

The Search for Answers to Troublesome Questions

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According to the existential view of psychotherapy when we look deep inside our self we cannot fail to recognize that we are finite, that we must die, that we are inexorably alone and that we are free and cannot escape from our freedom. To make matters worse we often have to wonder, as Tolstoy did, whether there is any meaning in life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting us.

The four basic, or "ultimate concerns", as Irvin Yalom (1980) calls them, which are at the root of all our conflicts, anxiety and psychopathology are: **death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness**. It is these same concerns, however, which, if we become capable of dealing with, can lead us to a much happier and more satisfying life. This may sound as a paradox but let me try to explain as briefly as I can.

Death exists in order to remind us that life will not go on forever and thus we better realize it soon enough so that we can do something with our life before it is too late. Without the presence of death we wouldn't be motivated to do much of anything. Even more so, some of the intensity of life would be lost. When death is excluded, when one loses sight of the stakes involved in losing what one has, life becomes impoverished. It is turned into something, Freud wrote (1980), "as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the very first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a continental love-affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind" (p.32).

Of course this side of the importance of the presence of death (or loss in general) in life is not very often mentioned. Nonetheless, death exists in order to remind us of the value of life. Of what we have but definitely will lose. History shows that human beings value what they have only when they lose it

and thus it may be impossible for us to value the presence of life, but when it is already too late.

In past presentations I have stressed how important it is, and how privileged in some strange way we are, that we have thalassemia. If not in any other way, by the fact that we can be more aware and in touch with the reality that our health is always in danger and thus death is always at our doorstep. A realization which could be very enriching if we were able to surpass the initial panic of: "Oh, my God I am going to die!"

According to Heidegger death is the condition that makes it possible for us to live in an authentic fashion, or to move to a higher state of functioning, which he calls "mindfulness of being". In other words, that state in which we become fully aware of our self and thus we embrace both our possibilities and our limitations. A lot of other great thinkers have mentioned in many ways that although "the physicality of death destroys man, the idea of death, saves him". It is through the acceptance of death, which is a basic fact of life and thus the only thing we can safely assume will happen to us, that we can fully comprehend that we are alive. Since we are alive today but we may not be tomorrow we must do something with our life while we can.

One of the things I have come to realize in my years of personal struggle is that, at those times during which I were most scared of death. I had put down my defenses and had allowed myself to see and realize that I wasn't living my life well. This fear of dying was however the most potent way by which I could become motivated to introduce drastic changes in my life, since I couldn't bear the thought of me dying and not having done, or at least having tried to do, the things that I wanted the most. I also noticed that when I went in the direction of doing what was important to me my fear of death dissipated. Then I came to understand what Tolstoy meant when he wrote in his story "The death of Ivan Illich, that "he is dying badly because he has lived badly". Thus I decided this year to focus my presentation not on death but on how we can live better. Let us look at the other three concerns.

Irving Yalom, in his book "Existential Psychotherapy" (1980) describes three types of **isolation**:

Interpersonal isolation, is experienced as loneliness and refers to isolation from other individuals. It is a sense of non-connectedness with other people, which can manifest itself in the form of lack of friends or superficiality in relationships. Many factors can contribute to this inability to have close relationships with others. Such may be: geographic isolation, the lack of appropriate social skills, heavily conflicted feelings about intimacy, or a personality style (for example aggressive and/or judgmental) that precludes gratifying social interaction.

Intrapersonal isolation (or intrapsychic), is experienced when somebody has cut off parts of himself. Freud refers to isolation as a defense mechanism by which one isolates affect from thought. In other words, when an individual has experienced an intensely traumatic event he tends to either forget it, push it into the unconscious-- repress it, or to cut-off the feeling from the memory. In this way an individual can relate an intensely painful situation without feeling the pain. Although this is a mechanism that can be very efficient for survival it also leads to the exclusion of experiences from our conscious awareness and makes parts of our psyche inaccessible to us. When we cut-off, isolate, or dissociate parts of our self from our self we not only function below optimum level but we also are unaware of the totality of our experiences and thus of who we really are. Yalom writes: "intrapersonal isolation results whenever one stifles one's own feelings or desires, accepts "oughts" or "shoulds" as one's own wishes, distrusts one's judgment, or buries one's own potential". (p. 354).

Existential isolation, is the most difficult to comprehend and deal with. It "refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being" (p. 355). This concept, that we are alone in this world, can be best understood when we again consider death. As Yalom writes "it is the knowledge of "my death" that makes one fully realize that no one can die with one or for one". Heidegger states that "though one can go to his death for another, such "dying for" can never signify that the other has had his death taken away in even the slightest degree. No one can take the other's death away from him. Though we may be surrounded with friends, though others may die for the same cause, even though others may die at the same time, still at the most fundamental level, dying is the most lonely human experience" (p.356).

The realization of our **aloneness** often brings panic. However, differently from interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation, which we can influence and even change with a lot of personal work, existential isolation is an unchangeable fact of life. Our efforts at alleviating these feelings of aloneness by trying to live our life through another person are as dangerous as denying our inevitable death. The danger lies in the fact that our development is hindered in two major ways. First, the process of growth is a process of continuous separations, of individuation, of becoming a separate being of existing (exist=to stand out) as an autonomous, self reliant, independent individual. As Irvin Yalom describes it, "human life begins with a fusion of ova and sperm, passes through an embryonic stage of complete physical dependence on the mother, into a phase of physical and emotional dependence on surrounding adults. Gradually the individual establishes boundaries demarking where he or she ends and others begin, and becomes self-reliant, independent and separate. Not to separate means not to grow up, but the toll of separating and growing up is isolation" (p. 361).

Secondly, the realization of our aloneness implies that no one else can live our life for us, which means that we are totally responsible for what we do and do not do. Although the temptation to throw the responsibility for our lives on someone else is always there doing so is a great inhibition to our growth because it always keeps us dependent on someone else and on what they want in order to be pleased and thus continue to play master of our life. However, since no one can live our life for us and no one can die for us, having a master does not save us either from our aloneness, or from our inevitable death. Actually no relationship can eliminate isolation. Each of us is alone in existence. Yet aloneness can be shared in such a way that love compensates for the pain of isolation.

In the same way that the realization of our inevitable death can help us live a more authentic and thus satisfying life, so can the realization of our aloneness. When we fully realize that we are alone, and that we are the ones living our life, we cannot deny that we are free. We are the ones that have to decide about our life and we have to materialize our decisions because no one else can do it for us.

We all claim at times that we want to be free. But what does it mean to be free? To be free means to be responsible for our life. To make choices for what we want and do not want to do, think, express, try out, and generally want and do not want to be. Being free and responsible for our life means to be able to guide our life to progress, or at least try to progress, in the direction we want.

Of course there could be a number of objections that can be raised by skeptics and determinists. Is it that we really know where we want our life to go and can we really make it go in the direction we want it to go? Of course there are limitations to our freedom and of course there are things that happen to us that we have no control over. There are limitations for example in that we cannot not die, we cannot not have thalassemia, we cannot be what we cannot be but there are endless choices in what we can do with what we have. There are endless decisions we can make about our life or what happens in our life, or how we react to what happens in our life. This is for me enough freedom, more than I can often bear.

I frequently realize that being free and being my own separate being, is something I have strived for, for many years. However, now that I am closest to the realization of my adolescent dream I am aware of how, very often, I shy away from the freedom I have been seeking for all these years. I also realize that it is the burden of the responsibility for my existence that I try to shy away from. Although I believe that being able to not put the blame for my problems and my mistakes on others is a very valuable and desirable objective I often realize how easy it is to fall in the trap of "other-blaming". In some ways it

makes our life much easier and a lot more comfortable. We can have an excuse for our faults and mistakes. Thus, we can avoid doing something about them and also avoid feeling guilty for not doing anything to change them.

Freedom implies **responsibility** and responsibility implies authorship. To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life, predicament, feelings, and if such be the case, one's own suffering. I have noticed that very often we create, cause, or procrastinate our suffering. We get stuck in negative emotions that have nothing to give us but make us feel miserable. Yet, as Ouspensky writes in his book "The Fourth Way" (1971), "... it is very important to understand that all negative emotions are absolutely useless; they do not serve any useful purpose... and there are no obligatory negative emotions, (but in order to deal with them) ... we have to change our mental attitudes, which are more or less in our power. We have too many wrong points of view about negative emotions; we find them necessary or beautiful, or noble; we glorify them, and so on" (p. 10).

Of course for us pain and suffering have been intertwined with our growing up. It has been a part of our life for many years. But does it have to be that our physical pain continues to be transformed into emotional and spiritual pain? Like "I am no good", "I have to keep on suffering", "I can't enjoy life like all other people", "I am not supposed to enjoy but I must suffer", "if I am well then something bad will happen to me" and all these negative ways with which we have learned to think about our self and our life? Being a thalassemic does not mean that our right to have a good, fulfilling and satisfying life has been waived from the start.

It is true that all of us have been faced with some form of prejudice and rejection. I hope, but I am not convinced, that only some of us have been faced with severe prejudice and rejection even from those people that are the most important to us as children, our parents. I believe that it is not uncommon to find parents who consider the idea of having an ill child unacceptable and unbearable for their self-image and self-esteem. Consequently they reject, criticize or put down their child. If we are lucky to have escaped from this most painful form of rejection I am sure that most of us have not completely escaped from criticism and rejection that come from our extended family, or from school, or even from medical professionals.

It is not easy to change our mental attitudes when they have been so badly influenced from our environment but I want to keep on believing that it is not impossible. It is just that it takes a lot of will power and determination to change what we want to change in our self once we recognize that this is not how we want it to be.

Every time we have to carry out the decision we have made, we must face up to the fact that we are the ones who have to do the changing. No one can do it for us. However this is what is meant by the phrase "I am free, I am responsible for myself, I am my own person". The question is "Do we want to do it? Do we have the strength to do it?" It would definitely be much easier if our parents could let go of their overprotective and infantilizing mode of operation. However, we cannot count on them changing because they may not. We have the responsibility of whether we will change. We cannot change anybody but ourselves.

Of course change is often a terrifying word for all people but even more so for us. A few years ago I thought it was only I who associated change with something that always meant "going for the worse". I have realized in recent years that I am not as unique as I thought. When we were children we grew up in an atmosphere where change was always associated with "our condition" getting worse. Thus, any change was definitely considered bad news. We were of course growing up at a time when dying in adolescence was the most common outcome in a thalassemic's life so maybe such fears were not unrealistic. However, later on in my life I realized that because I had translated the idea of change into something that could only lead to more suffering, I avoided trying out new things.

During my psychotherapy, when I was training to become a psychologist, I realized that it was me and my mind that kept on seeing things in this way. Of course I was influenced by what happened to me as a child but still I was holding on to the idea that if I change I am at risk and something bad will happen to me. At about the same time I realized that since I was no longer a child I could have a lot more control over my life and what happens to me. So I decided to slowly start trying out new things to see how it would be. I quickly realized that change doesn't always have to be negative. Quite the contrary it is the only way to develop and grow. It does require however that we give up our old ways of thinking and being. It does require that we take risks and plunge into the unknown, with no guarantees.

The first thing I started to learn how to do differently for myself was to say no to the demands of others. I started to set limits and slowly established my boundaries despite my fear that others will stop liking me and reject me for not doing what they wanted me to do. The change was quite gratifying because I felt even more in control of my life and I realized that others respected me rather than rejected me. Even when some rejected me, because they could not hear no as an answer, I felt good with myself because I knew I was taking care of myself and my needs, which anyway no one else can do for us.

I continued to try out new ways of being and I quickly realized that change doesn't always have to be negative. I then allowed myself to take even more

risks without feeling as much fear for what would happen. I have not regretted doing it for a single moment but I do know that it is a long and difficult process. It requires a lot of hard work. It requires that we take charge of our life and become responsible for what we do and do not do with it.

The most difficult and basic decision we have to make concerns the issue of **meaning**. "What meaning do we want to give to our life?" Existentialists believe that there is no inherent meaning in life. It is we that have to decide if we want to give a personal meaning to our life. Viktor Frankl, a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Vienna medical school writes in his book "Man's Search for Meaning" (1963): " ... striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man ... (Each) one should not search for an abstract meaning of life ... but his own specific vocation or mission in life Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible" (pp. 154, 172)

We are each responsible for finding what we want from our life; how we want our life to be; what we want to have done before we die. What counts, regardless of what we decide to do, is doing it well and receiving the satisfaction and fulfillment we want to attain. The goal doesn't have to be a noble or high achievement. It just needs to make us feel good about doing it. Feeling we have spent our life well if nothing else makes living worthwhile.

The most important and difficult part of using our life well is finding out what we really want, what it is that gives meaning and life to our life. Finding out what we want is not an easy task. In order to know what we want from our life we must first be in touch with who we are. In the many years of dependency on our parents (at least 13-14 years) we have been trained not to know who we are and what we want. During our upbringing and so called socialization, we have been taught how to please, how to be accepted, how to belong among the so called normal people. We have been told what we should and should not do; what we must want to achieve in our life. Usually it is these ideas that have been slowly instilled in us that we keep thinking as what we want. However these are not our true choices. It is what our parents would like us to be, do, etc.

In most families and in most cultures uniqueness and individuality are often synonymous to rebellion and trouble. Every effort is being made in order to suppress them. Thus, we rarely learn, or are encouraged, to be our own person. Of course, as I have already suggested earlier, we also often buy into it because it is the easy solution. We do not have to stand up for our self and face our aloneness. We do not have to make any decisions and be responsible for what we do in life and we can blame all our faults and problems on others rather than do anything about them.

Standing up for oneself, being separate, unique and responsible are not easy things to do. I am not, quite sure actually of how many people can achieve a complete individuality and not succumb to the social pressures of how we ought to be. In our case I believe there is an added pressure. Since for a long time we have been considered a kind of outcast of society, because of our physical differences, often our whole struggle is geared towards the direction of proving we are normal people. Being, however, normal also means being average, belonging to the majority of what people do and consider acceptable and appropriate. We must not forget that we are unique individuals; we are not just thalasseemics wanting to prove that we are normal.

When we decide we want to be our self and begin on the road to self-discovery we inevitably come to the realization that there are a lot of parts of our self that we do not know. We had to bury them deep inside our self in order to survive and protect our self from what was too painful and difficult to deal with otherwise. We have almost completely forgotten a lot of things that have happened to us and have influenced the way we are and function. In order to rediscover and reintegrate these hidden or dissociated parts of our self we must go through a process of deep self-inquiry which Heidegger' calls "unconcealment". We have to uncover our true self and our true potential from the many layers of garbage that has accumulated over the many years of training and socialization. We have to allow our self to "see" what is really there that is uniquely ours and is being wasted by trying to become someone we are not in order to please and be accepted. We must allow ourself to "see" all those aspects of our self and our childhood that we are trying to run away from.

The process of un-concealment requires, above all, that we want to know the truth about our self and our life. We cannot hide behind lies and false pretenses. We have to have the courage to ask harsh questions and often give painful answers. Are we willing to do this? Do we really want to face up to all the possible faults, mistakes and wrong doings that comprise our self? Do we want to remember what has happened to us and how much it hurt? But even more so, when we rediscover all those things that we are and are not, all these things we could do but don't dare to do. Will we have the courage and strength to start doing them or will we shy from our possibilities and just accept our limitations?

To summarize and conclude I would say that the most troublesome question seems to be: What do I do with my life? How do I live my life, how do I run my life? What choices do I make, are there any choices to be made? In order to answer these questions as best as we can we have to be as self-conscious as we can. Even when we have achieved a high degree of self-awareness, of intrapersonal connectedness, we must realize we are not automatically self-conscious beings. We have the potential to develop self -consciousness but

we are not yet there. The best way to realize that we are not conscious is to observe our self and admit that we live with many illusions. The illusion that we know who we are, the illusion that we are only one thing (one I), the illusion that we are in control, that we have a will and that we can do. We could potentially achieve all these things but we have not, yet.

Speaking for myself I can say that only recently I have been able to admit to myself that, after so many years of self search, I know very little about myself. I am often amazed by my reactions, actions, desires and ways of being that are often so incongruous but yet each one so real and so much a part of me. This realization has often caused me great pain and has made me wonder and doubt whether there is any meaning to this self search or whether I would be better off living in oblivion. Whether I would be better off if I didn't try to see the reality of my existence. Maybe this way I could avoid the pain involved in looking at all those aspects of life that hurt, the unfairness, injustice, struggle, pain and often despair that living involves.

Peck writes in his book "The Road Less Traveled" (1978). "Life is difficult. This is a great truth one of the great truths (the first that Buddha taught). It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult -once we truly understand it and accept it- then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters" (p. 15). The same I believe is true of death and aloneness. Once we accept them as facts they are no longer as threatening and thus we can transcend them.

In order to see these facts of life, in order to see the truth, we must be willing to face the pain of the realization. It is painful to realize that life is difficult is full of losses and deaths and full of people who are isolated interpersonally and intrapersonally, let alone existentially. When we are in touch with reality we cannot avoid the pain of the recognition that we are alone, we will die and we are free to decide what we will do in this interval between birth and death.

Although life is difficult and it is a series of problems, problems are presents because we can learn from them and grow. When we say that we have a problem we usually mean that we have an obstacle to overcome; that things are not developing the way we wanted them or had thought they would. However, there are always things that do not go according to plan in life. We can either moan and groan over them or decide to problem-solve instead (Peiffer, 1990). This is actually I think the biggest freedom we have in this life. We can decide we want to have our chin up, look at life face to face and solve (or at least try to solve) our problems rather than feel miserable, escape or give up. When we make such a decision however we have to have a lot of courage and strength.

Many scientists and philosophers say, and in many religions we often read, that man has tremendous powers and forces inside of him that he does not know he has, and thus he rarely uses. Ouspensky writes "We have in us, so to speak, a very big and very fine organization, only we do not know how to use it. It is like having in us a large house full of beautiful furniture, with a library and many other rooms, but we live in the basement and the kitchen and cannot get out of them. If people tell us about what this house has upstairs we do not believe them, or we laugh at them, or we call it superstition or fairy tales" (p. 2).

In order to reach the state of using at least a significant part of the powers we have inside we need to work very hard. Most important of all is to realize the extent to which we lie to ourselves. Ouspensky mentions that "the psychology of ordinary man could even be called the study of lying, because man lies more than anything else; and as a matter of fact, he cannot speak the truth. It is not so simple to speak the truth; one has to learn how to do it, and sometimes it takes a very long time" (p. 7).

Let us then try to begin to speak the truth, as much as we can. Our childhood has been a difficult and painful one. We had to learn how to live with pain; we had to learn how to live with the uncertainty of our existence. We had to learn how to survive from the indifference, the uncaring, and often the prejudiced and rejectful attitude of the people that surround us. We had to learn how to hide our vulnerabilities and our fears in order to survive. We had to learn how to be brave and do what we have to do without complaining. We had to prove our self and we had to defend our right to exist and to grow.

We have survived all these experiences with, no doubt, at least some wounds. We have already I believe proved ourselves, by the mere fact that we are here today and he have come so far from where we were. We had been told by the "authorities" that our existence had basically no meaning since we were born sick and we were in such an underprivileged position. Differently than most people we had to fight for our life every single step of the way. We are here and we have proved we are worth living. It is about time that we support each other, learn from each other and move further along on the path of individuation and fulfillment. We are capable of having a fulfilled and satisfying life. I even believe we have a great advantage over most people. We have learned how to suffer and survive. We have learned how to cope with one of the greatest fears of most people. Illness. I never stop being amazed at how most people are incapacitated by even the slightest appearance of an illness in their life. It is as if their greatest fear has materialized. For us it materialized a long time ago. We have coped. Each one of us as best as s/he could. With more support and understanding I believe we could have done even better. We did not receive it then but now we can create it for ourselves. All things considered we have not done badly.

If nothing else we have definitely disproved the original prognosis that only very little could be expected of us. We just need to keep on going. In our day and age we can be a lot more in control of our life than we were 20 years ago. We just need to answer the most basic question of all: How do we want our life to be? What do we want to do with our life? Each and everyone in this life must give her\his own unique answer.

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