

Part I: Why Many Crises Can Only Be Solved Through Renunciation

(Elisabeth Lukas)

Renunciation Brings no Joy— But it Creates Space for Joy

No one likes to hear about having to renounce something. Many people are almost hyper-sensitive to the word "renunciation." They immediately suspect that someone wants to withhold something beautiful, desirable, or rightfully theirs. They think that someone is trying to spoil their joy. A call for renunciation can, of course, occur in such negative contexts, but there is another entirely different side to the topic of renunciation, which I would like to highlight here. Renunciation can create space for the return of lost joy, and that would be—if we take a look at the psychological mood barometer of our contemporaries—a true revolution! In our crisis-ridden world, courage, confidence, and above all, the ability to feel joy have often been lost, and not just in regions of poverty and terror. Even in privileged areas, a climate of despondency has crept in. The fact that, according to recent statistics, one-sixth of all young people in still-wealthy Europe have contemplated suicide and suffer massively from anxiety and depression is "a cry to heaven," to put it bluntly. Even if one were to point out to these young people that—unlike millions of their peers in other parts of the world—they have enough to eat, unimpeded access to education, plenty of job opportunities, the freedom to express their opinions, or excellent medical care, it wouldn't make a difference. They would dismiss it with a shrug as

mere appeasement and point to the looming horrors of an uncertain future.

And it's true: Our future looks more uncertain than ever. But even in this regard, a new modesty, or a shift in lifestyle, has the potential for solutions. However, for now, let's stay with the question of how to regain lost joy. Joy has a peculiar nature. It cannot be caught, forced, or artificially inflated. It comes, if at all, of its own accord, and especially after a deprivation. That is, it lends rare values a aura of glory. It elevates the special, the non-everyday, the long-awaited to the podium of attention and enjoyment. One has struggled through learning and finally holds the desired certificate in hand. One has fasted (voluntarily or involuntarily) and can now sit down to a delicious meal. One has saved for years and can now afford a nice car. One is unexpectedly invited to a celebration or concert. One was lonely and isolated and suddenly finds a loving partnership. In all these cases, the joy is all the greater because the gift received was not taken for granted and did not present itself often.

Those who can acquire any pleasure at any time lose the ability to enjoy it. Those accustomed to success, feasts, concert visits, flattering friends, and the like will only manage a tired smile, even at the height of luxury. That is why rich or famous people often suffer so miserably inside. Joy is missing, and ironically, it is the one thing that cannot be bought with money.

Joy, then, is a child of deprivation. If you have three dresses in your closet, you will be happy about the fourth. If you have a hundred dresses, you will no longer care about the hundred and first. How does one return to the mode of joy? One could give away ninety-seven of the hundred dresses, and then one would be happy about having a fourth again. This is the simple arithmetic of meaningful renunciation: it creates space for the return of lost joy. If the renunciation is truly meaningful, it accomplishes even more: the ninety-seven dresses given away could, in the best case, benefit ninety-seven needy individuals! That would be something! What sounds

primitive and simplistic is, in fact, a grand principle for reducing the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, a remedy against the throwaway society and its hubris, and a standard for fairer distribution of the earth's limited resources. The only sticking point is: Who is willing to part with the contents of their overfilled closets?

Well, if it is perceived as meaningful, there might be a few wise individuals who increasingly bow to the "call of meaning." And this is where a pioneer of the question of meaning comes into play: Viktor E. Frankl. Since I had the good fortune to meet this pioneer and benefit from his teachings, I would like to present some of his outstanding insights here.

What Can We Hope For? Not That Everything Will Turn out Well...

In Frankl's meaning-centered psychotherapy, known as logotherapy, the focus is on gradually strengthening the spiritual person in the face of the physical and psychological states that happen within. It's about the lifelong struggle with the question of what is physically and psychosocially given to us and what we are capable of making from it. After all, life on Earth is not fair; and even if all people were fair—what an absurdly idealistic idea!—there would still be injustices in the world. Fate throws us into a certain "drawer" from the start, and that's where we first find ourselves. Maybe we're born during a plague, in a time of war, or in a period of prosperity... as chance may have it. Frankl, for example, was born to Jewish parents in the middle of an anti-Semitic society. Just 100 years later, it would not have mattered at all whether his parents were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, but in his time, it was a catastrophe that exposed him to the Holocaust.

Help, I Can't Stop Anymore!

Preamble

There is a psychological condition that is almost impossible to cure without an extremely painful renunciation—and that is addiction. One can therapeutically attempt to make this painful renunciation as palatable and easy as possible for the sick. One can list a hundred perfect arguments for it, and one can even build a network of "motivational pressure" around them – but the sick must make this renunciation themselves. And if they don't, or don't sustain it in the long term, they cannot be helped. Not with words, not with pills, and unfortunately not with the dreadful consequences that life has in store for all addicts. At that point, they are completely, body and soul, consumed by the addiction.

The core problem is that addiction increasingly affects the brain, and not just in the biologically damaging sense, like with alcohol or drug abuse. It tricks the brain into craving the addictive substance repeatedly. But it is only with strong willpower that one can resist the addictive substance. This means that the very tool needed to fight addiction—the will—is progressively incapacitated by the addiction.

Theoretically, though unfortunately not practically, it is still relatively easy to renounce alcohol or drug addiction if one is truly determined. You give up the substance and are saved. However, there are addictions where the addictive substance cannot be given up entirely, such as with food addiction or medication addiction. In such cases, consumption must be limited, which requires even more willpower than a radical renunciation. The brain, so to speak, must sometimes be allowed to want and sometimes not, and this causes confusion. Every former smoker knows this well: quitting is achievable, but limiting oneself to two cigarettes a day is almost impossible in the long run.

Gambling addiction belongs to a mixed form of these particularly hard-to-overcome addictions. Of course, one can completely re-

nounce all forms of gambling, but since the invention of cyberspace and the internet, these games are mostly linked to the possession of a smartphone. And today, you can't expect addicts to go without a smartphone for the long term. But as soon as they have it in their hands, the gambling addiction rears its head again. To protect them from this, various therapeutic strategies need to be devised.

Case History

Background

Robert was 35 years old when he came to see me, a friendly man with a charming personality. He had only agreed to visit my practice after much pleading from his wife.

He and his wife had married young and were the happy parents of two boys, aged two and four. His wife came from a small bakery that belonged to her father. However, her father had fallen seriously ill, so she had to run the family business alone with a few employees. As an only child, she had been familiar with the bakery from an early age and had developed a great love for the work, from dough preparation to interacting with customers. She skillfully managed the employees, worked very hard herself, and was successful.

Robert had once been employed at her bakery. They fell in love and married. Both were professionals in the field, forming a team, expanding the range of bread, and attracting new customers. Everything seemed perfect, like a storybook.

However, four years ago, their relationship began to crumble. Robert had started gambling online. One day, his wife caught him gambling in the office and was outraged. After that, Robert shifted all his gambling to his phone, which was always handy and easy to hide. Robert would gamble when he had breaks and felt bored. He also gambled when he was stressed and wanted a ten-minute break. He hid all of this from his wife, even going so far as to get up at night while she slept—to gamble.

Robert became jittery and nervous and began smoking. Social gatherings with friends became rarer, and the relationship with his wife grew more strained. It wasn't long before the drama escalated. A saleswoman caught Robert stealing money from the cash register.

This led to a massive fight with his wife, during which it came out that Robert had no money left in his own account. Worse still, he had accumulated thousands of euros in gambling debts. In a shoebox, he had hidden warning letters and collection notices. There were hours of conversations between the two and many tears.

Robert assured her that he would stop gambling. The couple decided to make a fresh start. Robert's wife paid off thousands of euros of his gambling debts, and they both promised each other that from now on, everything would be okay.

Robert came home slightly injured and told his wife that he had been robbed while taking the bakery earnings to the bank. The car and the money were gone. Their shared sympathy for this misfortune was short-lived, as police investigations soon revealed that the robbery had been staged, and Robert had inflicted the injuries on himself. A court case followed. Robert's dismissal from the bakery was inevitable. Now, he had a criminal record.

The marriage experienced severe conflicts, but both fought to stay together, not least for the sake of their two children. There were still small sparks of love between them. Robert swore he would never gamble again. His wife believed him—what other choice did she have? A large beverage market hired Robert as a warehouse worker. There was new hope, and for a while, everything seemed to go back to how it used to be. But soon, collection notices started arriving in the mailbox at increasingly shorter intervals, indicating that Robert was gambling again. Everything of value he owned was long gone: his expensive sports equipment, his watch, his motorcycle. He didn't have a single cent left and had accumulated an incredible amount of debt, including unpaid loans from both domestic and foreign banks.

Over the months, his wife had repeatedly paid off his debts, amounting to thousands of euros again, but eventually, her financial resources were exhausted as well. While a prenuptial agreement protected her from Robert accessing her account, the family of four was living entirely off her income.

A fruitless clinic stay

There was no other choice: Robert had to be admitted to a clinic for gambling addiction.

He stayed there for three months. Strangely, the doctors allowed him to keep his smartphone – so Robert continued gambling even in the clinic, and he didn't take the therapy sessions seriously. After being discharged, he immediately resumed gambling without interruption. His wife was in despair.

Since the family's financial situation had become extremely precarious, the couple devised a protective system. Robert handed over control of his money to his wife. She gave him small amounts, for which he had to provide receipts as proof of how the money was spent. If he needed money for cigarettes or gas, he had to give his wife the receipts afterward to show what he had spent it on.

What any adult would consider humiliating—having less money at their disposal than a child—Robert requested himself as protection against his gambling addiction. He admitted that at first, he rebelled against this agreement with his wife, but he realized he needed such protection because he would gamble away every euro he could get his hands on. Therefore, he essentially had to reduce his access to money to zero.

The initial conversation

This is what the couple told me when they sat together in my office. I spoke to them about addiction. Addiction is not primarily a dependency on the substance itself but rather a dependency on a pleasant feeling created by a specific substance. Some people use alcohol for

this purpose, others use drugs, and Robert used gambling. He immediately agreed—this was exactly how it was for him. He was drawn to the thrill, the high, the excitement, and the chance of hitting a big win. This made him instantly forget everything else: his worries, his feelings of being overwhelmed, his boredom, his anger, and his frustration. Robert had gambled while his wife worked long hours in the office and had little time for him. He also gambled when she was asleep, and even during cheerful family vacations with their children. He gambled constantly, using it as an escape from reality.

Robert felt miserable about the financial arrangement with his wife. He couldn't even buy his children an ice cream. He literally owned nothing and had enormous debts. When he ran out of cigarettes, he had to beg his wife for money to buy a new pack. But he knew that with any amount of available money, he would immediately purchase a prepaid card for his smartphone and start gambling again.

Living without money was incredibly difficult for him, but he wanted to return to his old life. He wanted to be a reliable partner for his wife again and a good father to their two sons, of whom he was proud. He admitted that he had always despised himself when he gambled, tricked those closest to him, stole, and lied. Deep down, he didn't want to be that person.

Professional Insight

From the perspective of neuropsychopathology, a fascinating phenomenon can be observed here: the will of the (mental) person is not identical to what their brain "wants." This suggests that a person is more than just their brain, which—when considering the brain's vulnerability and mortality—is immensely comforting.

As mentioned in the preamble, every addiction forces the "will" of the brain under its control. The brain, responsible for emotions and reasoning in both animals and humans, suddenly no longer "wants" what is beneficial and healthy, but craves the harmful addic-

tive substance and nothing else. The person resists, but in order to assert what they "truly want," they need the cooperation of their brain, and that's where the problem lies. Although the person is more than just their brain, they are, for their entire life, inextricably linked to their organism and dependent on it. This leads to the terrifying internal conflict in which Robert currently finds himself. Emotionally, he is deeply drawn to continue gambling; intellectually, he knows all the legal and illegal ways to obtain money, but spiritually, he dislikes the person he has become, from head to toe.

Further Conversations

Robert came to see me a few more times in the following weeks. The main focus was on his relationship problems, as his marriage was constantly strained by ups and downs. There had once been great love between them, but now there was also great disappointment. His wife had made it clear to him that while she still loved him, she could no longer tolerate his gambling addiction. She told him that if he couldn't overcome the addiction, she would leave him.

Robert nodded in agreement—he hated himself for being so dependent.

Everything seemed to be going well, until Robert canceled an appointment with me because he had to take an extra shift for a sick colleague. After that, I didn't hear from him again.

Continuation of Therapy

Months later, his wife contacted me by phone. She was worried because Robert was getting up at night and was as restless as he had been during his gambling days. Additionally, a neighbor had come to her, demanding the return of €500 that Robert had borrowed but hadn't paid back. She feared the worst and asked if they could come back to see me together.

This time, the tension between them was palpable. The wife was outraged over the €500 she had to repay and angrily complained that

Robert had stopped giving her receipts to show how he was spending his money. She had looked at his account: not a single euro remained, despite him working many double shifts. Robert lamented that he was being exploited at the beverage market, always the one assigned to emergency shifts, and that he also needed a break.

So I asked him directly, “Are you gambling again?”

Robert lowered his gaze and said, “Yes.”

His wife was shocked. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve asked you a hundred times! Why are you only saying it now?”

Robert replied, “I can admit it to the therapist because she won’t leave me—but you probably would if you knew.”

I tried to calm the situation by explaining that lying is often part of addiction, a symptom of the illness. Almost every addict lies because they are ashamed when their misconduct is exposed—a behavior they don’t approve of but are unable to control. The real Robert surely wants to be honest, but the addiction has him in its grip. “Are you ashamed?” I asked him. He immediately nodded.

“Shame is the best part of you,” I emphasized. “The greater the shame, the more you can distance yourself from your addiction. Addiction is like a wild animal inside you. For a while, you managed to control it, but now the addiction has taken over again. You need to learn to tame this beast and keep it at bay. I suggest you return to the clinic for your relapse. This time, you need to take the therapy seriously. You need this help.”

Robert’s answer was an immediate “No.” Never again in the clinic! It had broken his heart not seeing his children for months. He couldn’t go through that again.

I patiently explained that he had little other choice. But Robert remained adamant. No, he couldn’t guarantee what he might do. “What does that mean?” I pressed. Was he threatening suicide? A crime against his wife or children? If that’s how much he loved his kids, then his love wasn’t worth much! On the contrary, the right

thing to do would be to go back to the clinic for the sake of the children!

No, he couldn't do it again. Even his wife's heartfelt pleas couldn't change his mind.

Under these circumstances, forcing him into the clinic wouldn't likely result in progress. But what else? We engaged in a long discussion, weighing the options. Finally, we reached the following conclusions:

1. Robert's smartphone must go. It's the medium that tempts him to gamble.
2. Robert needs to find a different job where he doesn't feel exploited.
3. Robert will reactivate the plan he voluntarily made with his wife months ago. She will manage his bank account, and he will receive money only in exchange for receipts. He must also file for personal bankruptcy, as his debts are overwhelming. New claims continue to come in against the family.

I reassured his wife: if Robert sticks to this plan, he's a hero. Anyone who voluntarily relinquishes financial control for good reason is highly respectable.

But this was just the beginning. As with an alcoholic who must first abstain from alcohol and avoid temptation, the goal isn't just abstinence. Eventually, the alcoholic should be able to see a bottle of wine on a shelf and not be interested. Similarly, one day Robert should be able to handle money and own a smartphone without something tragic happening. Indeed, it is not a favorable situation for a marriage when one partner must exercise long-term and strict financial control over the other.