

Aftermath of a War

I was twenty-eight and living in California when I fell. Fell until I thought I would never catch myself again; fell crashing and tumbling and stammering I love you—I love you—I love you—until I thought I would die of shame; fell until I dropped into grace so profoundly humbling yet so life-giving I could scarcely believe it was happening to me.

The man who, unbeknownst to himself, evoked the emotion was sixty-three and thoroughly married. He lived in Vienna, city of Strauss waltzes, and was known for his love of hiking the Austrian Alps. He would earn his pilot license at seventy, mountain-climb into his eighties, publish an autobiography at ninety. I had read *The Doctor and the Soul*, but my lifelong attention was to focus on the heart-wrenching tale of his Shoah experience. Coming across the modest-sized book was a key event as I cast about to make sense of my life.

I'd had little trouble finding his address—Mariannengasse # 1—but to subjugate assorted

fears and actually airmail a letter to the man? I had typed several pages in my native language; what would I do with them? Trepidation held me in thrall. By then the Austrian physician was known well beyond Europe. In the US he was affiliated with the Scripps Research Institute of Neuroscience in Southern California. In flights of fancy I imagined visiting there. In actual life, once our babies slept, I read to my man from his law books—or else from a collection of humorous stories I'd brought with me, translating for him as I went. Darold begged to hear these stories over and over. Meanwhile I idolized an author who, however enlightening, brought me tremendous conflict. His book seemed to call me to take a stand, make myself heard.

“For several months now I have composed attempts at a letter to you. Perhaps this one will find its way to your mailbox,” begins my missive to Vienna. When I arrived in the States, I explained, I knew nothing of recent German history. Schools as well as parents were silent on the matter; indeed, my history teacher nixed her curriculum to substitute the teaching of Greek myths. Hence I knew all about Jason's capture of the golden fleece and the gift of fire from Prometheus, but until Viktor Frankl's death-camp memoir came into my life, I was ignorant of the Nazi horrors perpetrated by my people. A story in my fifth-grade reader was so obscure, for years I failed to grasp its subtext. A young woman negotiates with a prison warden for the ashes of her son. The boy supposedly died of influenza. When she arrives, the warden is taken aback by her blond braids, pinned atop her head in a half-crown. “He was my stepson,” she says. Then she adds, “I lost my husband. Grant me this bit of connection to the past.” He allows her to take the ashes. What bunk, what sentimental gibberish! What a way to lull to sleep an unknowing generation! Blond braids, ashes in urns, orderly prisons!

“Your state that fellow survivors were reluctant to speak of their camp experiences because no one would understand, and those who survived have no need to hear the tale,” I think

I wrote, “but your approach changed all that. Because of your publication, others have come forward to disclose their experiences. Not only Holocaust survivors are speaking out, black Americans are doing so also. James Baldwin, for example, is an amazing writer. If it weren’t so, I would not have heard of Emmett Till.”

Interestingly, Martin Luther King Jr. had joined an antiwar march in D.C., charging the US meddled in “what is basically a civil war.” We were destroying hundreds and thousands of Vietnamese children with napalm, he said. Photos in the news supported his allegations: Children running in terror, clothes incinerated and skin sloughed off. Just as certain companies in Germany had profited from Nazi evil, Dow Chemical, the industrial giant that manufactured the napalm, raked in the dollars. Soon after the US allied itself with Nguyen Can Ky, a Vietnamese general who professes admiration for Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King Jr. suffered his assassination.

Did my letter include the Vietnam aside? Did I mention my husband was a survivor of childhood polio? If so, my efforts segued into response to a passage in Frankl’s memoir, then titled *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*. Its German title read *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*: “Say yes to Life in Spite of Everything.” In the scene that touched my heart the author, weary to dying, is charged with repairing a road in the camp where he is forced to subsist. Unexpectedly a bird alights on a pile of dirt. Its appearance evokes a chain of thoughts and feelings he shares with his readers, musings on Tilly, his spouse. I thought of a song popular just then, in which the speaker reflects on a faraway beloved for whose touch he has longed “a long, lonely time.” My letter said that his sharing was like a precious gift left on the doorstep of an impoverished hut. Of the passage I said, “We, your readers, are invited as it were into your inner sanctum, where we catch glimpses of healing in our broken lives.”

Even at first reading—I read it repeatedly, eventually going over its content as if with a fine-tooth comb—Frankl’s medical insights forced me to confront the fantasies of ending my life that plagued me. Such imaginings are powerfully seductive. Against my wishes they continued to persist. It’s like being addicted to pornography, I wrote, except that pornographic images provide the illusion of power over another human being while suicidal fantasies drag you down into apathy and hopelessness, where you wallow in self-pity and are powerless to change your life. The insight does not make the fantasies disappear, however, nor does it alleviate the fears and anxieties that gave rise to them to begin with.

“At times the destructive thinking cannot be resisted except with lines from your writing. Sometimes I repeat to myself the German title of your memoir. Say yes to life, I tell myself, say yes. I am reminded that you stayed true to your credo even when overwhelmed by grief and sadness. In this I want to be like you. I am forever in your debt for sharing your thoughts as you did.”

I may have alluded to Mother’s death and her sister’s suicide. The letter’s subterranean message, however, must have been a prayer for love. Love me anyway. Love me even though I am German. Love me although I am one messed-up cookie. I may be too cynical by half; still, I want you to love me. Not knowing—though Frankl may have understood from the get-go— that what I’d written was a plea for forgiveness, I signed the letter with “Your devoted reader.”

Was I hoping for a reply? A signed photograph, perhaps, a preprinted thank-you note? In moments of doubt I shook my head. It won’t happen. It can’t happen. Many demands are made on an author of note. Readers more literate than I, and there had to be many of them, would share how his insights had touched their lives. It was self-indulgent to imagine a reply.

When a response did arrive in my stunned hands, it comprised not only a letter but also a

conveyance so unusual, at once its author became my adored, my redeemer, my savior and judge.

“*Sehr verehrte gnädige Frau,*” he wrote, which roughly translates as “Most honored and gracious lady.” The greeting hurled me into shudders of remorse. No one had ever addressed me with language as this, not did I have occasion to use such elevated phrasing with my coevals. “Please go away,” I whispered. “I don’t deserve your kindness.” Almost immediately the thought was replaced by something equally embarrassing: “I want you involved in my life. I want you close to me; I want you in bed with me.”

The fevered state triggered a poem I had the good sense not to send him. That is, I hope I didn’t send it. Did I send it? From that effort, only these lines remain in my memory:

How I desired

To stroll toward you with joy, stand before you, a queen

And here I come in rags; I kneel in shame.

What was it that caused Frankl to respond as he did? Did he discern I was in love with him, would gladly open myself to sexual surrender? My letter, I knew, bore implied emotion toward its latent recipient, though initially I did not think physical desire would obtain in tandem. Desire, I believed, was ephemeral. It comes calling, lingers for a while, then changes into something else—indifference, jealousy, contempt. What I didn’t know but was about to learn: Desire can deepen into the capacity to love, or at any rate the potential of love. Desire does this by demanding we invest ourselves, body and soul. It requires we give it all we’ve got, insists we pledge ourselves to a force that’s about to upend life as we know it. Desire throws open the door to our humanity. We may hesitate at its threshold, decide not to enter, or jump in with both feet. Desire propelled me to a leap of faith into the unknown without quite understanding how or why. Already the beloved name had become an inexpressible stammer, a cry for forgiveness, a sob too

ashamed to call itself love.

Once the hormones quit jumping and I studied the letter and its attachment at leisure, the wisdom of Frankl's choice of language became apparent. However gracious, it established formal boundaries to our conversation, not to be confused with the tenor of the enclosed pages which turned out an exposition of passion barely held in check. Written twenty-four years earlier and obviously composed on manual typewriter, it was the original—very likely, the sole copy—of an address delivered to a Berlin Congress of Physicians in late 1945. The speech touches on crimes horrific in ideology, unforgivable in action. The immediate past saw crematoria reducing to ashes hundreds, nay thousands of bodies, bodies alive a few hours earlier, before nerve gas did them in. Some, if not many of Frankl's listeners would have been SS doctors who helped deport his own and other communities, signed off on the executions he witnessed, condoned the mass murder that robbed him of family, friends, and fellow prisoners. What did it cost him to deliver that speech? Such sorrow is in it, such heartache! And then, to pass on the paper in response to someone else's pain! Imagine rummaging through piles of writing two-and-a-half decades in the making until you unearthed the very thing.

“How did you know I needed this?” I wanted to ask, never imagining, within less than a year I would get the chance to put the question directly to my hero, only to stumble when his path crossed mine in all its stark reality.

Had I been able to put into words the underlying question, it would have been something like this: Supposing you remembered your childhood mostly as chaos, long on anxiety and short on kindness, so that you grew up insecure, secretive, and quick to take offense. Could you learn empathy in adulthood as one might a foreign language, more difficult now than it would have been earlier, but possible nonetheless? And erotic affection, might it promote a readiness to

learn? Perhaps desire always begins as self-serving impulse; still, it engages the imagination when it begins to ask “What is life like for the loved other?” And supposing your spouse were as thin-skinned as you are and altogether disinclined to study a new language, might your own learning suffice? Yet I was caught in a family story that trailed across the miles like a persistent stowaway. Mother’s too-early demise of cancer was its poster child, or perhaps it was her sister’s suicide for which Mother’s rejection proved the proverbial straw. The family story spelled Monkey See Monkey Do for my three brothers and me, two of whom had come to live near or with me in California. Undoubtedly the mindset brought harm to the family I created for myself in the US. Yet change was to come.

To be generosity’s undeserving recipient is an amazing experience. It is altogether transformative. I kept poring over Frankl’s Berlin address, which must have been composed within weeks of learning he’d lost his parents, his brother, even his spouse and unborn child to Nazi atrocities. In his talk he calls to account his listeners for the degradation visited on a profession he yet cherishes. Allusions to medical experiments perpetrated on incarcerated children are recalled in sorrow.

In spite of harrowing disillusionment, toward the end of his speech the author reaches out to his German colleagues, urging them to rebuild a profession discredited through years of abuse. He speaks of the heroic efforts of physicians in the camps who sought to preserve life, men and women who, like he, struggled with daily decisions to maintain their own existence versus giving away the scarce morsels of food in their possession. His speech repeats an observation in his death-camp memoir: “The best of us did not return.”

The best of us did not return. The line also appears in a letter Frankl wrote to a friend soon after his return to Vienna, made public many years after the exchanges with me. The

writing reflects a desolation that must have been shared by many survivors: “I learned that my mother was sent to Auschwitz a week after me. What that means, you know all too well. And I had scarcely arrived in Vienna when I was told that my wife is also dead. She was sent from Auschwitz to work in the trenches at Trachtenberg in Breslau, and then on to the infamous concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. There, the women endured ‘terrible, indescribable suffering,’ as it was put in a letter from a former colleague of Tilly’s, in which Tilly’s name is listed as one of those who died of typhus. The letter comes from the only survivor of the former hospital nurses, such as they were, in Bergen-Belsen. I have had the ‘indescribable’ depicted to me by a survivor of Bergen-Belsen. I cannot repeat it.

“So now I’m all alone. . . . I am terribly tired, terribly sad, terribly lonely. I have nothing to hope for . . . I have no pleasure in life, only duties . . . I feel distant from everything.”

In the camps, Frankl tells his correspondent, the prisoners believed they had reached the lowest point but “when we returned, we saw that nothing had survived, that all that had kept us standing has been destroyed, that at the same time as we were becoming human again it was possible to fall deeper, into an even more boundless suffering.” And yet, even as he seeks a smidgen of consolation by reading the Psalms, something asserts itself toward the good. A couple of influential friends have taken up his cause, he writes; they encourage him to work on his book and look forward to its publication. He ends the letter asking his friend to “forgive these disjointed scribbles.” He explains he writes “bit by bit during my surgery hours.” Though trained in psychoanalysis, in those postwar months he found employment as surgeon in the city of his birth, where love would find him again in the person of Eleonore (“Elly”) Schwindt. He went on to publish several more widely-acclaimed books.

What Frankl says of Bergen-Belsen brings to mind a French resistance fighter’s memoir

of surviving the women's camp in Ravensbrück. She described how, as they arrived, the women had to strip and put their belongings in a bag. They stood naked for hours, forced to submit to female camp workers (Kapos) who "examined" their genitals with toothbrushes or dirty spatulas. SS doctors clad in Nazi uniforms looked on, leering. Women can be as obscene, as pornographic to their sisters as any male sadist. The prisoners had to sew colored triangles on their uniforms: red for political prisoners, black for social outcasts, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses, green for criminals, yellow for Jews. Toward the end mostly red-triangle wearers remained.

Taking possession of the Berlin paper brought on the vow that, whatever difficulties harried my days, I would live with them. For the sake of Frankl's forthrightness I would accept whatever fate came my way. In months, years, decades to come, whenever life seemed too much to bear, I was to return to that pledge and cling to it as to a life raft. It permitted me to survive where my unfortunate siblings succumbed.

Inevitably the Berlin speech prompted the impulse to inquire into audience response. Did anyone step up after his talk to say "I am sorry" or "What can I do?" I guessed any such phrase would seem an insult added to injury and, hence, to be avoided even by those who resisted the Nazis. It doesn't take rocket science to work out the result; no, to inquire was redundant. Yet my adored interlocutor was apt to reply, I surmised, were I to continue our long-distance exchange. I imagined the exquisite agony of awaiting another response and knew I would find a way.