

2018 Classical Literature Scholarship–1st Place

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Agony

Agony is a creature unlike any other. She devours the senses until there is only her, demanding to be felt. She isolates her vessel, consuming the human will as waves swallow long stretches of beach.

I know only one person who has weathered her unrestrained blows and remained whole, Viktor Frankl. He endured all the forms of anguish and misery that are a part of the holocaust. He witnessed atrocities so horrible he could not write them. Yet, in his words, “in spite of this, [he] had no intention of losing hope and giving up” (82). In *Man’s Search For Meaning*, Frankl describes how a man could walk through hell and emerge unshattered.

In my years with a severe chronic pain condition, I’ve come to know pain intimately. I remember waking up during the silent hours of the night, my body soaked in sweat, sharp pains beating my limbs and abdomen, my back arched and my legs kicked against the sheets and one another. I could not scream because I could not breathe, and I could not form one word in my mind with which to pray.

Another time, I watched my field of vision shrink as the amount of pain I was in increased until I could see nothing at all.

As my illness grew more intense, I recall feeling like a prisoner in my own body. I could do almost nothing that I could before. I was drowning in a lonely sense of powerlessness. In moments of pain and in the aftermath of it I found myself angry and frustrated. I was angry that I had to be in pain. I felt it was weakness that I did not have control over my body or the pain I felt; I hated my physical weakness and the hatred was breaking me.

However, I found sweet liberty reading Frankl, who knew very well the despair I was feeling. He wrote, “The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity-even under the most difficult circumstances-to add deeper meaning to his life” (67). In other words, the manner in which we choose to react to difficulty has immense potential to add to our virtue and strengthen our faith, depending on what we choose. I desperately want to add to my virtue and faith, and did not realize that struggle, rather than an obstacle, is an avenue to growth. I find myself less miserable when I’m in pain, and less disheartened by my lack of energy or physical ability.

Frankl states that we have the constant “opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance” (66). As sick as I was, the choices I had were limited, but I had the one that mattered: I could either move forward in pain or lie down in fear.

Reading *Man’s Search For Meaning* showed me that even if I cannot control my circumstances, I have a choice. It is a joyous opportunity to take up the “greatest courage, the courage to suffer” (78).