fall victim to a terror act, a new “family of the bereaved” is left behind, joining with other families whose loved ones fell on the battlefield or in sudden and violent terror attacks (Possick, Sadeh, & Shamai, 2008). Even for those who have never been directly impacted by a terrorist attack, the thought of such indiscriminate violence creates varying degrees of anticipatory anxiety, fears of future harm to oneself or loved ones, and functional impairments, such as refusal to leave their homes or ride public transportation (Somer, Tamir, Maguen & Litz, 2004). For all of these individuals, the pain is always there ... and for the world, it is yet another example of continuing inhumanity on the part of humankind.



As a trauma researcher and oral historian, with a family history of surviving the Holocaust and living in Israel, I set out to address two important questions (Konvisser, 2006, p. 6): How can we learn from our experiences to prevent genocide? How can we move beyond the trauma of such events?

Viktor Frankl provided some answers in *Man's Search for Meaning*, and his belief in *healing through meaning*. Frankl described how personal strength, wellness, and other positive outcomes can result from the struggle with a trauma or life crisis, and he stressed the freedom to transcend suffering and employ the Defiant Power of the Human Spirit to make choices and embrace life:

even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear

witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation ... we are challenged to change ourselves. (Frankl, 2006, p. 112)

Similar answers came from the more recent work of Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, who used the term *posttraumatic growth* to describe the positive psychological change that can be experienced as a result of the struggle with a highly challenging life circumstance – a traumatic event of seismic proportions (a holocaust) that severely shakes or destroys some of the key elements of the individual's important goals and worldview (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). In their research, they found that reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders and that continuing personal distress and growth often coexist (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

To further explore these questions, I wanted to understand and know the voices, faces, and passions of these otherwise ordinary people and how they are – or in some cases, are not – able to cope after experiencing acts of terrorism. I also hoped to explore what is in the stories of some individuals that allow them to move from some of the darkest experiences possible to make sense of their lives and move forward in their lives, discovering meaning from their experiences and making a difference in the world.

So, between 2004 and 2010, I traveled to Israel eight times for extended stays to collect the stories of 48 survivors, their families, and the families of the bereaved – 28 women and 20 men – who experienced terrorism primarily between 2000 and 2006. In total, 33 incidents are described, in which ordinary people – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze – riding in buses, dining in restaurants, shopping in markets, studying at college, visiting hotels, or walking along the street – suddenly found themselves targets of suicide bombings, shooting attacks, or rocket attacks, or grieving families of those who were killed by these acts of terror (Konvisser, 2006, 2013).

What happened to the survivors of these indiscriminate and horrific attacks, their families, and the families of the bereaved? Did the physical and emotional scars overwhelm them? Were they able to transcend this experience to lead healthy lives?

I sat with these people and listened to their horror and distress, their suffering and losses – what it is like to feel the pain of a bullet entering your body, believing your life is ending, coming home to babies who don't recognize you, and family members, friends, and co-workers who don't understand that you are not the same person you were, even though you look the same – what it is like to lose your child or parent or spouse and see

friends cross the street to avoid talking to you because they don't know what to say to you.

But I also heard what it is like to come back to life after such a horrific experience or the death of a beloved one and maybe finally be able to find the light at the end of the tunnel. In their true life stories of hope and determination to rebuild and to triumph over the terrorists – a victory of the human spirit – these people speak not just of moving on with life but of living next to their feelings of grief, pain, and helplessness, overcoming suffering, finding meaning and purpose, and moving forward to turn tragedy into action. In their stories, hope and optimism replace despair. While they do not forget their traumatic experiences nor minimize their suffering, they are able to integrate and own the painful emotions of their situation, make them part of their story, and live with them in a productive way.

Each person's story is unique. Although there is no right or wrong way for dealing with these crises – or any life crisis – and there may be some unique cultural and situational factors in the way these persons responded to their challenges, as well as an emphasis on personal and community preparedness, I found that those who have survived and thrived share some common qualities – ones that we may cultivate to master any crisis. We too can learn from their experiences and be inspired to meet our own challenges, and to make choices that will help us live more purposeful and more fulfilling lives: by calling on our inner strength, core beliefs, and values; by focusing on and prioritizing the important things in life – family, friends, God; by staying healthy and fit; by the positive attitudes and actions we take; by obtaining and fostering resources that help buffer the effects of stress; by seeking out others who have been there and understand; and by sharing our own trauma stories and experiences with sensitive and empathic listeners in a safe, respectful, and supportive environment (Konvisser, 2014, p. 267).

As we have learned from Viktor Frankl, such tragedies resist the very possibility of meaning. However, the meaning is not in the tragic event – it is in the way the survivors and families respond to the inhumanity in a positive way. In my book, *Living Beyond Terrorism: Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing* (2014), I discuss what I learned from these remarkable people about healing through meaning.

Many survivors demonstrate the three logotherapy value categories or possibilities to find meaning in life – attitudinal, experiential, and creative (Frankl, 2006, pp. 115-116; Konvisser, 2014, pp. 7-14). Although their lives often are changed forever, they view life after being confronted by an unchangeable fate with a positive and hopeful attitude – one of the logotherapeutic values – and accept what has happened to them, believing often that they have been chosen by God for a reason, not by chance.

A second logotherapeutic value category is experiential. They take from life's experiences the importance of human encounters, relationships, and love and have a greater appreciation of life. They are strengthened by and give strength to their families, learning to appreciate them much more. They actively pursue creative activities and good deeds – the third logotherapeutic value category, continuing to give to life to help themselves and others – to make a difference in the world.

One repeated theme I encountered was that, for parents, there is no greater grief than losing a child; but the persons I interviewed often felt when a child dies suddenly as the result of a terrorist attack or in the service of one's country, it is the parents' worst nightmare. There is no time to prepare or somehow make their farewells. These parents have a very difficult time in finding closure; yet some demonstrate incredible resilience, strength, and determination. They channel their grief into turning the most negative episode in their lives into something infinitely positive. They respond to pain and suffering by building, growing, discovering meaning in suffering, and choosing life, honoring the memories of their beloved children and truly making a difference in their lives and the lives of others (Konvisser, 2014, p. 228).

To fill the big holes in their hearts created by their losses, many search for and find the silver lining, creatively giving back and moving forward with action. Some find meaning through self-transcendence and altruism. Out of their disappointment in others who do not know how to react to their bereavement, many discover the healing value of speaking about their experiences and creating opportunities to educate and raise awareness. Through these acts of healing others, over time, these bereaved parents heal their own hearts and souls, and leave a legacy for future generations (Konvisser, 2014, pp. 265-266).

Acts of terror also provoke questions regarding the meaning of human intent and of good and evil (Knafo, 2004). In the stories I collected, for some – both Jewish and Arab – their search for answers becomes a search for peace, reconciliation, and tolerance between Israeli and Palestinian societies. They speak out about reform and advocate for coexistence, bearing witness to the indomitable power of the human spirit to transcend and transform following tragedy and uncertainty.

In the process of healing, survivors, their families, and bereaved parents may come to understand and change their self-identity; they identify themselves as survivors and are not defined by victimization or by survivor's guilt. In the face of overwhelming disaster, these otherwise ordinary people call forth courage they never knew they possessed; find meaning from their deeds, experiences, and attitudes; and turn tragedy into triumph, allowing

growth and wellness to thrive. They become survivors! And they discover for themselves that the meaning does not lie in the disaster, but in the way they respond to the disaster (Konvisser, 2014, pp. 266-267). As I quoted Frankl earlier, “even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed ... we are challenged to change ourselves” (Frankl, 2006, p. 112).

Robert C. Barnes, PhD, President, International Board of Directors, Viktor Frankl Institute of Logotherapy, wrote in the endorsement to my book:

These stories illustrate the gift of choice, not “Why me?” but instead “Why not me? What do I do now with my freedom to go forward from this moment?” ... Viktor Frankl reminds us that “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.” ... Which one is your choice? (Konvisser, 2014, p. i)

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