Finding Meaning in the Face of the Abyss:

The Existential Landscape of Death and Bereavement

This evening's talk…

Is about confrontation with death and how it can lead to the growth of new and inspiring life-meanings.

It will cover:

1) The clinical picture, from my experience.

2) What I believe to be the philosophical and psychological backgrounds that set up the reactions we have to death.

The clinical landscape of death and loss...

Involves:

Existential confrontation
Trauma
Grief

These are interrelated experiences – one cannot be separated from the other.

However, these reactions to death and loss arise from a more fundamental existential dilemma – one that determines the human condition:

... we have a problem with both human nature and nature.

The problems of human nature and nature

1) We are mortal animals aware of our mortality.

2) We are aware of the overwhelming power of nature and awful vastness of the cosmos.

The world is terrifying. Our basic motivation is to control our basic anxiety – our terror of death.

> 'The real world is too terrible to admit – it tells man he is a small trembling animal who will someday decay and die' (Becker, 1973).

Awareness of our mortality arises from our divided nature – half animal and half being with a symbolic inner self:

As animals, we are genetically determined, finite, limited, and doomed to ageing, injury, illness and death - we are bound by necessity. We are even tied to a particular gender and are thus incomplete.

As symbolic beings, we experience an identity, a life-history, freedom of thought, and imagination that seems boundless. Finitude does not fit the picture - nor does necessity. Yet, we are aware of the contingency of our lives.

We are embedded in nature while feeling separate from it.

From fear of death and nature arises…

- An urge towards immortality.
- Creativity and the development of culture.
- Repression of the problem of life and death.

The urge towards immortality is a heroic reaching towards life and meaning

It assumes two opposed ontological positions each of which seeks transcendence, or a reaching for 'the beyond', in different ways:

1) Desire for belonging

2) Desire for separation

The urge towards immortality
~ desire for belonging

Desire for belonging means we seek to merge with something larger than ourselves e.g. god/community/ others. This need arises from feelings of powerlessness in the face of nature and fear of isolation.

Belonging allows us a sense of self-expansion within safe confines.

The risk - merging to the extent that one's claim to life is lost with a failure to develop self because of having to adopt the values, assumptions and beliefs of the larger entity.

The urge towards immortality ~ desire for separation

Desire for separation means wanting to stand out as an individual – a desire for exciting experience. It is an impulse to individuation and self-actualisation - the development of uniqueness and one's self-powers.

The risk - exposes one to being crushed and annihilated by the power of the universe.

Terror of death and the enormity of nature explains the creative impulse in humans.

> 'The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.' (Becker, 1973).

Culture makes humans seem important, vital to the universe, and reaches towards immortality.

> 'If extraterrestrials land tomorrow and demand to know what the human mind is capable of accomplishing, hand them a copy of this book' (The New York Times).

Culture can be understood as a protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of the human condition. It supports us in our repression of death.

Fear of death elicits repression

In order to function 'normally,' we:

1) Hide the problem of life and death.

2) Limit the impact the world has on us.

We do this by lying to ourselves about the truth of reality and repressing:

Whatever threatens our security.

Our animality.

Our physical and moral inadequacies.

Repression means that...

Like Zaphod Beeblebrox with his peril-sensitive shades...

We limit the amount of reality we have to face and adopt a pretence of invulnerability.

We keep the awareness of our own life at a safe existential distance from its contingency, allowing us an illusion of solidity and stability.

We shrink from being fully alive and suffer existential guilt as a consequence.

We 'tranquillize ourselves with the trivial', giving precedence to fiction over reality.

The cost of repression

- A repressive life-style can become crippling – a neurotic half-alive state in which life-experience is limited, yet the more neurotic a person is the greater the sensitivity to the terror of existence.

Creative coping

Objective creativity satisfies nature, which demands we plunge into the world and live biologically, but it allows us to do this on our own symbolic terms. In this way, we give a human answer to the problem of life and death.

Through creativity :

We negotiate the two extremes of necessity and possibility (contingency).

Through the arts:

We re-create subjective experience (which may overwhelm the psyche) by transforming it into objective terms (which is assimilable by the psyche).

The clinical situation

When the brutality of death finally confronts us, our defences are likely to fail as we realize the truth of existence - we risk becoming overwhelmed.

As illness progresses and disability increases, the mind sees the body as increasingly strange and unfamiliar.

The treatment approach is to promote adjustment to change and the new unwanted reality. In this process, meaning can be restored.

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On meeting someone confronted with death…

- You become aware of their distress, their:

  numbness, grief, confusion, withdrawal, denial, resignation, helplessness, fear, anger, despairing protest that life is no longer 'how it should be' and sad longing for what has been lost.

- You become aware how each of these emotions, with their accompanying thoughts and memories, fragment the self:

  people can be 'all over the place' and will often say, "This is not me – this is not my life - I don't know who I am anymore."

Facing the end...

Within days of death, I've seen people:

- Pale with fear, unable to speak, in a cold sweat;
- Frantically writing letters to the family in a last attempt to resolve a family conflict;
- Distressed at the loose ends of life to which they can no longer attend;
- Concerned about how others will cope without them;
- Distressed that they will not be able to be there for their young children.
- In despair because their faith has collapsed;
- Bullied by a family who accuses them of not trying hard enough to live;
- Angry with overly dependent family members who will not let go of them;
- Terrified of dying but more terrified of living;
- Despairing at a life that has seemed unfulfilled;
- Bewildered and utterly alone;
- In denial of reality and eager to discuss their new business plan.

Then there are those who, despite their physical distress, have adjusted to their situation and are able to engage with others freely and fully because they have found self-acceptance and inner peace.

Existential confrontation can be traumatising

Confrontation with death is likely to be traumatic. What characterizes trauma is perceived loss of control, often experienced suddenly. Arthur Frank described the effect the moment of diagnosis had on him:

> "The future disappeared … I felt I was walking through a nightmare that was unreal but utterly real. This could not be happening to me, but it was."

One's self-construct (made up of values, beliefs and assumptions about self) and associated world-view (assumptions and beliefs about the world) can be shattered.

Trauma can fracture the coherence of the self and one's life-story with a consequent loss of meaning.

Trauma leads to loss of Meaning

When the universe is recognised as arbitrary it loses its moral quality and one has to discover one's own meanings

A terminally-ill person might say:

"Why do I have to die when I have young children to bring up?"

Or… "It isn't fair that I'm in so much pain. Why is God doing this to me?"

Adolescents dying from cancer, might ask:

"How can I find any purpose in an existence like this? I've never even had a chance to have a girl-friend."

A bereaved woman might say:

"When my husband died, I died also – I don't know who I am anymore".

Images representing states of meaninglessness

- Figures sit in the waiting room - some chairs mean life, some mean death, but you don't know which is which.
- A solitary person is fishing - for meaning.
- A person in a boat on a river is drifting towards impassable, dark mountains, searching for a cure.
- A tiny figure sits in an vast, empty landscape, waiting, with a suitcase.
- A figure at a cross-roads is unable to move because all the paths seem overwhelming.
- A figure is lost in a maze.

Emptiness is a companion to meaninglessness

In bereavement, it is often experienced as inwardly as a black hole of grief.

Emptiness…

Is also experienced externally. The lost person's absence is unavoidable … it presents itself in the simplest, most domestic ways, stripping life of its previous meanings.

The other side of the marital bed is now empty.

The dinner table is now set for one less person.

Death is an absence

Death is not a 'thing' – it's an abstract concept, which is why children can't understand it until they are old enough to have abstract thinking. A young child famously asked her mother:

> "I know Daddy's dead, Mummy, but what I don't understand is why he doesn't come home for dinner anymore" (Yalom, 2008).

It's also hard for adults to grasp - people struggle dreadfully with the disappearance of someone that was important in their lives. How can someone be there one moment and gone the next? It simply doesn't make sense!

> "It isn't gasps and blood and falling about – that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all".
> (Guildenstern, from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*)

Existential Isolation

- A dying or bereaved person's loneliness is almost palpable.

- They are the only one dying or the only one who has lost this particular relationship …

  … how can anyone else know what that person is going through?

Pictures of existential isolation are often groundless.

The approach of death brings an unwelcome freedom

- Dying people witness the death of their status – this threatens belonging. Social roles are increasingly limited or lost as disability and illness overcomes them. Friends 'move on' or may visit in numbers, talking to one another. The dying person often feels left behind and less relevant.

- The bereaved also become aware of their loss of status – they are no longer wife or husband or may be orphaned by the death of the last parent. Worse, they may have lost a child - their ultimate reason for existence.

- This results in a new kind of freedom, usually experienced as an emptiness filled with uncertainty, despair and hopelessness.

Existential guilt

Guilt is almost unavoidable in bereavement.

Firstly, survivor guilt – “Every day I live, every change I make, separates me further from him.”

Then existential guilt looms and the situation becomes an awful dilemma – “I know I have to change in order to live my own life, but if I do that I will abandon him.”

Time

Relationship to time changes:

For the dying person every moment becomes precious, but it is not clear what to do, therefore time is often experienced anxiously.

For the bereaved person, time becomes an endless emptiness filled with uncertainty for which little motivation or interest in life can be found.

Dread

Grief is a reaction to loss – proximally, grief is a reaction to loss of relationship, but ultimately it's a reaction to loss of immortality.

For the dying person, the loss is easily understandable – the myth of immortality has been shattered.

But the one who is bereaved has lost the one they invested their emotions in – their transference object.

To the degree transference has occurred, they may have lost the symbolic god who allowed them transcendence e.g. The 'tragedy' of the death of an elderly matriarch or patriarch, or the death of a celebrity like Diana in which the connection to immortality is lost.

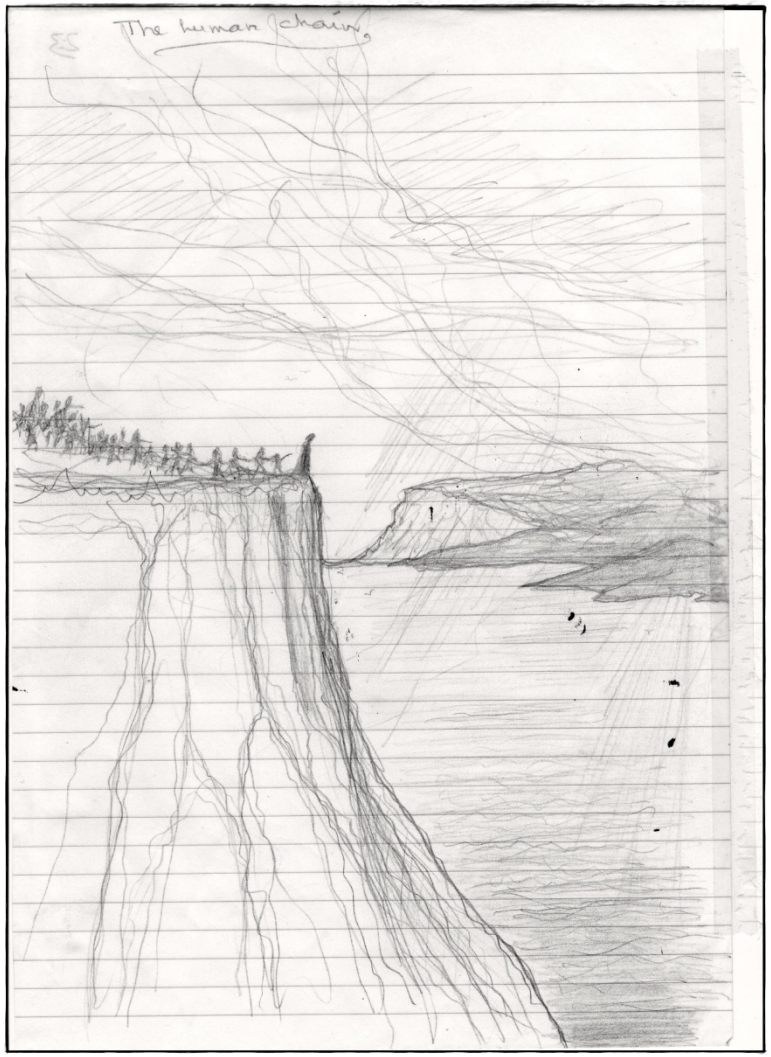
Dread – the truth of existence revealed

Alone, the dying or bereaved person is disconnected from a self they no longer recognise, from others who cannot hope to understand their position, and from the meaning of their existence .

They are filled with dread because the truth of existence has been revealed to them and they no longer have a defence to use against it.

They are facing the Abyss which, to paraphrase Nietzsche, gazes back into them – ‘with all its dreadful possibilities’.

The Abyss



Dread in children

Because death is an abstract notion, and abstract thinking is not developed until later childhood, young children who have suffered a bereavement tend to ‘concretise’ death, usually as some kind of awful monster.

At bedtime, when the room is darkened, a pile of clothes on the floor can transmute into something terrifying.

Others can be sacrificed to our dread

- A child whose parent has died, might obsessively draw violent pictures. One child said to me, “I like killing”. When I asked him why, he said, “The others die, not me!”
- This was his attempt to defeat death, to which others were happily sacrificed.
- Human history illustrates all too well this deadly deflection of the dread of death.

Averting one's eyes from the gaze of the Abyss

Many cannot stand the gaze of the Abyss and look away in denial. They are too fearful to talk about their experience..

Others shrink into resignation and withdrawal.

The alternative is to attempt to adjust to the new reality that is presented…

Adjustment to reality – sense of self and meaning restored

Heroic souls try to accept their situation.

Art making aids adjustment by transforming the terror of death into an art object (the subjective made objective).

This helps transform what is traumatic into something that can be assimilated by the psyche, processed, integrated into normal memory, and hence coped with.

Arguably, the only people who are truly sane i.e. confront reality openly without defensive pretences, are those who are have adjusted to death.

A sense of self re-emerges with new meanings and a new philosophy of life with a revised set of priorities.

"I think the dying are more alive than the living"

"I feel free now – free of the expectations of the world. I have also grown through my illness and disability and would not want to go back to the way I was before I was diagnosed with cancer."

"I feel freer than ever, especially intellectually. I don't have to worry about pleasing others anymore but can simply be who I am in the here and now."

"I am safe here in hospital. It's the first time I've felt safe in nearly 20 years – I don't have to worry about the basics of life and I feel cared for. My life is better than ever."

"I have grown so much through my husband's illness and death - I am proud of what I've achieved, more confident and self-assured, more self-reliant, much more myself and very OK about who I am.

Facing the abyss has meaning in itself

It provides an opportunity for heroism that otherwise barely exists in secular Modernist society.

…we admire most the courage to face death.

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