I remember a personal experience. Almost in tears from pain (I had terrible sores on my feet from wearing torn shoes), I limped a few kilometers with our long column of men from the camp to our work site. Very cold, bitter winds struck us. I kept thinking of the endless little problems of our miserable life. What would there be to eat tonight? If a piece of sausage came as extra ration, should I exchange it for a piece of bread? Should I trade my last cigarette, which was left from a bonus I received a fortnight ago, for a bowl of soup? How could I get a piece of wire to replace the fragment which served as one of my shoelaces? Would I get to our work site in time to join my usual working party or would I have to join another, which might have a brutal foreman? What could I do to get on good terms with the Capo, who could help me obtain work in camp instead of undertaking this horribly long daily march?

I became disgusted with the state of affairs which compelled me, daily and hourly, to think of only such trivial things. I forced my thoughts to turn to another subject. Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past. Both I and my troubles became the object of an interesting psychoscientific study undertaken by myself. What does Spinoza say in his Ethics?—“Affectus, quipassio est, desinit esse passio simulatque eius claram et distinctam formamus ideam.” Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment—not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and was or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. If this crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sick-bay or to do anything to help himself. He simply gave up. There he remained, lying in his own excreta, and nothing bothered him anymore.

I once had a dramatic demonstration of the close link between the loss of faith in the future and this dangerous giving up. F---, my senior block warden, a fairly well-known composer and librettist, confided in me one day: “I would like to tell you something, Doctor. I have had a strange dream. A voice told me that I could wish for something, that I should only say what I wanted to know, and all my questions would be answered. What do you think I asked? That I would like to know when the war would be over for me. You know what I mean, Doctor—for me! I wanted to know when we, when our camp, would be liberated and our sufferings come to an end.”

“And when did you have this dream?” I asked.

“In February, 1945,” he answered. It was then the beginning of March.

“What did your dream voice answer?”

Furtively he whispered to me, “March thirtieth.”

When F--- told me about his dream, he was still full of hope and convinced that the voice of his dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer, the war news which reached our camp made it appear very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March twenty-ninth, F--- suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March thirtieth, the day his prophecy had told him that the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March thirty-first, he was dead. To all outward appearances, he had died of typhus.

Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind and a man—his courage and hope, or lack of them—and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. The ultimate cause of my friend’s death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his body’s resistance against the latent typhus infection. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body fell victim to illness—and thus the voice of his dream was right after all.

The observations of this one case and the conclusion drawn from them are in accordance with something that was drawn to my attention.
by the chief doctor of our concentration camp. The death rate in the
week between Christmas, 1944, and New Year’s, 1945, increased in
camp beyond all previous experience. In his opinion, the explanation for
this increase did not lie in the harder working conditions or the
deterioration of our food supplies or a change of weather or new
epidemics. It was simply that the majority of the prisoners had lived in
the naïve hope that they would be home again by Christmas. As the time
drew near and there was no encouraging news, the prisoners lost
courage and disappointment overcame them. This had a dangerous
influence on their powers of resistance and a great number of them died.

As we said before, any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength
in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal.
Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost
any how,” could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and
psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an
opportunity for it, one had to give them a why—an aim—for their lives,
in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence.
Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and
therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply
with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, “I have
nothing to expect from life anymore.” What sort of answer can one give
to that?

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our
attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had
to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we
expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to
stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves
as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our
answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and
in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find
the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it
constantly sets for each individual.

These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to
man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the
meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can
never be answered by sweeping statements. “Life” does not mean
something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life’s
tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man’s destiny, which is
different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be
compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats
itself, and each situation calls for a different response. Sometimes the
situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own
fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make
use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way.
Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross.
Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always
only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.

When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to
accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have
to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in
the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his
place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his
burden.

For us, as prisoners, these thoughts were not speculations far
removed from reality. They were the only thoughts that could be of help
to us. They kept us from despair, even when there seemed to be no
chance of coming out of it alive. Long ago we had passed the stage of
asking what was the meaning of life, a naïve query which understands
life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something
of value. For us, the meaning of life embraced the wider cycles of life
and death, of suffering and of dying.

Once the meaning of suffering had been revealed to us, we
refused to minimize or alleviate the camp’s tortures by ignoring them or
harboring false illusions and entertaining artificial optimism. Suffering
had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs. We had
realized its hidden opportunities for achievement, the opportunities
which caused the poet Rilke to write, “Wie viel ist aufzuleiden!” (How
much suffering there is to get through!) Rilke spoke of “getting through
suffering” as others would talk of “getting through work.” There was
plenty of suffering for us to get through. Therefore, it was necessary to
face up to the full amount of suffering, trying to keep moments of
weakness and furtive tears to a minimum. But there was no need to be
ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of
courage, the courage to suffer. Only very few realized that.

Shamefacedly some confessed occasionally that they had wept, like the
comrade who answered my question of how he had gotten over his
edema, by confessing, “I have wept it out of my system.”

The tender beginnings of a psychotherapy or psychohygiene
were, when they were possible at all in the camp, either individual or
collective in nature. The individual psychotherapeutic attempts were
often a kind of “life-saving procedure.” These efforts were usually concerned with the prevention of suicides. A very strict camp ruling forbade any efforts to save a man who attempted suicide. It was forbidden, for example to cut down a man who was trying to hang himself. Therefore, it was all important to prevent these attempts from occurring.

I remember two cases of would-be suicide, which bore a striking similarity to each other. Both men had talked of their intentions to commit suicide. Both used the typical argument—they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them. We found, in fact, that for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child’s affections.

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. 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.”