

I came to consciousness with what must have been a smile on my face, so enjoyable was the dream that still lingered. As I lay there slowly waking, the thought crossed my mind, why not turn the dream into reality? Why not send an invitation to Vienna?

In my dream, I was host to a beloved figure who had arrived with his wife to share his ideas with neighbors and friends. As I hovered at the edge of wakefulness I reflected that the dream had its roots in reality: I had recently organized a neighborhood get-together, and I'd also played host to a travel-club couple who stayed overnight. Why not invite Viktor Frankl and his spouse? Then I remembered that my quasi-Zen master had died in 1997, at age 92.

The early-morning thoughts transported me back to the time I encountered the renowned humanist and his companion in the flesh—in an elevator, of all places. An upscale hotel in San Francisco was the setting for an event that featured Dr. Frankl as keynote speaker. My husband had agreed to attend with me; we even splurged on an overnight stay, having left our children with a sitter.

It was 1969 or early 1970. Months earlier I had mustered the courage to write the author how much his books meant to me, from his autobiographical “Man’s Search for Meaning” to the psychologically astute “The Doctor and the Soul.” The latter proposed a novel approach to psychiatric treatment. Its author, once the disciple of Sigmund Freud, had become disenchanted with his mentor’s ideas and developed logotherapy, a reason-based approach that, interestingly, allowed for religious faith. On returning to Vienna from his cruel exile, Viktor Frankl married a catholic woman. They seem to have raised their child in both faiths.

My long-ago letter may have included a poem or two, for the famous man replied without delay, sending something of his own: an address he delivered in 1945 to the Congress of Physicians in Berlin. This was soon after his release from bestial concentration camps where he lost virtually all his family, including his young wife. Another time he sent me a note scribbled on a postcard that featured a Strauss score. I treasured these communications, though in the elevator I lacked the wherewithal to introduce myself as his correspondent of the previous year. I only but stared at my feet.

That speech from 1945, obviously typed on manual typewriter, its paper brittle with age, rebukes his colleagues for the shame and degradation brought down on the profession during the Nazi years. It also highlights the courage of a handful of individuals who mustered the strength to work against the regime’s murderous policies, which often cost them their lives.

“Say ‘vegetables’ one more time,” someone had recently said, thinking my accent cute. In those days I hardly dared speak without putting my hand in front of my mouth. Though the great man himself spoke with thick German inflection (and, anyway, I could have used German, as we did in our correspondence) in the elevator I found myself tongue-tied.

In my dream, my mentor showed a fondness for the lightly-sweetened breakfast rolls that, I imagine, were the dream-equivalent of Viennese “Nockerln” I’d managed to bake or purchase. Again, this may have alluded to the real-time sourdough pancakes I prepared for my travel-club guests. The couple were far from famous, much less were they of a psychological bent; still, they provided pleasant company, indirectly leading to a lovely dream.

Today San Francisco chokes on traffic. Population runs out of control. In California's San Joaquin Valley, once termed the "breadbasket of the world," farmers relinquish their orchards and fields for lack of water. Near the Sacramento delta, salt water has invaded a dried-up aquifer. This is where two of my adult children are raising their families.

Decades ago, our Santa Clara lives featured prune-, pear, and apricot orchards that spread springtime blossoms and intoxicating scents. Today, freeways and buildings exist where trees once lived, punctuated only by the artificial landscapes of high-tech industrial parks.

When I arrived in California to marry my man, the state was one and one-half times as large as West Germany and held one-third of my country's population. Thirty years later, California had caught up to the population of reunified Germany and, ten years later, surpassed it.

"We will not grieve," read two lines from "Splendor in the Grass" by the impressionist poet William Wordsworth, "rather find / Strength from what remains behind."

I hope and pray that my adult children and their coevals hold memories to sustain them in difficult times.