

The pastor's search for meaning

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I'm re-reading *Man's Search for Meaning*. The last time I read it was when I was in seminary. I skimmed it for a course. It had a profound effect on me then, but it's been good to soak it in this time around.

In the first half, Victor Frankl writes about the every day life of surviving in a concentration camp. He doesn't go into detail about the ovens and gas chambers, instead he explores the mundane stuff of torture and why he didn't "run into the wire" (electrocuting oneself on the fence was the preferred means of suicide). He became interested in why some people have resilience, even in the most difficult suffering.

Church leaders suffer, on different levels. Most do not suffer at the depths that Dr. Frankl experienced, although some might. I meet a lot of depressed and anxious pastors in more ordinary situations, and sometimes find our self-care advice can be insubstantial. We often indulge in destructive behaviors to deal with our suffering—drinking in excess, eating too much, or engaging in unhealthy relationships.

He told the horrors of the camp, in order for us to draw upon them in our more ordinary lives, and so I will do that.

Nurture our interior life. Though it goes against all of our commonly held beliefs, the people who survived the concentration camps were not the toughest and sturdiest men. Instead, they were the ones who were sensitive and had developed an interior life upon which they could draw and into which they could withdraw. Frankl describes rewriting a book at night, on tiny scraps of paper.

Cultivate love. In the camps, one man would say, "I wonder what our wives would say to us now." Then Frankl would begin to imagine his wife and have conversations with her. He didn't know that she was dead, but he was sure he would have still had those intense conversations with her even if he had known. He began to understand that the highest purpose of humans was to love—loving family and friends. As Song

of Songs says, “Love is as strong as death, unyielding as the grave.”

Develop a sense of humor. Frankl taught one man how to have a sense of humor. They both had to report back a funny story that would happen when they got out of the camp. He explained that the humor allowed them to disassociate from the suffering, and to see it in a different light. Even though most humor felt grotesque in the circumstances, it was also effective.

Appreciate nature. As the prisoners worked on building a road, one man would nudge another to look at the sunset. They became more keenly aware of the beauty surrounding them.

Value music. [Oliver Sacks explained](#) that music appreciation is hard-wired into our minds. Likewise, Frankl talked about hearing the sadness of a violin on his wife's birthday. Our connection to music can become a transcendent thing that carries us through suffering.

Find what gives you meaning. What gives us meaning is different for every human. I read a great example of this. When [Barry Schwartz wrote about meaning and work](#), he talked about hospital custodians who found meaning from helping patients.

Oftentimes I think that people have high ideals about what it means to pastor a church. Then we become frustrated when the work feels meaningless. We become confronted with endless meetings, budget stress, and calcified church cultures, and our *lives* feel meaningless.

I used to be told, “get tougher” and “grow a thicker skin” when I faced difficult situations at church. It took a long time before I realized that a long walk in the woods, where I could listen to music, make up funny stories, appreciate my family, outline a book, and remind myself why my life was meaningful, did me much more good.