



The Frankl Perspective: To Choose Our Way

By Jordan Hattar, Director of Help4Refugees.org

The secret of life is to fall down seven times, and get up eight.” -The Alchemist

Hoping to put the Syrian refugee crisis on President Obama’s agenda, I applied to the White House Internship Program eight times from 2011-2016, failing in my first seven attempts. However, after the 7th try I read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, the story of a boy named Santiago who follows his dreams to find treasure under the pyramids in Egypt. This book encouraged me to apply one final time, and on the 8th try I was accepted!

While interning for Michelle Obama, a lot caught my eye. Whether it was running into Mark Cuban in the hallway, watching LeBron James and his Cleveland Cavaliers celebrate their championship in the Rose Garden, or escorting the singer Usher, there was never a dull moment. However, the one memory that stands out above all others is the last speech Mrs. Obama delivered in the White House.

Mrs Obama’s speech that day had many lessons but in addition to the individual lessons, it painted a larger picture for me. Her speech reminded me that my story of applying to the White House eight times is part of a larger American story of persistence. What if our country would have caved into pessimistic thinking during the Cold War and given up on de-escalation of a nuclear war? What if we would not have been persistent to dig out of The Great Depression?

Mrs. Obama described optimism as:

“The belief that something better is always possible if you’re willing to work for it and fight for it.” It is this belief in ourselves that helps us rise above “doubt and division, of anger and fear that we have faced in our own lives and in the life of this country. Our hope that if we work hard enough and believe in ourselves, then we can be whatever we dream, regardless of the limitations that others may place on us.”

Mrs Obama’s speech reminded me that if a country has an optimistic and resilient approach then surely its individuals must encompass these same traits. But what happens when resilience towards our dreams doesn’t seem like enough...what if we are no longer able to change our situation? What then?

Reflecting on this question, I recalled a passage from Viktor Frankl’s biography, *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

During these unprecedented times, I think it is important to ask which choices remain fully ours. It might not remain our choice to see our relatives. It might not be our choice to board an airplane at will. It might not remain our choice to go to work or school. It might not be our choice to wear a mask. But as Frankl suggests, we still hold one very important human freedom, to choose our way.

Frankl’s words gently remind us that EVEN IF decisions are taken out of our control, we still hold one fundamental choice, our disposition. This choice may be limited but we still have control over our state of mind. In times such as these, our attitude may be the only choice that is fully ours.

Why does it matter to choose our attitude? What difference does it make if we don’t enjoy all the other freedoms?

The late Nelson Mandela answered this question when he advised President Clinton that the world can take away practically everything from us. Speaking from his own experience of being jailed for 27 years, Mandela spoke of what was robbed of his life, but then he reminded Clinton that the world can’t take everything from us. It cannot take our heart and it cannot take our mind. Those he said, “we must give away, and I decided not to give them away.”

Holding onto our mind and heart by deciding our attitude towards circumstances can determine how we feel about ourselves. During coronavirus times, many of us do not face situations as dire as sitting in a jail cell for 27 years nor live through the horrors that Frankl endured in a Nazi concentration camp, but during this unusually restrictive time in our lives we can take their

advice and recognize as Frankl shared, “that when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

Part of our legacy will be decided by how we deal with the cards given to us. As my mentor Carl Wilkens suggests, we are defined by what we do next. It is enough that we try. So let us go out and find ways to ensure that we are choosing our attitude and that it isn't being chosen for us.

Towards the end of author George Orwell's life, he decided to write a series of articles titled “As I Please.” The purpose, to write what he pleases. May we have the same conviction with our attitude, that it is not determined for us, but consciously chosen. As We Please.

Today, we can challenge ourselves by asking, is this the attitude I want to have? Did I choose this way?