

*This book is about how important learning is to a child and the development of their character and success in life. The quality and effectiveness of our wholeness in adulthood depends on our successful development as children.*

## **Coping with Life: A Study in Adaptation**

By Harry Gael Michaels

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# COPING WITH LIFE

A STUDY IN ADAPTATION



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## Prologue

“A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the ‘why’ for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’”

--Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Victor Frankl, M.D., Ph.D., (1905-1997), was born of Jewish Austrian parents and became a psychiatrist/neurologist and religious philosopher as well as a Holocaust survivor. He lost most of his family including his wife and child in the concentration camps of the Nazi Third Reich of WWII. His famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, has served as an inspiration to millions who try to deal with suffering. My story is with compassion for all those who, along with myself, have struggled to understand suffering and how to regard it with meaning and value in our own lives.

I would also like to find an answer to the question that must haunt us all; that is: Why would a supremely loving, omnipotent, omniscient and fatherly God allow so much suffering in the world He created in the first place and why would He, as the ultimate Creator of the Universe, also create such a horrendous place as hell knowing beforehand that some would eventually wind up there for all eternity? I know the Biblical story says that the brightest and most beloved of angels, Lucifer, chose to attempt an unseating of God, through pride and hubris, but failed and was therefore condemned to rule the underworld of Hell---being the source

of evil. However, might not evil as we perceive it emanate from ourselves rather than a personalized projection of a satanic being separate from ourselves? These questions puzzle me and maybe I will come across some satisfying explanation and maybe not. Either way I am satisfied with the effort. I find the journey and the quest alone gives me a sense of purpose.

Two of Frankl's major themes that he expressed were: "My interest does not lie in raising parrots that just rehash their master's voice, but rather in passing the torch to independent and inventive, innovative and creative spirits." And, also, regarding freedom he said: "In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast." One day a student said to him: "I understand from your writings that your purpose and meaning in life is to help others find the meaning in theirs." "That is exactly right," said Frankl. "And that is the basis of my form of psychotherapy which I call Logotherapy---elevating the spirit rather than ruminating in the faults and failing of the human personality."

In my view these kinds of considerations point to the issue of developmental psychology and how each one of us experiences the process of growing from infancy to adulthood and what influences bend us toward a perception of ourselves as fundamentally defective and insufficient or toward a perception of ourselves with wholeness and value. Some of us may have grown up even without a sense of ourselves because our pedagogical training stressed the importance of obeying and following a pre-established authoritarian paradigm rather than experiencing the freedom to explore with love and courage our innate talents and

*A Study in Adaptation*

inclinations. In other words, the freedom to come to know and value ourselves. This notion of true self-discovery as God's creatures that we were intended to become is a main theme of my essay.



## Introduction

I was going to title this essay: A Melancholy Life or Coping with Suffering through Meaning and Purpose, however, it seemed a bit too long and over dramatic. It was meant to express the dampening pall that many of us experience in life due to an insufficient development of a sense of wholeness as in living life from an internal kind of suffering rather than something external such as a physical or medical handicap, a death of a loved one or trauma such as expressed by Victor Frankl in his WWII Nazi concentration camp experience.

Since going to grad school, myself, and studying psychology I became impressed with the notion of what was being described at that time as “self-actualization”, “self-realization” or “fully functioning personalities”. That became my pre-occupation and goal in life because I believed that unless I achieved that state of being my life would not be fulfilled, whole or have meaning and purpose. It was not until many years later that I came across the insights of Victor Frankl who spoke of the pursuit of “self-actualization” as a delusion because, as he said, “you can never achieve it by pursuing it. ‘Self-actualization’ only comes as a bi-product of immersing oneself in some meaningful experience in life with a project, a person or a purposeful endeavor---and not of the de-humanizing psychotherapy approach to man’s psychic illnesses which focused on the weaknesses, inhibitions and short-comings of his psychological stature but, instead, is focused on the spiritual and self-determination aspects of the human personality”----an approach he called



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“Logotherapy.” He learned from his experiences during WWII in which he discovered that losing everything he still had a will to retain his attitude and disposition toward his own suffering and extending himself in love and kindness toward another human being was his answer---the assertion of his spirit against the brutalities of the lowest of human bestiality. To cite Frankl’s own words: “By declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic ‘the self-transcendence of human existence.’ It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself---be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself---by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love---the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one strives for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side effect of self-transcendence.”

Frankl spoke of the brutalizing effects of the “camp” experience as producing “devils and saints” as though the experience brought out the worst and the best of humanity. This raises the question in my mind as to the causes of this disparity in the human personality. What makes the difference between one who, while undergoing extreme suffering either bends to it and becomes dehumanized or, becomes strengthened and ennobled in the best of his being?

Although, in my own case, I experienced nothing of these external sufferings mine were more internal because I

felt for much of my young life, that I had been anxiously skirting the edge of a borderline personality disorder and struggling desperately to keep from falling into a pit of helpless and hopeless despair like those poor individuals who I would see as a teenager, walking home from school in San Francisco, those hapless individuals slouching in doorways with vacant eyes and a cheap bottle of wine as their only friend. I used to fear I would end up living like that in a cardboard box on the streets south of Market.

Having been raised as a strict Catholic I was well imbued with the fears of the Devil lurking around and always threatening to catch me some time in my unreligious moments and drag me to hell. It became important for me not to be too far away from a priest so that I could be sacramentalized (my word) and saved through the Sacrament of Confession or Absolution. The priest represented salvation because we were taught that the priest was the direct representative of God through Jesus Christ and His Church. Is it any wonder that so many children and their parents, as well, were so captivated by the “holiness” of the Catholic clergy that no one would dare question anything a priest would do or say---even in matters of the sexual perversion of its own Catholic children.

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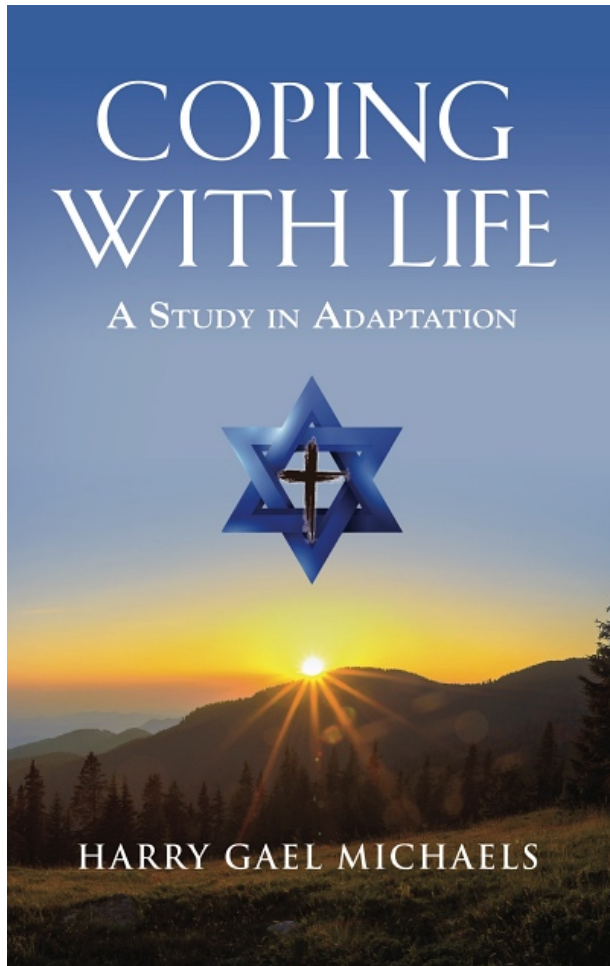
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