

COPY OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT

Viktor Frankl on the subject of war and peace (1946)

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When the invitation to address this meeting was extended to me I was somewhat reluctant to accept it because I do not belong to that sort of psychiatrists who seem to be imbued with a sense of omniscience and omnipotence inducing them to dabble in fields scarcely connected with their own. We psychiatrists do not even know how to cure schizophrenia, even less, what schizophrenia really is. How can we tell people how to prevent wars? The omniscience of psychiatrists is a myth, their omnipotence is faith. But the omnipresence of psychiatrists at international meetings is fact.

And yet it may well be that psychiatrists have something to offer even at a meeting such as this. In fact, there are parallels between individual and social pathology. There are, for instance, certain neurotic mechanisms, more specifically, circle formations, and what seems to be most important, is the vicious circle formed by anticipatory anxiety. Fear tends to make come true the very things one fears. A speaker who is afraid of blushing and stuttering during his public appearance, not only actually starts blushing and stuttering. The occurrence of things feared also reinforces his fear, and the recurrence of these things is precipitated. Is it not possible that wars, too, are triggered off by fear of war? And should it not be possible to devise and develop techniques that allow to break up the vicious circle and thus parallel those techniques which are available in psychiatry?

What also comes to mind in this context is a psychotic rather than neurotic mechanism. I refer to a certain type of patients suffering from delusions of persecution. Such patients often observe other people incessantly in order to find out who persecutes whom. For these patients psychiatry has coined the term "persecuteur persecuté". Once, however, that they stop observing and that way persecuting other people, their own feeling of being persecuted suddenly subsides. Is there no lesson to learn? Distrust generates distrust on the part of others; this however, seems to justify one's own distrust and thereby reinforces it. Cannot this, too, be applied to the prevention of wars?

One has defined war as politics with other means. However, I think that this only holds for one sort of politicians. But there are two sorts of politicians. There is one to whom the end seems to justify any means, and there is another who is alert and aware that there are means which would desecrate even the most holy end.

It is obvious that the subject boils down to an axiological issue. What exactly is the end? If it is a value – are there values shared by people and peoples? Are there common denominators as to what they feel makes their lives worth living!

The only thing I know for sure is that survival cannot be the supreme value. Being human means relating, and being directed, to something other than itself. The human reality is characterized by its self-transcendent quality. Unless life points to something beyond itself, survival is pointless and meaningless. It is not even possible. This is the lesson I have learned in 3 years spent in Auschwitz and Dachau, and it has been confirmed by psychiatrists in prisoner of war camps. Only those were likely to survive who were oriented toward the future, toward a goal in the future, toward a meaning to fulfill in the future. Something analogous may well hold for the survival of mankind.

However, if common values and meanings are to be found, another step has to be taken, after mankind, thousands of years ago, has developed monotheism, the belief in the one God. Today this is not enough, this will not do. What we need at present is not only monotheism but also – mon-anthropism, not only the belief in the one God but also the awareness of the one mankind, the awareness of the unity of humanity.



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