She turned to the sunlight

And shook her yellow head,

And whispered to her neighbor:

‘Winter is dead.’

A.A. Milne, When We Were Very Young

Happy New Year and welcome to the Spring 2014 edition of the Circular. As yet, the daffodils have wisely stayed below ground, waiting for the mild weather that signals to them that their time has come. For all living things have their time. This is the subject of Diana Mitchell’s fascinating interview with Ernesto Spinelli, a landmark article that forms the centerpiece of this issue. As Ernesto reaches his 65th birthday, he reflects on what it means to age and develop. This is an important issue for me as Editor, as it is the final issue of my first full year in the role. It seems to have flown past and I identify with Ernesto when he says that at his age a year seems to take about as long as 3 months did when he was younger! We are delighted also to bring you an abridged version of an essay read on Radio 3 recently by Emmy van Deurzen. To have the thoughts of two of the world’s most eminent existential thinkers represented in one issue is truly a privilege. Publishing in the Circular is not just for those with decades of experience, however, and we are equally delighted to give a voice to some new existential practitioners/philosophers as they offer some thought provoking factual and fictional pieces with existential themes. The next Circular is due out in June, with a deadline for submission of the end of May. So whether you are in training or a seasoned practitioner, do consider submitting your pieces. Thank you to all who contributed this time around. I do hope you find this edition to be varied, provocative and intriguing.

Susan Iacovou

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Pavlos Filippopoulos
Chair: I am still new to the role of Chair and it is still a learning process. So far it has proved to be a combination of leading a strong committee and carrying the badge of the Society in a number of Psychotherapy, Psychology and other fields.

Digby Tantam
Committee Member: Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield, Director of Research and Deputy Principal at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, and co-chair (with Emmy van Deurzen) of the forthcoming World Congress of Existential Psychotherapy to be held in London in May 2015.

Claire Marshall
Publicity Officer: I am responsible for managing and organising information produced by the SEA, creating and disseminating relevant information, developing the branding, promoting interdisciplinary connections, maintaining the SEA’s profile amongst students as well as other public relation matters.

Mike Harding
Committee Member: As the former Registration Officer of the SEA, I am now the Committee Member responsible for registering ADEP graduates and other suitably qualified practitioners for first-time registration with the UKCP.

Natasha Synesiou
Secretary: I coordinate monthly committee meetings and the AGM. This entails compiling an agenda, as well as taking and circulating minutes of the meetings. I liaise between committee and other SEA members, respond to various enquiries and, as a trustee of the SEA I uphold the legal requirements of the Charity Commission, as it applies to the Society.

Murray Blacket right, Natasha Synesiou
Conference Co-organisers:
How do you capture a theme that engages, inspires and engenders real debate for people from many walks of existential life? How do you make this as meaningful as possible, in just one day? And how can that day come alive and make the SEA 2013 conference a memorable one? These are just a few of the questions we hope to answer as Conference Co-organisers.

Derek Bean
Practice Matters: Practice Matters provides a space on the website for keeping members updated on professional practice matters. It is also planned to create a wider forum for looking at and sharing concerns, issues and interests, focusing on existential psychotherapy as applied and as a working life. Watch out for further information or contact me at practicematters@existentialanalysis.org.uk.

Awarding the Scholarship is dependent on funds available, so I maintain contact with the Treasurer and Committee. I also ensure that payments are made by the Treasurer when fees are due, and that Scholarship information is up to date on the website and occasionally included in the Circular, as well as keeping students informed about it directly. I am also responsible for asking recipients to write a paper for the Journal and/or give a presentation on their research.

Paola Pomponi
Honorary Treasurer: I look after the financial issues of the Society. I balance the yearly accounts, deal with the bank, keep all financial documents on file, and help with any queries related to moneys, receipts and payments.

Ursula Berghaus
Committee Member: More on this role in the next issue.

Paul Silver-Myer
Membership Secretary: I send annual membership renewal invitations and provide a receipt and membership card. I liaise with Distribution and Marketing, and the Circular Editors, provide membership details to the Registration Officer and Therapist List Co-ordinator, and update the Treasurer on fees received. Keeping an overview of changes in member numbers and attending to membership related queries and feedback is also part of my role.

Sarah Young
Administrator, Hans W. Cohn Scholarship: I am responsible for sending out the Scholarship application form and liaising with readers of completed applications (usually past recipients). The subcommittee of readers includes the Chair of the Society, so I keep him/ her informed of any applications.

Susan Iacovou
Editor, The Hermeneutic Circular: The Hermeneutic Circular has gone from strength to strength under the stewardship of previous editors and I hope to continue their good work. My role is to encourage students, qualified practitioners and everyone interested in existential philosophy and
psychotherapy to contribute articles, poems, case studies, workshop reports and adverts to the Circular. Help, suggestions for future features and feedback all welcome.

Simon du Plock & Greg Madison

Journal Co-editors: Simon du Plock has co-edited Existential Analysis (EA) since 1993. He has worked closely over this period with Professor Ernesto Spinelli, and Alessandra Lemma, then with Dr Hans W. Cohn, Dr John Heaton, and, most recently with Greg Madison. Simon is Head of Post-Qualification Doctorates in Psychotherapy at Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University. Greg joined Simon in co-editing EA almost six years ago, after returning to the UK from a brief stint on faculty at a Canadian university. Greg is a psychologist and psychotherapist with interests in developing an experiential-existential model of therapy and concerns about the impact of globalisation and technology on human existence. His EA role includes working closely with the whole journal team in our attempts to produce two coherent high-quality publications a year.

Martin Adams

Journal marketing and distribution, and Book Reviews’ Editor. I have two roles in the SEA. I am the person who sends out all the copies of Existential Analysis to members and to people who buy back copies. I also manage the subscriptions of EA to academic institutions across the world. As the book reviews editor I look out for and receive books that would be appropriate for review. On many occasions I commission reviews.

Paul McGinley

Representative to the Constructivist and Existential College: My role as representative of the SEA on the Executive Committee of the “Constructivist and Existential College” is to support the SEA Chair in representing the interests of the Registered Members of the SEA at UKCP level, as well as promoting existential psychotherapy generally.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW FOR EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS

The following publications have been received for possible review. People who wish to be included in the list of book reviewers for Existential Analysis for these or other publications are requested to e-mail the Book Reviews Editor, Martin Adams at adamsmc@regents.ac.uk


Hello All,

This is my third ‘Report from the Chair’ to you through the Hermeneutic Circular.

A week ago I was at a presentation on philosophy and science and although the talk was really interesting I found myself being even more interested in a question that somebody asked the speaker. They asked to what extent contemporary science has taken into account postmodern French philosophy, for example Camus. With great surprise I heard the speaker respond that Camus was a novelist and not a philosopher, then continue to explain how science has been influenced by acclaimed or, to be more precise, self-acclaimed philosophers of that specific era.

During the break, I found myself having a discussion with another member of the audience about what makes a philosopher, or a thinker, an existentialist. As soon as I revealed my identity, I was asked the million-dollar question: What makes a therapist an existential therapist?”.

I will protect you from reading the response I gave, for now (though may well expose you to it in a future report) but will ask you to join me in facing the question. Existential therapy has evolved through the years, keeping some traditional values free from the ’rust’ or ‘polish’ of the times and upholding the art of questioning and the search for meaning.

The SEA has also been evolving since its inception in 1988 and it gave me great pleasure to chair and participate in the celebratory 25th SEA conference in November. I was especially delighted to welcome Emmy van Deurzen back for this anniversary, as I believe that both the Society and our various existential trainings owe a great deal to her passion, dedication and energy within the field of existential psychotherapy. I want to thank all of you who made the effort to come and take part in a very successful and vibrant conference, about which I continue to receive positive feedback. The speakers were excellent and gave us much food for thought, but the audience also interacted dynamically, with powerful questions, helping to create a lively and diverse space, which was also enjoyed and appreciated by people outside of our discipline. I want to thank the conference organisers, Natasha Synesiou, Murray Blacket and our treasurer, Paola Pomponi for all their hard work in the months leading up to that day; I also want to acknowledge the help from other SEA committee members on the day.

On this note I want to remind you all that the SEA’s survival depends on its members volunteering their time, energy, expertise and interests, and to ask you to get involved. As the UKCP tightens and clarifies its structure it demands that its Colleges and Organisational Members (of which the SEA is one) do the same. Currently we are looking for CPD and discussion group coordinators as well as a lay person to be part of the SEA committee, so please get in touch via info@existentialanalysis.co.uk if you are interested in any of these roles. The UKCP are also holding consultations on the Complaints and Conduct Process and on their CPD policy and it is vital that all our UKCP-registered members have their say on these crucial topics. The outcome matters to every one of us and will ultimately have an impact on how we continue to practice existential psychotherapy. The UKCP are also looking for a pool of volunteers from different modalities to be available to sit on professional conduct hearing panels and, once again, it is crucial that the existential paradigm is represented in this forum. This precisely returns me to the question ‘what makes a therapist an existential therapist’? I welcome your responses and reflections on this question, in future pages of the Hermeneutic Circular, and elsewhere.

Bye for now.
I want to show in this article that psychiatric diagnosis, when used appropriately, can lead to treatment that markedly improves the client’s quality of life and is not something we need to avoid as existential psychologists.

Until relatively recently attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) represented for me a stigmatising and unhelpful diagnostic term that spoke more about family and society than the individual diagnosed with it.

My view was confirmed during an intensive 10 day silent retreat I once attended that involved daily meditation for 12 hours with no other distractions such as reading or physical activity. Food consisted of two meals a day and leaving the compound was not permitted at all. After the 10 days were over I started a conversation with one of the senior practitioners. This was my first retreat and I was amazed at how he was able to sit perfectly still without any sign of discomfort. However when we started speaking I was taken aback by how fidgety and agitated he seemed. His speech was rapid and he was disclosing lots of personal information about his past and he also told me that he had ADHD and as a result has not made much of his life. I remember thinking that if he had ADHD he would not have been able to focus and concentrate as he did over the last 10 days and I put his general manner down to the effects of having been labelled ADHD.

Years later however I was to come across clients in clinical practice that would describe a way of being in the world that led me to change my mind about ADHD.

One of those was a client who was referred to me for psychotherapy due to problematic cocaine use. This is a very brief description of our work together and only roughly shows the process by which things started to emerge.

The cocaine was proving to be increasingly damaging to his psychological wellbeing and was threatening his relationship with his partner, his 2 year old son, as well as friends and family. The positive effect of taking cocaine for him was now reduced to a 20 minute feeling of euphoria counterbalanced with around 48 hours of intense paranoia, depression and anxiety and this left us wrestling with why he couldn’t stop using, despite feeling very clear that he got so little from it. I trusted his genuine motivation to stop using based on my experience working with substance misuse clients. Initially I was often left with the feeling that something was missing in all this and over the weeks, by engaging in phenomenological exploration he was to say things that started to make me think that his substance use was an attempt to cope with, and linked to, undiagnosed ADHD.

During one session, exploring beyond the buzz cocaine gave him, he suddenly said that things become clear and he can read. I was struck by the way he said ‘I can read!’. He said he could sit down and read things like bills and sort out paperwork.

He also spoke about constantly receiving invitations to pubs and clubs because as he put it ‘I’m always dancing’. At the time it did strike me as a novel reason to be invited out a lot and in retrospect I think it was part of his hyperactivity.

During another session he said leaving the house and going to the pub was a trigger for him to use cocaine and from there we explored what being at home was like for him. The experience of being at home, especially alone, was one characterised by intense agitation and inability to stay still and relax. From his description, things like reading a book or newspaper were impossible – ‘I don’t know, I can’t focus on what I’m reading, my mind wanders before I get to the end of a line’. Encouraged to explore his experience of reading he would laugh and say ‘I’m thick, I’ve always been like that’. Television and films were the same ‘I don’t watch TV or films, after a few seconds I zone out and can’t follow what’s going on, like I’m looking through the screen’. Talking about his childhood he said he could never focus on things and that he did not achieve educationally. He was seen as a disruptive child and was taken outside of mainstream learning environments and placed in ‘special needs’ classes.

I was also curious about his heavy work schedule, normally working 12 hour days, 6 days a week. It started to emerge that this intense work schedule was fuelled by his restlessness and inability to stay still. His one area of focus and concentration was his work and as a result has not made much of his life. I believe attention to his symptoms as an adult was diverted in his inability to stop using cocaine was his high impulsivity and desire for intense sensations, which also appeared in frequent unplanned shopping sprees.

The substance misuse made sense when ADHD was taken into account, as did his difficult childhood experiences, particularly in the world of education. Although it was not immediately obvious to him or others, it became clear that he was living with some very real impairments that only came to light when he sought help for cocaine use. He struggled to focus on reading for more than a few seconds, was too restless and agitated to concentrate on a film or pursue any hobbies, and would do things on impulse that would have very negative consequences for him afterwards. It is hard to overestimate the impact something as fundamental as the inability to attend to things had on him.

I believe attention to his symptoms as an adult was diverted by the more externally noticeable drug using behaviour as well as some good compensatory strategies such as excessive hours at...
work and having his partner do things for him that he would otherwise struggle to do himself.

Towards the end of our work together we agreed that I would write to his GP requesting a specialist psychiatric assessment for adult ADHD. The value of this for him was the possibility of successful drug treatment (ironically stimulants) in combination with psychotherapy to improve the overwhelming nature of his symptoms. Had the inattentiveness and agitation not been so extreme or had they shown some response to other interventions (e.g. mindfulness, insight) I would not have gone down this road. By this point things were starting to fall into place for him and he was beginning to understand his struggles as something separate from substance misuse or ‘I’m just thick’. Our exploration of his attentional processes, agitation, and impulsivity in the context of their pervasive and far reaching effects on his life resonated with him and felt valid.

At this point, I left the centre. I do wonder what was the outcome of the assessment I requested.

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Nothing more open than the open ear
To listen with one’s eye
to eavesdrop with one’s tongue
to hear with one’s hands
To learn once again
to listen with one’s nose.
With all five senses
to obey the calls:
belonging.
Cohn, H. W. With All Five Senses

In the beginning of 2014 I had the honor of being granted the Hans W. Cohn Scholarship, a scholarship established by the SEA in 1996 on the occasion of Hans Cohn’s 80th birthday.

As a doctorate student in my final year of studies at NSPC, receiving this scholarship is a great opportunity for me to continue with my research and complete my dissertation and thus, to fulfill my dream of becoming an Existential Counselling Psychologist. Moreover, it has been an opportunity for me to reflect upon my journey as a trainee psychologist, a journey that has not always been easy. The previous year, especially, brought forth many challenges for me, both financial – due to the severe economic crisis that has affected my country – as well as personal. My passing from a mere student to a practitioner made me reconsider my identity as an existential therapist. In a society that is mostly driven by economic profit, and where both therapists and clients often strive for quick and easy fixes, a successful therapy does not always coincide with a respectful encounter where the autonomy and dignity of the client will be protected. The same concerns were also my inspiration for my doctorate thesis with the title ‘Existential Psychotherapy in a Time-Limited Context: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of existential counselling psychologists’ and psychotherapists’ experience of working within a time-limited context’. With my research, I aim to provide an understanding of how existential therapists manage to offer their services in the time-limited settings that are the prevalent trend nowadays, both in the public and voluntary domain. It is both my personal and professional need to explore the lived experience of existential therapists who, if they want to remain a competent and likely choice of today’s needs, have to adjust their practice to a briefer format, hopefully without jeopardizing the values and attitude of the existential approach.

Although I have often lost my faith, it is my belief that existential therapists can and should remain a valid choice for people that seek therapy, and that it is up to each and every one of us to promote the existential stance, both in our professional lives but also in our personal ones. In my opinion, this is the legacy Hans Cohn, with his uncompromising eagerness to learn and question, has left us with. With his books and articles, Hans Cohn enriched the existential and therapeutic community with new understandings and meanings, providing a concise and clear framework for existential practice. In addition, with a great degree of courage, but without lacking sensitivity, he managed to convey his views about a therapeutic practice that should always remain open, respectful and humane, reminding us of the ethos and values of existential therapy. His kindliness and warmness towards the human condition is also apparent in his less known poems, where he manages to express complicated existential ideas with a
Introduction
When the Cold War came to an end in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies, hope grew that turmoil and tension in the international scene would diminish and a new era of peace and prosperity would start. Soon after, this sweet dream shattered as the new regions were trapped in conflict. This trend has continued to the present day. Refugees continue to come because of political, social and economic reasons and, in recent years, because of environmental changes. Hundreds of people flee every day from their homelands to find shelter in hosting countries. Many experience trauma and need special care, if they are lucky enough to be accepted by the country in which they end up. Logotherapy was first coined by Viktor Frankl and deals with meaning in life. He himself experienced one of the most horrible traumas one can bear – that of the concentration camps of World War II. In this article I will study the application of Logotherapy in helping refugees and the relevance of Sartre’s ideas.

Who are refugees?
Under article 1A(2) of the refugee convention a refugee is 

essentially a person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (Farbey, 2000: p9)

According to the convention, the asylum seeker must meet these criteria to be considered as refugee: First, he or she must have subjective fear. This subjective fear is related to an objective condition he or she experiences in his/her own country.

This fear must be the fear of persecution (ibid). He also must be prepared to show that this persecution is related to one of the accepted reasons in the convention, for example, race, religion and nationality.

Refugees’ mental health needs
According to Vander Veer (1998), a refugee passes through three different stages:
1. Increasing political repression (in his/her homeland)
2. Major trauma
3. Going in to exile and the process of adaptation to the new culture

First it begins with facing up with the repression of a totalitarian regime, things like lack of freedom of speech, social freedoms and the like. The second phase is the time when the refugee is arrested and may be tortured.

The term Torture refers to violence directed against the physical and mental integrity of the individual. Torture takes place in a situation in which the victim is helpless and totally at the mercy of the torturer (ibid, p 2)

Torture is not just physical. The mental (psychological) torture comes from the creation of a condition in which painful and hard emotions are provoked in a detainee, like threats to rape, cutting off the prisoner’s contact with the outside world, or making threats against the prisoner’s family, etc.

Stage three is adaptation to the new culture. It begins by learning the new language, and forming a kind of social network.
After the initial adaptation, a refugee begins to partially adapt to the new environment (ibid, p 25).

He may know the language of the hosting country at this stage, but he uses it only in limited situations to meet his basic needs like housing and the seeking of benefits.

Sometimes some refugees show over adjustment. This means that they reject their own culture and affix to the new one with no question. By doing this, the refugee’s life often becomes shallow and meaningless. They sometimes change their names and change their hair colour to resemble more the people of the hosting society.

To become a productive and creative citizen, refugees need to fully engage with the new society, examine its values and create new meanings for their lives: meanings that can give them direction and energy in the new society.

**Philosophical background**

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French philosopher and novelist. He is believed to be the first person who coined the term ‘existentialism’ (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

In Sartre’s view, only human beings exist. God is, but does not exist. A flower is, but does not exist. In his view human beings are nothing. Then he immerses himself in life and by choosing how to live, and also by not choosing which is also a choice, he becomes something (Sartre 1973).

In Sartre’s view, external forces and limitations can only limit our choices but cannot force us to withdraw from being and from its choices.

Sartre also claims that man is nothing except what he makes of himself and then adds that man is nothing but what he proposes. In his view there is no love apart from the deeds of love, nothing except what we see in loving.

Sartre believes that we convince ourselves that we are bound to act by external circumstances, just to escape the anguish that freedom brings. We deceive ourselves by saying to ourselves that our actions are determined by forces exterior of us (Sartre, 1993).

**Logotherapy**

Viktor Emil Frankl was born in 1905 in Vienna into a Jewish family. He became a specialist in neurology and psychiatry after graduation from the University of Vienna in 1930. In September of 1942, he was arrested along with his wife, his parents and his brother by Nazis and was sent to a concentration camp in Bohemia. Only he and his sister survived this experience. Frankl has 32 books in his name. He died on September 2, 1997 of heart failure.

The first and most important conclusion for Frankl was that even in the most absurd, painful and dehumanized situation, human beings have the potentiality to find meaning.

These ideas came to Frankl when he was working in the horrific conditions inside Auschwitz. One of the prisoners was whispering to himself ‘if our wives could see us now’ and wishing that his wife be in a better situation. This incident brought the memory of Frankl’s wife to him and he imagined her smiling at him and answering him. He grasped that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. A man even in the most unbearable moment of his life can achieve fulfillment through loving contemplation of the images he carries of his loved ones (Frankl, 1959 [2004]).

Another important conclusion he made was around the importance of looking to future goals to which a prisoner could look forward as a way to fight against the camp’s psychopathological influence on the prisoners.

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 become subject to mental and physical decay... Usually this happened suddenly in the form of a crisis (ibid, p82)

Frankl noticed that people who had hope of being reunited with their family and friends, or who had some incomplete projects in their minds, or those with great faith, had a greater chance of surviving in the camp.

Logotherapy has a Greek root. Logo means word, spirit, God or meaning. Frankl criticised psychoanalysis’s focus on reducing psychological tension, which in his view is necessary for health when it comes to meaning. In his belief people desire the tension involved in striving for some worthy goals. Frankl calls this Noodynamics.

**How people find meaning**

Frankl believed finding meaning was like playing chess. There is no best move in chess without considering the context. He added that meaning is very individual and emphasised responsibility as the core essence of human existence.

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 (ibid, p113-114)

According to Logotherapy we can discover the meaning in our life through three different routes:

1. Experiential value: by experiencing something or someone we like, one example could be love.
2. Creative value: ‘By creating a work or doing a deed’ (ibid, p115). Being involved in a project or a desire, it could be art, music, writing, or work that the person likes.
3. Attitudinal value: ‘the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering’ (ibid, p115).

**Application of Logotherapy with refugees**

For the last few years I have been working as a psychotherapist in a setting where I have the chance to meet some refugees. One of the major questions these refugees have is, ‘Why me?’ . They share a desire and need to find some meaning for all the suffering they have experienced.

Frankl believed that meaning is found rather than given.
Meaning, in Frankl’s view, is like laughter. You cannot force someone to laugh. The same rule applies to faith, hope, and love. Meaning must be discovered. It is there to be seen, not something created by our imagination (Frankl, 1955: 1973).

Finding a meaning based on Frankl’s theory is through experiencing or creating something, but it cannot be done unless the therapist shows respect for the refugee and sees the potentiality of him/her, not just the problems he/she has brought to the session. Although dealing with trauma is important, it is important to focus on the whole life of the refugee not only on the traumatic experiences (Harris and Maxwell, 2000).

To find new meaning through creation, refugees first must gain a sense of intentionality.

Deurzen (1997) quotes from Hazel Barnes (1990) different stages of decision making and progress of self, as discussed by Sartre. According to her we pass through four stages:

1. In this stage we are completely non-self-conscious. We are just relating to the world through projecting ourselves into the world. We are purely intentional at this stage.

2. At the second stage we retrieve a sense of Ego out of our intentionality. ‘A sense that I actually exist as an entity in my own right. This happens when I begin to notice that I am the one acting in the World’ (Deurzen, 1997: p48).

3. At this stage we become aware of our relative ability to reshape ourselves. This awareness means that we understand that by our intentionality, we can reshape and change some facts or givens of the past and create a new self for our future.

4. The final stage is when we achieve a total understanding of the first three stages. We accept ourselves with all the paradoxes we have as an integration of body and soul and connect to the world through our embodied unique experience.

One of the aims of detention, persecution and torture by the totalitarian regimes is to take the sense of control and freedom from the prisoner. Some refugees may still carry this sense with them, if they are exposed to extreme dehumanization. To help those clients to find meaning, a central role of psychotherapy is to help them to regain the sense of control over their actions and to appreciate their freedom to choose, which is a key concept in Sartre’s philosophy. Without appreciation for freedom to choose, any search for meaning is futile.

According to Sartre, we are active agents, and according to Frankl we make our meaning, so they both promote this active aspect of living. In doing so, we have to remind our refugee clients that while they did not choose to be refugees, they can choose how they make it matter to them. We choose our meaning, and for both Frankl and Sartre, this meaning isn’t static or fixed for ever. We can help our clients see if the meaning they have made in the past still makes sense for them in the present.

When the refugee finally settles in the new society, he/she may find themselves with no direction. Things that he/she has fought or persecuted for are defined differently in the new society. People may also show less interest (or no interest) in those issues. It makes the connection to the new society even harder, and in these circumstances, a central role of psychotherapy would be to consider the dilemma of the contradiction between the new society’s construction of meaning and the individual’s experience. William and Berry (1991) point to racism and discrimination as the two factors preventing refugees from joining the new society at this point.

To deal with this problem one important factor is community mobilization. The new arrival must be helped to connect, and be empowered by the support of the former members of that community (Harris and Maxwell 2000).

Loss is another central issue for refugees who have left behind deeply valued personal possessions as well as less tangible things such as goals, aspirations and projects. Refugees are also uncertain whether they will ever be able to reconnect to family and friends again.

Here Frankl’s third way of finding meaning can be of therapeutic value: we can help refugee clients find new meaning in their suffering.

Even dying and suffering are potentially meaningful... since Logotherapy deals with meaning it can’t ignore the tragic triad of human existence which are pain, death, and guilt (Frankl, 1967: p87).

Psychotherapy based on Frankl’s view must help the client face their difficulties rather than avoid them.

Pain, death and guilt are inescapable for all of us. The more we try to deny them; the more we are drawn in suffering. He uses the term ‘tragical optimism’.

It means one is and remains optimistic in spite of the tragic triad which consists of those aspects of human experiences which may be circumscribed by (1) pain (2) guilt (3) death.

How is it possible to say yes to life in spite of all that? This presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life’s negative aspects into something positive or constructive’ (ibid, p139).

To find meaning out of suffering seems very interesting but is it always possible?

Tereia Shantall (1999) has conducted a qualitative research study based on Frankl’s theory. She interviewed five survivors of the Holocaust and analyzed their stories based on Frankl’s concepts. According to Shantall: ‘meaning can be experienced in suffering if suffering is accepted as a challenge to overcome evil’ (p96).

Considering this finding, one of the challenges is to find meaning in situations in which the refugees’ sacrifices have not led to any victory. At this point finding meaning through suffering seems very hard if not impossible.

The last but not insignificant factor is cultural and individual differences. According to Frankl, meaning is not tied to the society’s values. Each society tries to attribute meaning to its values but in the end meanings are unique to each individual (Frankl, 1955: 1973)).

People respond to trauma differently. They also view adaptation to the new society in different ways. Psychotherapists who intend to work with refugees must bear this in his mind if they want to be effective in working with their client.

In an interesting qualitative study, Ekkblad et al (1999) explored the differences between the perceived quality of life among Iranian refugees in Sweden and Swedish-born participants. The researchers found that the two groups saw their quality of life differently. For Iranian refugees, quality of life was equivalent to being healthy, being financially independent and being accepted in Swedish society, while for Swedish participants it was equivalent to being truthful, loving each other, having friends and spending enough...
time with family (ibid, p337).

Findings like this suggests the importance of adopting a phenomenological frame of reference while working with refugees. At the end of the day this is the only way we can approach the inner world of our clients, as each client is a unique entity.

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References

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN DIANA MITCHELL AND ERNESTO SPINELLI

Diana: Ernesto, I can’t believe a year has shot by since your talk on Uncertain Uncertainty at the Uncertain Landscapes conference!

Ernesto: Yeah, it both feels like yesterday and a lifetime ago that I gave that talk. I guess it’s holding that paradoxical time-tension. I seem to experience the years whiz by at an incredible rate. Most of the time, when I think about time, a year feels like around 3 months long these days.

Diana: I recently heard a quote by Lou Reed that seems to be a great comment about the ageing process. ‘The other day I was 19, I could fall down and get back up. Now if I fall down you are talking about nine months of physical therapy.’

Ernesto: Yup, I can relate to that one. Hemingway said that ‘getting old ain’t for sissies’. I’m beginning to get a sense of what he meant.

Diana: I wonder why, we of a certain age, experience time moving so fast? Do you think it has something to do with the fact that in spite of knowing that we are not fixed and always shifting and changing we are always clinging on to a more fixed identity or at least a preferred identity?

Ernesto: I think that your idea that the sense of speed is linked to identity in some way has a lot going for it. So, for example, no matter how long one goes on holiday for – be it a week or a month or longer – the first half of the time period seems to stretch out so that each day feels really, really long. But, suddenly, with the second half of that period, time seems to condense, speed up such that the remaining days gallop by. I don’t know what it is that provokes this. Is it an attitudinal shift of some sort? But, if so, what is it? Maybe your link to identity helps to make sense of it. So, even if I’m on holiday and travelling every day or doing something new every day perhaps my sense of my self under these conditions, that I am now self-construed as ‘Ernesto who is travelling’ does create a sort of identity-based ‘fixedness’ – even if that identity is about movement and novelty. Whatever… It’s weird.

Diana: You are now or almost 65. I would love to know how you experience that and how you are making sense of being at this point in your life.

Ernesto: Ouch! Yes, I am now approaching (or by the time anyone else reads this, will have reached) the grand old age of 65. How does it feel? Another paradox. On one hand, a genuine sense of being grateful and a sort of relief to have made it so much further than I’d predicted for my self. On the other, a sort of ‘fear and
trembling’ for what may lie ahead. In part, it’s adjusting to new scenarios: like that of becoming increasingly invisible in public spaces. More and more, when I’m out walking about I notice how I no longer get noticed. All sorts of people quite literally bump into me now and then look really surprised to find that they have bumped into another human being. A lot of people my age, or older, women especially, have brought up this phenomenon. It’s pretty humbling, to say the least.

Diana: I’m laughing about you becoming invisible with age … Here I was thinking it was just me. Being less visible has kind of propelled me into making myself a bit more visible and more outspoken. It is also very liberating… We are all so forgettable. But we also fade away physically… Our hair falls out and turns grey or light, our features become shrunken and less clear and we shrink in height…

Ernesto: And how are we expected to make any sense of that, I ask you? You ask me: ‘How do I make sense of being 65?’ My honest answer: I don’t. At some level I seem to just simply not believe it. And then, I experience invisibility or, worse, that awful experience of looking into a mirror and finding this weird old geek staring back at me and wondering: ‘who on earth is that?’ And then, knowing all too well who that is. Ah well… I do agree with you about the liberating aspects of invisibility, though. A long, long time ago, I was reading quite a bit of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and one of them – Gurdjieff, I think – had this idea that you should leave every space that you have entered into so that no residual trace whatsoever of your existence would remain. I have no clue why this idea appealed to me so much, and in some ways continues to appeal to me. Of course, I don’t for a moment believe that such an enterprise is possible since we are all and always present in time and space. But there was something about the enterprise that sticks close to me and that acts as a reminder of the folly in seeking to make our selves significant. It’s yet another paradox. Another guru/quack named Don Juan put it really well when he tried to teach his pupil, Carlos Castaneda, that the way of being that he represented demanded that you put the utmost significance and conviction in absolutely everything you did or engaged with in your life while at the same time you embraced the awareness at every moment that all you did/thought/felt/enacted had no lasting significance whatsoever on you or on anyone else or on the planet – or at least, no lasting significance that you could truly predict, control, influence or direct. Maybe turning invisible is another way of expressing – or living – that paradox. I think it can be expressed existentially as: ‘when no-thing matters, every thing matters’.

Diana: Paradox indeed! Reading what you say about reaching 65 and not being able to make sense out of it makes sense (ha ha) but this creates another question and that is: Why are we so horror stricken by certain ages? Was it not too bad to be 63 let’s say? So there is something about the number 65 that is loaded with what for you? Ok, obviously we don’t like the fact that we are becoming older because old = death. When I was 12 I could not wait to become a TEENAGER, 18 was another feather in my cap, 21 another one… all of that was great, I was moving further and further away from being a mere child suddenly and when I hit 30 I felt that at last I was a mature, to be taken seriously woman… not too young and not too old. But from 30 upwards ages took on different meanings… not my meanings but, as we existentialists would say, meanings created by ‘the they’, society, culture, family assumptions and my own assumptions. So the age 40 was a grim age to be if I went by certain images that I had of 40 year olds from when I was younger. My hunch is that ageing implies losing some of who we knew/know ourselves to be.

Ernesto: You’re right in that any new age is a shift in thought/time and so has its own ‘kick’ at a personal level. But then there are, as you highlight, certain ages that also have a broader, socio-cultural ‘kick’. So, 16 if you want to start to enjoy sex with another person in a legally-sanctioned way or if you want to shoot guns and wear a uniform (or is that 18!). 65 has the ‘kick’ that, among other things, says that the State is now going to start sending you some money every week/month for the rest of your life and, in return, you will start to identify yourself as a senior citizen. I know that’s changing and that for the youngsters among us, that ‘State kick’ will soon not be until they reach 67 and beyond. But for now, and I am guessing for a few more years after that, 65 will still have that added significance.

Diana: So if you could choose, which age is the best ‘fit’ for you Ernesto?

Ernesto: Which age is the best ‘fit’ for me? I’m not sure. If I imagine my self, it is an ‘I’ that looks at itself, others and the world from a perspective that, in age terms, is somewhere in its 20s. But maybe that’s only because that was quite a few kilos ago. Actually, personally, turning 30 has been the year that, so far, has most affected me emotionally. I just felt so old and couldn’t see anything terribly wonderful in my life to either look back on or look forward to. I think it was the darkest period of my life – so far. But it was also a pivotal one. So much of what I did and began to do during that year continues to resonate in what I do now. 40, for me, wasn’t at all bad. It felt like a start of something solidifying. The Interpreted World was first published when I was 40 and the personal impact of that was that I stopped writing the sort of things I’d been writing before (and not getting published) – novels, mainly – and refocusing that desire/necessity to write and that occasional enjoyment of writing into an arena where a readership existed. That’s been a 25-year long strange trip – or deviation – for me and one of the challenges I’ve set for my self on turning 65 is that I am giving my self the chance to return to my original writing interests and see where they take me. I suspect that I’ll still not really have a readership of any significant number but it feels important to me as a task to have set and at least try to carry through.

Diana: Uhhmm… I think I see an opening here for us to shift gears a bit. I’d like to know: just what you have been up to during the year, Ernesto?

Ernesto: What have I been up to in the past year? Quite a bit, actually. I’ve written several papers for various journals and edited books. I’m just at the point of completing the writing to a 2nd edition of Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World. And I’ve been doing some other sorts of writing. Then there’s seminars and travel – this year I was in Mexico and Greece (both great places to find – or lose – one self) as well as my usual hangouts in Denmark and Portugal – plus the clients and supervisees. And then there was the added surprise of being asked to curate

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an Art Show entitled ‘Why Am I Here? Art And Existence’ which took up a lot of time and energy and seriously stretched my somewhat limited creative abilities. And, finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, in a moment of sheer madness, my wife, Maggi, and I offered to take on the responsibility of looking after our great-niece, Evie (who was born just over a year ago) for one day a week. And going back to the temporal paradox you raised, our weekly time with Evie really highlights the sense of time confusion. On one hand, that day seems to stretch out into a quasi-infinity, such that by the end of it, what energy remains is spent in making it up the stairs to sink into bed and ‘the sleep of the just’. On the other, each week comes around so quickly, and Evie grows so quickly such that it feels like we’re participating in one of those time-lapse films that capture movement from acorn to oak tree within 30 seconds.

**Diana:** I’m laughing at the image of the acorn to oak tree in 30 seconds! Here we are again ... this little Evie is growing, changing, developing and ageing at top speed. But you too are ‘growing’, changing, developing and ageing but at a different speed?

**Ernesto:** You know, Diana, I’ve just realised that the one exception to all I said earlier about invisibility is when I’m out strolling with Evie in her buggy. Then, through her presence, I am visible once more. So, yes, the age contrast you mention. In this case expressed through separate beings linked to one another in all sorts of ways. It is such an odd experience since Maggi and I never had children and so here we are, in our sixties, pushing prams and changing nappies and playing in playgrounds one day a week – and, through Evie, having momentary returns to social visibility. But, it has to be said, even if visible, we are looked at as somewhat odd creatures. But perhaps there’s nothing new in that.

**Diana:** I was not surprised to hear about your various papers that had been published and to hear about the 2nd edition of *Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World*. I also imagined you travelling the world giving keynote talks, seminars and workshops, so again what I expected. But my heavens ... curating an Art Show in Denmark! What was that all about?

**Ernesto:** Ah!... About the Art Show. A weird and wonderful tale. Some time in October 2012, I was approached by the Directors of the Esbjerg Art Museum in Denmark. They told me that they had been running a series of shows under the broad heading of ‘Art In Context’ and that they wanted to focus their final show on ‘Art And Existence’ and that they wanted me to curate the show together with a Danish/British artist named Nina Saunders. This idea was, of course, totally insane. I know nothing whatsoever about curating an Art exhibit and, arguably, know next to nothing about ‘Art’. So, of course, I accepted the challenge. Actually, I couldn’t _not_ accept because Maggi, who _is_ an artist and who happens to know a lot about ‘Art’, just thought it was hilarious and would have never forgiven me had I refused. Ok. So Nina and I had less than a year to create a show. Which, as I quickly learned, is close to an impossibility in the Art world if you are attempting to bring together all sorts of works – paintings, sculptures, installations and so forth – from different parts of the world and belonging to different galleries or museums or private owners or to the artists themselves. And, of course, before you can even hope to achieve anything like that, you also sort of need to know – or have some vague clue about – just which pieces you might want to bring together. Having no clue, we scrambled about looking, asking for ideas (for which my thanks to readers of the *Circular* who responded with their suggestions), meeting up and just trawling the web on a semi-random basis, being guided by associationist, irrational intuitions. Anyway, we found lots of wonderful stuff – amazing works from all over the place – and pretty much decided from quite early on that the works we wanted should be mainly by living, contemporary artists. But we also needed an over-arching structure to guide us in the decisions we made. So, I came up with a somewhat rushed, haphazard ‘existential structure’ that focused on various polarities – birth/death, meaning/meaninglessness, individuality/universality and so forth all of which are ‘contextualised’ by the physicality of the world (as expressed through the 4 elements of fire/air/water/earth). So, we gave the basement of the Museum over to the artistic representation of the 4 elements and the other floor (and a half) to the representation/expression of the polarities. Of course, there were works that we desperately wanted and couldn’t get for one reason or another. Things like Ron Mueck’s sculptures entitled ‘Dead Dad’ or ‘A Girl’. Or this other wonderful work that created a real, genuine cloud in a room space. Lots of works that couldn’t be. But then, we were also really, really, lucky. We managed to get the hilarious Grayson Perry work ‘Mind Of An Englishman’ as well as Mark Wallinger’s amazingly moving work ‘Threshold To The Kingdom’. All sorts of really astonishing works that slotted into our general structure. So, I came up with a somewhat rushed, haphazard ‘existential structure’ that focused on various polarities – birth/death, meaning/meaninglessness, individuality/universality and so forth all of which are ‘contextualised’ by the physicality of the world (as expressed through the 4 elements of fire/air/water/earth). So, we gave the basement of the Museum over to the artistic representation of the 4 elements and the other floor (and a half) to the representation/expression of the polarities. Of course, there were works that we desperately wanted and couldn’t get for one reason or another. Things like Ron Mueck’s sculptures entitled ‘Dead Dad’ or ‘A Girl’. Or this other wonderful work that created a real, genuine cloud in a room space. Lots of works that couldn’t be. But then, we were also really, really, lucky. We managed to get the hilarious Grayson Perry work ‘Mind Of An Englishman’ as well as Mark Wallinger’s amazingly moving work ‘Threshold To The Kingdom’. All sorts of really astonishing works that slotted into our general structure. And, as well, I co-created an interactive piece with Nina, which we titled ‘Existential Photo Booth’. What it is, is a ... photo booth that has been placed at the entrance to the show and which every visitor can enter and have his/her photo taken. As they move...
into the show, there are confronted with giant double screen. The left hand side of it transmits the face photo that has been taken of the person. The right hand side screen sort of ‘mashes’, or blends together, all of the individual face photos into a single composite face photo. Two technicians managed to work out a computer programme to achieve this so that the composite image didn’t come out really weird with all sorts of eyes and noses and mouths all over the place. I’m not quite sure how they achieved this, but it had something to do with finding some mathematical code that would always locate the facial features in the same space. Anyway, it was our attempt to express the polarity of individuality/universality and people seem to have enjoyed it. But, you know, it’s surprising the mixture of feelings that emerge when doing something like curating – I’m guessing it must be a bit similar to creating a work of some sort. It’s a blend of satisfaction, relief, disappointment and embarrassment. And, of course, surprise. Always, surprise. I was shocked at how the separate pieces either interacted (or related) well with one another or else just didn’t gel – even if on their own they’d been absolutely fine. I don’t know why I was surprised, actually. It’s so obvious from an existential-phenomenological perspective, but to see the truthfulness of it so starkly was... somewhat shocking. Anyway... the show opened on 27th September 2013 and comes to an end in early January 2014 and I’ll be going back to close it with some sort of talk/discussion. Its final title was: ‘What Am I Doing Here? Art And Existence’. Half an hour before it was due to open, everything was unfinished and in chaos and the co-curators were in the basement wildly spreading soil all over the floor. Very apt. There’s a very vague chance that the show may come to London, but I’m not so sure that’s such a great idea and in any case whatever might come wouldn’t be the exact same show. Whatever, it was exciting, frustrating, time-consuming, exhilarating, humbling and a most amazing gift to have been given. I never dreamed of such an unexpected opportunity. And it made me wonder: if this is possible, maybe even other fantasies – like the fantasy of making a film, is also a possibility for me. Admittedly, an incredibly unlikely one but... hey! Who knows what life brings forth?

Diana: Your last SEA conference keynote talk was so whacky and creative... so don’t tell me you are not creative! I am so fired up about your show in Denmark! What a shame you could not get Berndnaut Smilde, the Dutch man who created his cloud... it is a totally magical ‘happening’ and it reminds me yet again how extraordinary human beings can be... to see man-made creations is so inspiring and moving... that is where my feelings of spirituality are felt. That is another topic that might be interesting... us existentialists have a reputation for being spoil sports when it comes to that dimension; too dry or cynical... too busy with our ‘nothingness’...

Ernesto: Yeah, Smilde’s cloud looks so beautiful. Maybe the SEA could have it as one of their conferences one year. No speakers. Just this amazing cloud experience and then a few hours passed exploring it. An interesting conference, don’t you think? For me, the problem with ‘spiritual’ is that when people use the term they seem to want to imply – or express – something other-worldly, something that takes us away from our private and shared embodied consciousness into something disembodied. One of the greatest ‘lines’ I ever heard about spirituality was from Leonard Cohen. He studied for years and years with a Buddhist monk, lived in some sort of ashram for yonks and then went back to recording music. When he was asked what he got that was most valuable to him about that whole experience, he said something like: ‘What I most got out of it, and what I am eternally grateful for, is that it allowed me to discover that I have not got, and have never had, any sort of spiritual feeling whatsoever.’ And this is coming from the man who wrote ‘Hallelujah’, which is probably the most devastatingly beautiful song about spiritual carnality (or carnal spirituality?) I’ve ever had the pleasure to hear. I think that’s what he was getting at with his statement and his song: don’t make the ‘spiritual’ something that is in some way separable, or an alternative to, what might be labelled as the physical or material. Don’t impose yet another stance of unnecessary dualism.

Diana: I’d like to find a different term for spiritual that is not linked to ‘another world’... have you got a better one? My version is something or someone who creates or achieves something that pulls me away from my every day life, fills me with pure joy, surprise and unbearable sadness in equal measure. My father hit the nail on the head with, ‘depressingly beautiful’. It is a moment, like that man-made cloud or an incredible dancer that touches and moves me but that I can’t keep because it evaporates and leaves
me standing alone with my memory and that too will fade in time. This can happen anywhere. I think that the act of creativity is that momentary losing of myself and merging with something that suddenly feels bigger than just me when everything clicks perfectly together in a very unselfconscious way. Once again, it is for me about recognising and connecting and sharing… And it is always inspiring and up lifting… Literally lifting me above my average every day self and yet my feet are always on the ground. It is also short lived, just a ‘food for my soul’ moment...

Ernesto: I can’t think of a better/other word for ‘spiritual’. Maybe we need to keep it while making clearer what we mean by it. I think what you’ve written expresses the sense of experiencing/being spiritual extremely well. Perhaps, it’s about acknowledging all the ‘otherness’ that is always present as valid. Perhaps it’s about allowing our ‘otherness’ (or various expressions of ‘otherness’) to co-exist, however temporarily, with that being we’ve insisted is our ‘self’ – thereby challenging that insistence. The link to our personal ‘otherness’ perhaps provokes a resonant link with all ‘otherness’ that extends beyond any fixed time or space.

Diana: I really like your idea of ‘otherness’… Something is experienced that is ‘outside’ our feet on the ground everydayness. In that experience there seems to be something happening where I am stretched further in and out… There seems to be no split between IN and OUT… it happens literally in the in-between. My feet are on and off the ground at the same time.

Ernesto: Here’s something that resonates for me when I hear your words: recently, I watched a film by an Italian film director named Paolo Sorrentino. The film’s title is La Grande Bellezza (The Great Beauty). And it truly is. Here’s a quote that has stayed with me:

This is how it always ends. With death. But first there was life hidden beneath the blah blah blah. It is all settled beneath the chatter chatter and the noise. Silence and sentiment. Emotion and fear. The haggard, incessant flashes of beauty. And then the wretched squaroler and miserable humanity. All buried under the cover of the embarrassment of being in the world. Beyond, there is what lies beyond. I don’t deal with what lies beyond. Therefore... let this novel begin. After all, it’s just a trick. Yes, it’s just a trick.

I think that what we’re calling the ‘spiritual’ is that experience of the ‘haggard incessant flashes of beauty’ that have nothing at all to do with ‘the beyond’. It’s in the ‘trick’ that is creation – be it writing a novel, or producing a work of art, or... living.

Diana: It sounds to me that you have clearly had a very special experience curating this Art Show in Denmark; it touched, moved, inspired and must have changed you… How do you think that came about? And do you feel changed in any way? I have to say that I am not a great fan of the term ‘change’… It kind of implies that you have been changed from the outside. For me a ‘change’ happens when I recognise and connect (or re-connect?) to a part of me that I had forgotten about or that I was not clearly aware of.

Ernesto: You’re right about the impact. I think that what I’ve mainly got from it, for now at least, is a reminder: ‘You’re a temporal being, Ernesto. You ain’t gonna be here for ever and ever. And there are other ‘views’ of you than that of ‘Ernesto the therapist’. There are other ‘Estrosos’ that you could be attending to – other ways of ‘being Ernesto’. Maybe that links in to your sense of what you react to when the word ‘change’ comes up. Maybe we call change is more akin to that Heideggerian sense of ‘revealing’ – the exposing of what has always been there but had been left unseen or insufficiently noticed, rather than the emergence of something new, that had not been before. But, again, where we might be disagreeing is that, for me, this ‘revealing’ sense to the notion of change, isn’t something that is shaped either within or comes from outside. For me, it’s precisely when the separation between inner/out (or self/other, or take whatever preferred duality you care to mention) is temporarily blurred or ‘fuzzed’ that this sense of noticed change occurs. The absurdity is that change is a constant invariant condition of being. It’s a cheap trick for therapists to offer change when it’s going on anyway. It might be more honest for those of us who offer such to clarify matters and admit that what is on offer is the exploration of our clients’ common insistence that we are – or should be – in some way capable of controlling, directing, initiating or stopping
change, or that they used to be able to but now seem to have lost that capacity.

**Diana:** I’m just back from Holland where I have been visiting my 93 year-old mother in a nursing home for the first time, while I stayed in her nearby flat. That was another one of those new time warp experiences… it was sad to be in her empty flat with all of her, via her belongings, everywhere, knowing she won’t be going back there ever again. Bit by bit everything will vanish and new people will move into her flat. This also reminded me of yours: ‘when no-thing matters, everything matters’. I agree with the sad fact that once we die, no matter how many books or works of art we might leave behind, we will also leave nothing but not no-thing(s) behind. What we do leave behind are objects even if the reader of the books or the owner of the paintings creates a kind of one-sided relationship with them. Our eldest son’s death has shown me how important it is for me to ‘keep him alive’ via photos and lighting candles… But it is a kind of tug of war battle as well because my life is going on without him and I can still enjoy my life. For others, even those who mourned his death, he will be fading very quickly and he will be forgotten most of the time. I can feel how this holding on can get lonelier and lonelier for the ‘holder’, while it also changes and fades over time.

**Ernesto:** Diana, I think that what you’ve just said about death and leaving/not leaving behind is really, really beautiful. I’m really touched by it. For me, the issue is that we cannot know what ‘will remain’, if anything at all. Some of us meet death with the belief that what we have done, said, created or been will be a forever world memory. Some of us believe that every trace of our existence will disappear with our passing. There’s plenty of evidence to show that both those views can be both true and false. And there is no way of predicting which it will be. In terms of the Arts and Literature, for example, just look back 100 years or so. Who has, so far, remained in the collective memory? Not all that many people. And how many of those who have remained were the most well-known/renowned/celebrated of their time? Not many, I’d wager. At the same time, I’ve just read this wonderful article by Martin Scorsese in a recent issue of The New York Review Of Books wherein he makes this impassioned plea for the preservation of as many films as possible, even those deemed ‘insignificant’ at the time of their release, precisely because the long-term ‘worth’ or significance and impact of any film cannot be all that accurately seen at the time of its release. Among others, he uses the example of Hitchcock’s Vertigo, which last year was voted by the British Film Institute membership as Number 1 in the list of greatest films ever made. What Scorsese points out though is that when it was released in 1958, Vertigo wasn’t recognised as anything more than yet another of the annual thrillers that Hitchcock directed, much less any filmic masterpiece for the ages. And, it became the case that Vertigo almost ceased to exist as a film because the film was badly preserved and the film stock was at the point of disintegration. It took years of search, research and preservation to allow it to be shown as it had been and for today’s audiences to recognise it as one of the truly great films. So, I think the point is this: we could (perhaps even should?) stop worrying or predicting our own personal impact — or lack of it — on the world-after-our-death. At the same time, the living could (perhaps should?) seek to ensure that the memory and contributions of those who have died are preserved in some way as far as is possible. And with the dawning of the Digital and Post-Digital Age, such an enterprise — while still impossible to fulfil in any complete sense — has certainly become a more realistic possibility for some significant partial fulfilment. In both cases, it seems to me that it’s more about the willingness to acknowledge the uncertainty of the relation between one’s life and one’s ‘after-life’. And more, I also think it’s about the respect we are willing to show or express about the lives and after-lives of those others in our world with whom we have had some sort of connection. The danger is always that respect and preservation can so easily turn into something all too ‘elevated’ and grandiose — which strikes me as not being at all respectful. Personally, I wish our notions of respect were tempered by something akin to what’s expressed in Merlene Dietrich’s final line in “Touch Of Evil”: ‘He was some kind of a man… What does it matter what you say about people?’.

**Diana:** I want to go back to something you said earlier. It’s so interesting to hear that your new writing life kicked off with Interpreted World and to now hear you say you refer to this as your 25-year long trip or deviation. Here you are now wanting to return to your fiction writing and to climb back on that track you left behind, or maybe a parallel track. So please tell me what kind of fiction you have been and will be writing. Let me see if I can guess: I know that you love Philip K. Dick’s work. I imagine that relatedness, relationships, sexuality, perceptions/misperceptions and humour will be in the mix with an ending that is left hanging. Maybe even thrillers or at least something where the meaning or message only becomes clear towards the end. End of fantasy!

**Ernesto:** Well, you’re not too far off in your fantasising. I did write a Private Eye novel once, which I’ve just gone back to and am playing with at present. Someone, somewhere, once said or wrote that you’ve got to have written around a million words before you can truly begin to write. I reckon I’m near that sum now. And so, what I’ve been doing is ‘preparing’ to write. This year, I re-wrote for what is probably the 9th or 10th time — and hopefully the last — a sort of ‘memoir’ that’s been haunting me for around 40 years or so. Various people have read it in its multiple manifestations and it’s pretty much 50/50 between those who love it and those who either hate or are disappointed by it. But, you know, Diana, whatever it is and it may be for, I’ve pretty much decided that it is something I needed to write for me — which is to say that I needed it to remind me of all the stuff we’ve mentioned above about other ways of expressing ‘being Ernesto’, and to just get on with it without bothering about what its ‘significance’ is while at the same time treating the enterprise with absolute conviction and significance. The Private Eye story seems to me to be a furthering of that. It’s a sort of ‘practice’ or a ‘sketch’ with which to prepare my self for what I hope to be able to begin writing in another year or so. I have about 4.5 early draft novels that I can turn to for further practice if I feel like it or think I need to. A couple of comedies, a sort of romance, a fairly detailed outline to another Private Eye story with the same main character as the first one.
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN DIANA MITCHELL AND ERNESTO SPINELLI

CONTINUED

Diana: That’s what exists. And what may one day exist?

Ernesto: Ok, what I’m working towards, is a novel that concerns itself with the investigation of what’s termed ‘charisma’. A few years ago, over the course of participating in quite a number of conferences and seminars, I had a moment of ‘illumination’ regarding charisma. In brief, what I realised – perhaps none too originally – was that charisma, as well as being, quite obviously, a relational experience, has two (or at least two) forms of expression, which I’ve called ‘the inspirational’ and ‘the perspirational’. The inspirational is the sort of charismatic experience wherein both the person labelled as charismatic and those who label him/her as charismatic co-create and share a huge sense of personal and inter-personal empowerment. Although they are significant in differing ways, the charismatic one and those who are interacting with him or her feel a sense of equality, of mutual import. Everyone comes out of that charismatic atmosphere infused with a sense of his or her own potential and possibility, there is a surging of activity, commitment, concern, possibility. In such instances of inspirational charisma the sense that one has a duty and a desire to be or become the best that one can be is across the board, shared by one and all who are in the sway of the co-created charismatic atmosphere. Personally, I had a lived sense of that on various occasions by being in the presence of remarkable men and women and I have always felt that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra expressed this sort of charisma.

Diana: I get the feeling that Lou Reed might have been one of your charismatic inspirational characters who kept his feet on the ground and someone who did not take himself too seriously. He was bright, creative and his humour and aversion to bullshit was very refreshing. That is for me sometimes one of the signs of drives everyone who is caught up in it towards what might broadly be called evil. But that is not all that they are capable of generating. Some twisted form of the inspirational focus of charisma can – and do – generate all manner of what might usually be called ‘madness’.

Ernesto: You know what I mean? So I do kind of wonder if we do all feel unique and special because we are. We all have our little quirky ways of understanding and responding that we can’t quite communicate and that are not quite in step with others. It is therefore so refreshing when I hear someone who has found a way (through talking, writing, singing, dancing, creating works of art) to share that and shake me up a bit. By the way, I have just discovered that with regard to ‘perspirational’, spellcheck does not recognise that term!

Diana: So tell me about perspirational charisma.

Ernesto: I’m amused that there’s no such word as ‘perspirational’. Never mind, existentialists seem to like inventing new words...

Diana: Ok. So tell me about perspirational charisma.

Ernesto: The perspirational kind of charisma, on the other hand, is much more about co-creating conditions of imbalance, superiority centred on the significance of the charismatic one over and above that of all those others who interact with him or her and co-create the charismatic atmosphere. It’s a sort of vampiric or energy-leeching charisma such that the charismatic one is fuelled by the energy of those with whom he or she interacts, but at their cost – they are all lessened, weakened, become subservient to the charismatic one. So, although the sense of empowerment generated by inspirational charisma is multi-directional and flows through and across all those present, the power that is generated through perspirational charisma is uni-directional – it all flows towards the charismatic one. And he or she, in return, embraces it all and demands more and more of it because, at the heart of the perspirational charismatic person lies a pervasive sense of emptiness that must be filled, a foundational sense of weakness, fragility, doubt and fear and loathing (be it directed toward self or other). The perspirational charismatic person feels a fundamental self-hatred that is expressed in terms of self-aggrandisement. But it is an aggrandisement that continually requires re-fuelling and which generates an ever-increasing demand for more and more while at every moment fearing its potential loss. This sort of charisma provokes all who get caught up within it to embrace anything and everything about who they can be just to add more fuel that can be directed towards the insatiable demands of the charismatic one. So it’s not just about generating something ‘less than’ or ‘evil’, it’s about allowing those possibilities to emerge alongside whatever other experiential possibilities there may be. For instance, we can see that those historical figures whom we recognise as fitting into this perspirational expression of charisma can – and do – generate all manner of what might loosely be called ‘madness’.

Diana: Both seem to catch our attention and involve us in different ways. I can see the difference between the two and also about the occasional overlap. Someone might start out as an inspirational charismatic character and evolve into a perspirational version.

Ernesto: Yes, I think there is a convergence and I think that one can become the other – though I suspect that it is mainly from inspirational to perspirational. But I do think that there is a different quality about them. Of course, in each there is the primary focus on the charismatic person, and, in that sense, he or she is imbued with a specialness or significance that in some way stands out. But I think that what is done with that specialness, or how it is expressed, by the charismatic one is very, very different depending upon whether it is inspirational or
perspirational. I think that the inspirational charismatic treats that specialness by allowing the ‘charge’ or ‘power’ being generated to immerse everyone. Whereas the perspirational charismatic is him or herself overwhelmed by the ‘charge’, feeds on it voraciously, demands more and more of it. And, I think that there is another quality about the inspirational charismatic – the ability to not take the whole charismatic focus so seriously, to be able to step back from it, to not require it – that is certainly not there with the perspirational charismatic. I’ll give you a concrete example of the differences between the two expressions. We can all think of poor sad twisted souls who are in the public limelight and who cannot stand the glare of it so that they either commit suicide or seem to seek out the conditions that will push them towards some sort of self-destruction. Recent examples would be people like Kurt Cobain or Amy Winehouse and, perhaps most obviously, Princess Diana. From an inspirational charismatic perspective, the charismatic one might discuss/consider/mourn their dying in a way that acknowledges their lives as a whole, that links their fears and weaknesses to her or himself and to all those present, who takes the loss of life and utilisethis as a way of reconnecting all present with their humanity, with their own personal and shared uncertainties, who, ultimately, unifies and unites all present both through and with the frail life that’s been extinguished. The perspirational charismatic on the other hand, would take that wretched being’s life and utilise it as a means for self-aggrandisement. Rather than mourn them, or bring out what is shared with them, he or she would almost castigate them for not having had the wit and wisdom to seek him or her out. ‘If only they had recognised me for who I am and my specialness’, says the perspirational charismatic, ‘they would have been saved. I would have saved them. They would be alive and well today. And ever-grateful to me’. And that lifesquelching view would be expressed and communicated and embraced by both the charismatic one and those in his or her circle because it would highlight the superiority, the supreme specialness, of that charismatic one as well as to a far lesser degree, but a felt degree none the less, of those among him or her. And this, in turn, would further fuel the focus upon the charismatic one which itself generates even more energy which he or she can then leech.

**Diana:** Thinking more about what you are saying makes me feel pretty strongly that the inspirational charismatic person does not see themselves as above or better than the people in the audience and the people in the audience can relate to that person on a human to human level. He or she comes away with new confidence and feeling that they are capable of more. It is a much more equal relatedness between the inspirational character and the one who feels inspired – this is not one way traffic because both are engaged and in some way the inspired person becomes as visible as the inspirational person, either to and with the inspirational one or to and with him or her self. The inspirational person might become inspired and the inspired might become inspirational. Both are active and to me that is the most important factor in any relationship including the therapeutic one and our relationship now.

**Ernesto:** Yeah, there’s something pivotal about that. Anyway, I had this sort of epiphany that gave me a strong sense of the differences and the distinction between both expressions of charisma that I’d put together made an awful lot of sense to me. And I thought: Ummm… I don’t think this difference has been considered all that much. Or maybe it has, but I have no knowledge of it. And… might it be turned into some sort of novel rather than just one more detached paper of some kind or other? So… That’s what I’d like to write about. But what I’ve given you is the easy bit – coming up with the underlying thematic idea. The difficult bit was finding some sort of way to give such abstractions a sort of concrete expression and life so that the novel that might emerge from them might have the slightest possibility of remaining of sufficient interest for me to want to spend the time and energy writing it, much less trying to put it out there in the world so that those who might want to read it would be able and interested enough to do so. I think I may have come up with a plot/structure/way of expressing the above in a fashion that could be wrapped up in the structure of a novel. Unfortunately, what I’ve come up with is set in three different time frames, one of which in particular requires that I do a fair bit of historical research – both around a character and around a time/place – namely, Vienna in 1908-1909 – as well as some years before and after these dates. Luckily, there exists an awful lot of such historical record. And also unluckily there exists an awful lot of such historical record. And yes, of course, it involves therapists and clients, and some matters left hanging (but, hopefully, not too much of that!). Anyway… it’s obvious I need to think this through even further. Just as its obvious that there may not be any ‘further’. I genuinely don’t know whether I can write – have the skill and ability to write – about this. I think that I might and will come up with something. But… don’t hold your breath. Maybe what we’ve discussed here is all that there is ever going to be. I hope not…

**Diana:** All this makes me think that approaching and turning 65 has been a kind of crossroads situation and that you now have the bit between your teeth and are determined to hang on to what is important and meaningful for you. Did this ‘change’ happen with the help of the curatorship or have you had your beady eye on the birth home or some such thing. The police officer had no idea who he was and even when he told her who he was, the name didn’t mean anything to her. Now here is one of the most charismatic people on the planet – except, in this instance, he’s not. Because there’s no agreement between the parties, there’s no ‘sharing’ of the relational factors that provoke a mutual agreement regarding charisma.
**Ernesto:** The curatorship served to focus me on other tasks, and other ways of thinking/experiencing to those that I’d grown used to. In that sense, it’s been a trigger of sorts. Just like the magical age of 65 has been. But at the same time, I’ve known for a while that something needed to shift for me. Truth is, when it comes to writing about existential therapy, or therapy in general, I think I’ve pretty much said my piece. That’s not to say that there’s no more to be said — there’s tons more that needs writing about. But I just don’t think that it’s going to come from me. There are a couple of things I’d like to complete: I am, as I said before, writing a new edition of *Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World* and that is giving me the opportunity to clarify and extend some points that were made in the first edition that maybe weren’t as clear as they could be. I’ve got an idea for a little book on existential coaching, not a textbook as such, but a sort of ‘handbook’. And, of course, there’s the never-ending saga of the CBT book that Michael Worrell and I have been tearing our hair out over for several years. That one’s ‘on sabbatical’ for the moment, and maybe it will be an eternal moment, but it keeps nibbling away at my thoughts. But other than that, I can’t, at this moment, see much else up ahead. Which is not to say that I’ve grown bored or tired of all things therapeutic. Far from it. There’s a lot happening in the field that I’m excited by and interested in. For instance, there’s currently a major revolution going on within the BPS Division of Clinical Psychology (not usually the most revolutionary of groups, by the by) that is making a powerful case against the use of all psychiatric diagnostic labels by psychologists. In part, that’s somewhat dubious ‘syndromes’ that seem to want to pathologise the more expressive/intense forms of human experience, like mourning for example. But there also seems to be a commitment to the development of a more psychological way of addressing and working with severe states of unease and disorder. I have no idea what, if anything, will come out of it, but it’s interesting (to me, at least).

**Diana:** You seem to be saying that something has changed in your attitude? Okay, of course you were ‘writing for me’ as well when you wrote all your therapy related books but this ‘me’ has a different ring to it… I also wonder if you feel more free and liberated not writing for a ‘ready-made readership’… Who knows who your audience might be? It is a bit like writing an essay knowing so-and-so will be reading and marking it… That can be restrictive but not knowing could be quite freeing… That ‘what the hell’ feeling of just saying what you want to and how you want to. I have a burning question for you, based on my own experience of being me… I wanted to say that every now and then a little book on existential coaching, not a textbook as such, but a sort of ‘handbook’. And, of course, there’s the never-ending saga of the CBT book that Michael Worrell and I have been tearing our hair out over for several years. That one’s ‘on sabbatical’ for the moment, and maybe it will be an eternal moment, but it keeps nibbling away at my thoughts. But other than that, I can’t, at this moment, see much else up ahead. Which is not to say that I’ve grown bored or tired of all things therapeutic. Far from it. There’s a lot happening in the field that I’m excited by and interested in. For instance, there’s currently a major revolution going on within the BPS Division of Clinical Psychology (not usually the most revolutionary of groups, by the by) that is making a powerful case against the use of all psychiatric diagnostic labels by psychologists. In part, that’s somewhat dubious ‘syndromes’ that seem to want to pathologise the more expressive/intense forms of human experience, like mourning for example. But there also seems to be a commitment to the development of a more psychological way of addressing and working with severe states of unease and disorder. I have no idea what, if anything, will come out of it, but it’s interesting (to me, at least).

**Ernesto:** With regard to my intended writing projects, I’m well aware that in order to even attempt them I need to allow ‘other Ernestos’ to influence. I guess that that was what I meant by ‘writing for me’. It’s writing from an unfixed perspective, or at least a perspective that is nowhere near as well known and ‘owned’ as the perspective that I usually adopt. I’m not sure if I want to do this out of boredom, as you suggest. I’m not even sure that I am the primary agent in all this. If my life has been characterised by anything, it has been about my willingness to ‘fall in’ with the possibilities presented to me. I’ve never had a preconceived plan or direction for my life. I don’t know why that is, only that I’ve been well-served by not having such. I have been exceptionally lucky in my life and I am immensely grateful for that. I think that part of that ‘luck’ was in not having a preconceived plan and therefore being genuinely open to what came my way. I never ‘wanted’ to be a psychologist or a therapist or an existential therapist or a writer. These were not things I dreamed of. The one thing I wanted to be was to be a film director. But when I got close to the chance of fulfilling this, I backed away, chickenened out. I’ve never been all that sure as to why, but in a strange way, I think it mattered too much. I couldn’t have lived with the (all too likely) failure. Do I see it differently now? Yes. Now, I’d give it a try and not worry. But I think I can only say that because of all the years and experiences that came with ‘not having a fixed plan or direction’, of putting my faith into the possibilities that life threw my way. So, bored? No, not bored. More that sense of: ‘Hey! Here’s another possibility! Wanna give it a try?’.

**Diana:** Which sort of takes us back to the ‘relational’. Relating to ‘me’ in different ways also generates relating with others in different ways? And changes the ways others relate to you and to themselves and each other in different ways? But now for the bit that for me is so important and that colours the ‘in-between’… I am expressing myself to you and how I say what I say is connected to ‘my Ernesto’, the Ernesto I am co-creating and see before me… You are doing the same… You are talking to Diana and whatever image you have of me also in a particular way… We both know that the other is responding and listening, but more importantly I know that you will understand and get what I am trying to say. Now that is all important. Without that trust and rapport the whole thing would be a non-starter… It would be one-sided and not two people bringing themselves and their differences into play. There is also a collaborative feel to this… A give and take… Even as I
‘talk’ about myself I see you out of the corner of my eye and a feeling that we are side by side and not opposite each other.

**Ernesto:** The Scorsese article I mentioned earlier has something really wonderful to say about that. He writes about the key aspect of inference in cinema:

**There’s a very famous scene [in D W Griffith’s The Musketeers Of Pig Alley] in which the gangsters move along a wall, each one slowly approaching the camera and coming into dramatic close-up before they exit the frame. And in this scene they’re crossing quite a bit of space… but you’re not seeing them cross that space on the screen. You’re seeing it all in your mind’s eye, you’re inferring it…...[Y]ou take one shot, you put it together with another shot, and you experience a third image in your mind’s eye that doesn’t really exist in those other two images. This is what fascinates me… if you change the timing of the cut even slightly, by just a few frames, or even one frame, then that third image in your mind’s eye changes too.**

It seems to me that what Scorsese is talking about is really critical for all meetings/encounters/engagements/connections between people – including of course those that take place within a structure that we call ‘therapy’. This ‘third image’ that can alter so significantly as a result of the slightest alterations originating from the existing two and which is, as well, what makes the other two so much more than what they are on their own seems to me to be getting to the heart of the relational issue. I don’t think existential analyses focused on therapy have really begun to address this pivotal issue. Which, to me, seems so odd because if anything distinguishes existential therapy from other approaches it has surely got to be the centrality of ‘the between’ and what it points to regarding the foundational assumption of relatedness.

**Diana:** Scorsese’s ‘third image’ example is really exciting. This touches on the beauty and mystery and impossibility of truly capturing that in-between that belongs to both people in the relationship... It also reminds me of the fluidity and movement in all relationships... There is so much that can be ‘called up’ and brought to light from what might seem on the surface to be a short discussion, however, don’t we all know that phenomenon where you wake up the next morning and see what you thought you saw... It could be very different? Suddenly there are more sides to what seemed clear and simple. So much for those boxes you ticked at the end of your therapy! Which segues wonderfully to my next point! I do have one burning question and that is how you feel about the need for existential therapy to justify itself, particularly in the NHS, via research? You know me... and I admit, very easy for me not to go along with this trend of monitoring, measuring, arriving at clear conclusions about the client’s way of being in session one and then again in the last session. There is always very little about the actual relationship, which for me is the therapy... How we are together, who we are together... It can take off brilliantly or never quite get going. I think we all approach this thing called therapy very differently and respond to the context in completely different ways. I can’t help coming back to your uncertain uncertainty Ernesto... Where the hell has that gone? Ok, we all know it does not ‘go’ anywhere… It is everywhere like air, but there seems no room for doubt and the impression I get is the overwhelming lack of doubt in what is being wanted or claimed. I simply can’t hand on heart believe that the research outcomes enlighten me and my client relationships and make me a better therapist... So... You are really in the swim and know what goes on and that is why I would love to know what you think/feel about this pressure.

**Ernesto:** What do I think? I think that you and I, we came to therapy, and existential therapy in particular, at a point in time wherein the issues you raise didn’t matter all that much. Notions of what constitute knowledge, evidence, appropriateness – all these were all pretty vague ideas. Well... things have changed. Not necessarily for the better, or for the worse. Now, again, you and I, we can, at a personal level, pretty much keep going along as we have done and not get affected overmuch by these developments. But I think we owe it to what we espouse to ‘think more than just I’ as Lou Reed used to sing. Are we willing to meet the conditions placed before us? Not necessarily from a place of agreement, but from one that just acknowledges their existence. So, do I personally think that the sort of quantitative studies being demanded and promoted tell us much about why therapy in general is effective or why specifically existential therapy might be effective (and I’m aware that just invoking a term like ‘effective’ is already loaded with all manner of issues and questions)? Short answer: No, I don’t. Do I also, therefore, think that carrying out such analyses is a waste of time? Short answer: No, I don’t. There exists confusion between our attempts to understand and our attempts to verify. They are not the same enterprise and each has its own merits and significance. For me, the only substantial problem arises when statements of verification are confusingly presented as statements of understanding, or vice versa. I think that this is what might be bothering you, and perhaps many others. Verification can help us clarify whether something is effective or not, or the degree to which it may be effective. It may also provide us with some clues as to the ‘why’ of its effectiveness. In therapy as a whole, at present, we’ve got a lot of verification that therapy is effective. We also have next to no clues whatsoever as to why it is. This position, this understanding, is thanks largely to, of all models, that of CBT. All of us, as therapists, owe CBT a huge debt of gratitude for making this distinction so clear. Before CBT came along and did its verification-focused research, pretty much every model of therapy – including ours – claimed to know exactly why it worked. Thanks mainly to CBT’s willingness to put its own ‘why-based’ assumptions to the test, and, so far, consistently failing in providing any kind of supportive evidence for its assumptions, all models of therapy are confronted with the deep, perhaps irresolvable, uncertainty that underpins their enterprise. To which I say: ‘Yippee!’... My personal guess is that because of this impasse, the direction of CBT – as the prime mover in our profession at present – will shift from a verification-focused approach toward increasingly an understanding-focused approach. I think there are already signs of that. Is there anything inherently problematic about existential therapy seeking to verify that it is effective as a therapy? I don’t think so. The only danger that arises is the one I’ve mentioned above: that statements of verification can be used to suggest more than what they can provide. For all sorts of reasons, the assumption continues to be held that the more
we verify that either a specific form of therapy or therapy as a whole is effective, the more we will be able to state with ever increasing certainty why it is effective. As a phenomenologist, I wholeheartedly believe this assumption to be both false and worth pursuing insofar as it points us to our sedimented perspectives as well as to novel possibilities. As I see it, existential therapy can respond to the challenges that you raise either by remaining aloof or detached from them or by engaging with them. Both options have something of worth in them, just as both have an inherent danger. I guess that, to some extent, the choice one makes is dependent upon where one wishes to ‘locate’ existential therapy. Should it be where it has been historically – on the margins, or periphery, of therapy as whole – or should it take steps to take a more central role/recognition? Again, each view has its benefits and its dangers. Perhaps, ultimately, it is this latter question that infuses the debate you raise. Personally, I’ve always preferred the benefits of the peripheral. But I am also well aware that I have played some role in influencing the attempts to move it towards the central. Perhaps, we can live with the polarity tension? Perhaps, as with all else, we yearn for the benefits of both without having to pay the price of either?

**Diana:** My main point about therapists measuring progress, change and outcome is what that does to their client relationships. I can’t get my head around that… It seems to me that this would be a distraction for the therapist and certainly for the client. It would surely have a hell of a lot to do with the therapist’s agenda and needs. No? Okay, of course we all have agendas and needs, but this measuring and sorting is therapist led and the therapist’s idea… The therapist needs to find out about this and that and then makes the whole thing to look like it was all for the client’s own good. I tell you one thing, from my experience in life and in short term time-limited therapy incredibly rich and meaningful relationships can be formed very quickly if I don’t allow myself to be hijacked by the time limit. It is then a mutually inspiring relationship… Of course I am curious about what it was (if anything) that each client found of value. But I also know that that can change in time… So whatever answer our clients give us will shift and change in time. You say that the ‘only danger that arises is that statements of verification can be used to suggest more than what they can provide’. It is often the therapist’s view and conclusion that becomes fixed forever more, so I do see this happening and unfortunately often the way verification is used. I honestly could not say or pretend to know what works… But I do sort of know when there is a buzz and when we are both inspiring each other in the moment, when we are able to ‘get real’ with each other… That is precious, exciting and inspirational. I have sometimes felt caught in a double bind situation where I was accused of not engaging with these challenges in the therapy world we now find ourselves in because I refused to comply… When I suddenly can’t compromise any further because it stretches me too far from my values at that moment in my life. Once again age, time, death comes into this and that powerful ‘not in my name’ feeling becomes as clear as a bell.

**Ernesto:** I share a lot of your concern, Diana. But really, for me, I don’t see it as a compromise. It only becomes a compromise if we negate the polarity and insist either upon a false unity or a false separation. Over the years, I think my stance has become clearer to me. We can call it ‘relatedness’ or whatever, but it’s fundamentally about valuing and living with the openness of existence, even if it seems contradictory or paradoxical or just plain absurd. The philosopher I’ve been reading more than any other these days is Isaiah Berlin. I don’t think anyone could claim that he was an existential philosopher, but, my god!, a lot of what he has to say is so resonant with what we grapple with. Not least in his insistence that the greatest, most destructive, error we keep making in the West is that of assuming, seeking out and insisting upon coherence and completeness in our values and in our sense of our being as expressed socially, politically, economically – and, by implication, personally and inter-personally. It’s this desire for coherence that I think leads to placing so much value on certainties and securities and control. And, again, it’s not that any of those is necessarily ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’, rather only that great problems arise when we set up such concepts as though they exist independently, distinct and separate from their counterparts, rather than be viewed as a sort of inseparable relational continuum. But that is counter to the current Zeitgeist and any view that argues this, even within a lot of what passes for contemporary existential thinking, is not likely to fall into the mainstream.

**Diana:** I have never seen existential therapy as mainstream… If we remain true to our understanding of what it means to be human creatures wrapped in uncertainty and never quite grasping or being able to stand outside ourselves in order to see clearly we are by default placing ourselves on the peripheral in a world and society that craves certainty and clarity.

**Ernesto:** Like I said before, I think that those of us who hold on to such views can inhabit the peripheral with less unease than others. But, then again, ‘peripheral’ and ‘mainstream’ are also notions of relatedness. There’s this song I really love by Jackson Browne called ‘For A Dancer’. It’s kinda hokey, but it’s got a truly existential heart to it. At one point, he sings:

‘Keep a fire for the human race.
Let your prayers go drifting into space.
You never know what will be coming down.
Perhaps a better world is drawing near.
And just as easily it could all disappear
Along with whatever meaning you might have found.
Don’t let the uncertainty turn you around
(The world keeps turning around and around)
Go on and make a joyful sound.’

One thing about living on the peripheral… you get to make an awful lot of ‘joyful sound’.
THE SPARKLY SLIPPERS: EXPLORING THE ‘CHOSEN PAST’ IN EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

BY BETTY CANNON AND REED LINDBERG

It is important for existential psychotherapy to look at the past. While the first existential therapists were psychoanalysts who worked with the past, current existential-humanistic psychology is often very present-centered. Applied Existential Psychotherapy (AEP), the existential depth therapy that we have developed and taught over the past 30 years, is firmly grounded in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre – who considered exploration of the past to be an important dimension of his own version of ‘existential psychoanalysis’. AEP is also influenced by humanistic psychology and by classical and contemporary psychoanalysis. For clinical interventions, AEP often draws on Gestalt therapy, body oriented psychotherapy, and other experiential approaches. Working with the ‘chosen past’ (as opposed to the causal past) is a crucial dimension of Applied Existential Psychotherapy. We’d like to talk about this concept and then illustrate it with the transcript of a demonstration video: The Sparkly Slippers.

The Chosen Past and the Possibility of Re-Choosing

Existential therapy conceptualises the impact of the past differently than so-called ‘scientific’ approaches that see the past as causal. The past that we work with is not the ‘caused’ past of deterministic psychology. It is what we refer to in AEP as the ‘chosen past’ of existential philosophy. We attempt to uncover what Sartre calls our ‘fundamental project of being’ – our way of projecting ourselves out of the past toward the future. In this respect, the past must be explored as a kind of ‘past future-directedness’. The question one needs to ask oneself is this: What was I trying to do as I responded in this way or that? Recovering the past as meaningful, rather than as causal, frees up the present and the future: If I was free, I am free.

In exploring the development of our ‘fundamental project of being’, it is very important to consider the impact of our earliest relationships with significant others on our contemporary dilemmas. The project took shape in the distant past beneath their loving or under duress, but in working with our earliest relationships, we are not so much trying to assign blame as attempting to find release from the spell cast by those early ‘looks’.

Conceptualizing the past as ‘chosen’ rather than as ‘caused’ is not merely a matter of changing terminology. It leads to a different way of understanding the process of therapy and a different way of working with clients in therapy. According to Sartre, the past material that we wish to uncover in ‘existential psychoanalysis’ is neither causal nor unconscious. It is simply experienced at a gut level but ‘unknown’ in a reflective sense. Since ‘reflection’ is the process by which consciousness turns and attempts to grasp itself as an object, there is always at least a small gap between the consciousness reflecting and the consciousness reflected on. And because I cannot simultaneously see myself and be myself, it is possible for all kinds of errors to creep into the process of self-reflection. A special form of reflection will be required if we are to come to know the past in a way that frees the present and the future.

Although we cannot change the factual nature of what happened to us in the past, we can change our orientation toward the past and with it our way of moving forward in the direction of a different future. We also have narratives about our past – narratives that we may discover to be more or less accurate as we go through the process of therapy. Frequently we discover that they are less accurate if we plunge deeply enough. The ‘perfect family’, for example, may not look quite so perfect any more. Sartre refers to these narratives as the ‘thematised past’ (1943/1972, 200). The themed past has been worked over so that it becomes part of the ego or story we tell ourselves about ourselves. The past that truly impacts us, however, is the ‘non-thematised’ past that Sartre says provides the ‘background depth of all my thoughts and all my feelings’ (1943/1972, 201). This is the unarticulated past experience that impacts all my choices in the present as I throw myself forward out of that past toward the future.

Sartre describes three forms of reflection: pure, impure, and purifying. The form of reflection that he spends the most time on is ‘impure reflection’, which is a source of ‘bad faith’ or lying to ourselves about the nature of reality. Impure reflection lies at the heart of the creation of the ego, which is always a thematised story that we tell ourselves in order to get a solid sense of who or what we are. For this reason, Sartre says that the ‘essential task of the ego may be to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity’ (1937/1957, 100). The development of the ego often includes a view of the past as causal: I am afraid to speak up, for example, ‘because my father always shouted at me’. Hence I have become a ‘timid person’. Although it may be true that my father did shout at me and that I do feel timid, these conclusions are nonetheless in bad faith because I am not a solid something or someone. I am instead free, I am free.

The other two forms of reflection are important to understanding the process of change. ‘Pure reflection’ is the starting point for reflection since without the naive capacity to turn and make an
object of myself, there could be no reflection at all. Sartre says that pure reflection is simply basic presence to ourselves without the intention of objectifying ourselves. ‘Purifying reflection’ also does not try to objectify the self, but it goes a step further than simple presence. It explores the full project, including the bad faith tricks of impure reflection. It is only through purifying reflection that we can approach ourselves as free subjects – that we can apprehend the ‘nothingness’ (no thing-ness) that consciousness is. Hence it is from the perspective of ‘purifying reflection’ that we must examine the non-thematised past in existential depth therapy.

How then do we get at the non-thematised past (that is so deeply impacting our way of living our lives in the world) and uncover the self-deception in our previous ways of thematising the past? Psychoanalysts attempt to do this by working with the transference, the superimposition of the past on the present in the current relationship with the analyst. This is one effective way to do this work, and we do work with the client-therapist relationship directly in AEP as well.

Another particularly effective method (and we use this in AEP) is empty chair dialogues, a technique borrowed from Gestalt therapy. What we do is to identify a conflict in the present, whether it shows up in a dream (as in our demonstration session below) or in a person’s daily life. It can be a conflict with someone in the person’s interpersonal world, or it can be a conflict between ‘parts’ of the self over how to deal with some life event. Either way we start with the presenting dilemma, identify the conflict, set up the empty chair dialogue, and deepen to the underlying experience. At the end of the session we usually move back to the presenting dilemma to see if something has changed. Purifying reflection becomes possible because, in the role play, we get to the experiential immediacy of the past choices rather than merely narrating past events. As we replay them, we feel them vividly and emotionally and concretely as past choices in a difficult situation. It then becomes possible to make a new choice.

The Sparkly Slippers: A Dream Session

We would like to illustrate these ideas with a dream session, drawn from a transcript of demonstration videotape with a colleague. The video can be viewed on the Boulder Psychotherapy Institute website: www.boulderpsych.com/videolib.php. Feel free to view the video in conjunction with this discussion of The Sparkly Slippers.

Diane, the dreamer, is a therapist in private practice. About a year prior to this working, she suffered the death of her husband of 25 years. She has done quite a bit of personal work on family of origin issues prior to this session:

Diane: I’m in my lawyer’s office, and there’s some knocking on the door. And the door opens, and all these little children start running in. And he goes over and he plays with them, and his room turns into a castle. And there are these miniature elephants, that have very colorful little, I don’t know, saddles. His accountant is there, and she is trying to fit my feet into these really sparkly, beaded, beautiful almost princess-like slippers. There’s a little girl that runs over, and she’s trying to help too… It’s a joyful, it’s chaotic, but it, there’s a joyful, almost festival, carnival feeling to it. Then, I guess I’m home, all of a sudden I’m home. And there’s a black man, kind of shadowed. And, uh, I, I don’t know who he is.

Betty reads the dream ‘characters’ back to Diane. They include all of the people along with the inanimate objects in the dream. As Diane listens, she starts to feel inexplicably sad. Betty invites her to stay with the sadness. As she does so, she begins to realize that it is the image of the sparkly slippers that is making her sad. Betty asks if Diane would like to explore this, inviting her to switch chairs and speak as the slippers. As the slippers, she describes herself as ‘dazzling’ and ‘glittery’. She adds that she has ‘this beautiful kind of mesh’ and ‘these little itty bitty bitty pearls’. At this point Diane is thoroughly into the dream character. She says she feels ‘beautiful’.

Betty offers a sentence stem, based on the idea that every character in the dream is the dreamer: ‘I’m the part of you that…’. At this point, Diane starts to cry. She finishes the sentence, ‘I’m the part of you that . . . feels tarnished and broken’. As the work continues, it turns out that Diane feels that she is not allowed to ‘be visible’ or to ‘sparkle’. When she moves back to the dreamer’s chair, she feels a film come over her eyes. The film keeps her from recognizing the slippers, which represent her ‘joy’. Betty has her play the film, which says it is trying to protect her.

Soon the working deepens to an underlying issue with her mother. First Diane starts to feel angry with the film over her eyes: ‘I’m angry because you didn’t let me enjoy the slippers. It wasn’t ok’. Then she suddenly realizes who it is who doesn’t want her to enjoy the slippers. It is her mother, who felt she was too young (at 19) to have a child, especially an exuberant one. Diane decides she is going to claim her own right to enjoy the slippers. It is her mother, who felt she was too young. At this point Diane starts to feel fearful. A dialogue ensues with her ‘mother’, who gets more and more enraged that Diane has ‘sparkly slippers’ (joy) and she doesn’t have them:

Diane [playing Mom]: [Diane clears throat loudly as she sits] Well, maybe I should be a little bit more honest with you. It’s not OK for you to have those slippers.

Betty: How come?

Diane [playing Mom]: You don’t deserve them.

Betty: How come?

Diane [playing Mom]: Because I do. [Mom then starts to get fierce]. Because… After all, what have you done? You don’t deserve them. And so NO, it’s not OK. It’s not OK for you to have them.
Betty: Would it be OK for her to have anything?

Diane [playing Mom]: [‘Mom’ makes a disdainful shrugging motion with her shoulders] I don’t know.

Betty: What’s that look? [mimics shrugging motion]

Diane [playing Mom dripping with irony]: Well, I mean, I love her. That should be enough.

Betty [also with an ironic tone]: Do ya? Sounds like envy.

Diane [playing Mom and sounding disdainful]: Envy? What do I have to be envious of her for?

Betty: She’s got sparkly slippers. She’s got joy.

Diane [playing Mom speaking with great irritation accompanied by a look of disgust]: Aaaa, she’s just, noisy and... [making a pushing away motion with her hands]

Betty: Yes, yes, do that [mimics pushing away motion]. So you don’t like her when she’s sparkly. You look disgusted.

Diane [playing mom and speaking loudly and angrily]: She gives me a headache.

Betty: You're angry.

Diane [playing Mom]: Well... you know [continuing in a loud angry voice] I didn’t ask for her.

Betty [directing ‘Mom’ to talk to the little girl]: Tell her.

Diane [playing Mom speaking loudly and angrily]: I didn’t ask for you. I, I’m the one who should be taken care of, not you.

Betty: Hmm. Who’s the mother here?

Diane [playing Mom and speaking loudly]: And then you get all this stuff? [Turning toward Betty] I don’t want her. I’m too young to have a child. I’m the one who should be taken care of.

Betty [paraphrasing Mom]: All right. I’m too young to have a child. I don’t want to take care of you.

Diane [playing Mom and speaking loudly and angrily to the little girl]: I just don’t want to take care of you. I’m too young. I want to be taken care of. I want to be given things.

When Diane goes over to play herself, she starts to laugh with recognition. So this is why she finds it so hard to let herself feel joyful? She’s amazed that, after all the therapy she’s done, this is still such a potent subject. Betty notes that the difficulty seems to arise when Diane starts to feel ‘joyful and playful and safe’. Then she gets fearful and closes down. Diane turns back toward the ‘mother’ chair and continues the dialogue:

Diane [talking to Mom]: So, um, I’m not gonna, I’m not gonna give up my joy and I’m gonna feel safe and I’m gonna be happy, and...

Betty: Well, because you are safe in the present, of course, as contrasted with the past.

Diane: I am safe.

Betty: Um hmm. What are you experiencing right now?

Diane starts to talk about how she wants her mother to feel safe and to have sparkly slippers too. For a moment, she starts to feel sorry for her Mom. Then she recovers:

Diane [speaking to Mom]: But... if you don’t, I’m not giving you mine. [laughs]

Betty: All right. All right. So you [gesturing toward the empty chair that represents mother] need to have your own.

Diane: Yeah.

Betty: Your own sparkly slippers.

Diane: Yeah you need to have your own.

Betty: How does that feel?

Diane: That feels right [said with conviction].

The work with this part of the dream is now complete, and Diane says she is curious about the ‘black man’ who appears at the end. When she role-plays him, he says he is ‘death’, which, of course, links this character with Diane’s experience of losing her husband. The black man says, ‘I think you may have used me as an excuse not to put on your slippers’. He says his message is, ‘Death is a done deal. And you’re not dead yet. So be alive’. He says it won’t ward off death if she does not put the slippers on, noting, ‘You don’t have to be deadened or dead while you’re alive. You can be fully alive and face death’. The dream now feels complete.

Diane wants to put the slippers on, and she and Betty do a mime of her putting on imaginary slippers and walking about in them. She wiggles her legs in the air in anticipation. They end the session laughing together. Diane says she feels very tender toward Betty and very alive. Betty concludes by noting that now Diane can ‘have your joy and your sparkle and all the rest of it’. Now she can live her life.

Conclusion

This session demonstrates, we think, the aliveness and unexpectedness of exploring the ‘non-thematised’ past as it impinges on the present. Once the impact of her early relationship with her mother is explored and brought into the clear light of day, Diane is able to make a new choice to live more joyfully and openly and less fearfully in the present. She no longer automatically shuts down when she starts to feel joy.
THE SPARKLY SLIPPERS: EXPLORING THE ‘CHOSEN PAST’ IN EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

CONTINUED

References


Announcement: The workshop on Applied Existential Psychotherapy (AEP) with Betty Cannon scheduled for 26-27 September of this year in London has been postponed. But thank you to everyone who expressed an interest. We’ll keep everyone posted about rescheduling.

If you’d like us to notify you in person or if you’d like to hear about future offerings here and elsewhere (and perhaps online), please send us your email address at bpi@indra.com. Our website is www.boulderpysch.com. You can see videos about AEP and demonstration AEP sessions there.

Betty & Reed at the Boulder Psychotherapy Institute

BECOMING AN EXISTENTIAL THERAPIST

BY EMMY VAN DEURZEN

An abridged version of an essay written and read by Emmy van Deurzen on 15 November 2013 for BBC Radio 3 programme The Essay,

Being an existential psychotherapist means being a philosopher who applies philosophical ideas and methods to the concrete challenges and realities of everyday human existence. As Camus put it: ‘the only serious philosophical question is whether life is or is not worth living’. Many people doubt the value and meaning of life and this unbalances them and may throw them into distress or despair. Existential therapy seeks to clarify and illuminate a person’s life, in light of the big human questions, lifting them out of their darkness and confusion to a place from where they can see the whole picture and get a sense of perspective.

Existential psychotherapy’s roots reach deeply, all the way back to the ancients, especially to Socrates. Existential therapy was officially founded at the beginning of the last century with the philosophy of Jaspers, and the psychiatric practice of Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, and Viktor Frankl. Frankl’s logotherapy was inspired by his own life and work, firstly in suicide prevention and then interned in concentration camps, where he was sometimes able to work as a doctor. He noted that some people just gave up in these situations, and others kept a deep sense of life having meaning that got them through the madness and horror.

Jaspers gave up his psychiatry training to become a philosopher. Boss and Binswanger looked to philosophy for new ways of tackling mental and emotional problems. They took the paradoxes and conflicts of their patients seriously and sought to deal with them more effectively. In the UK in the sixties and seventies the movement of anti-psychiatry, spear headed by R.D. Laing, attempted something similar, creating therapeutic communities which provided alternative living spaces for people who were struggling with their emotional survival and who did not want to be consigned to mental hospitals or pumped full of medication.

I came to the UK in 1977 to work with this movement and lived and worked in one of these communities, immersing myself in people’s problems and experimenting with alternative ways of approaching mental illness.

Before I came to the UK to participate in this experiment, I trained and worked residentially in psychiatric hospitals in France for many years. My interest in psychoanalytic authors like Freud, Jung, Lacan, Deleuze and Irigaray did not satisfy my search for a philosophical way to practice. As I joined my psychiatrist husband in his work in various psychiatric settings, first with autistic children, then with young anorexic women, I was shocked. I found that many people as soon as they became patients lost their own voice and self-respect, almost giving up their agency and humanity as they became dependent on medical care and chemicals.

It became essential to seek out places where this was not the case and where we could relate to those with mental and emotional problems in a more humane way. We chose to work and live in a revolutionary psychiatric hospital in the Massif Central, in the small town of Saint Alban, Lozere, which was the birthplace of French social and community therapy. Here I was able to apply my philosophical knowledge to my work with individual patients and groups. Then I went back to University to qualify as a clinical...
psychologist, doing research on loneliness and attempted suicide. I wanted to develop a method to help people understand their shipwrecked lives better and realized that the time had come to bring philosophy and psychotherapy together by developing an existential approach.

My deep connection with existential ideas came from my early background in the Netherlands. I was born in The Hague, some years after the end of the Second World War. My parents had joined the Theosophical Society, an organization that looked at the great world religions to try and make sense of spirituality in a more pluralistic way. When my primary school teacher asked everyone in our class to state their religion, I really was not sure what to say and went home to ask my parents. My dad suggested I tell my teacher that I was a heathen. This scandalized my mother, who thought I should call myself an atheist or an agnostic. I found these terms troublesome and deeply wanting, for I did not want to be defined by what I was not. I decided that I would find out what the truth really was and this is how I found philosophy.

I already had deep and secret beliefs of my own and wanted to commit my entire soul to something that was true and good and worthwhile rather than stating I was an unbeliever or a doubter. I loved nature and freedom and fairness and kindness, the sunshine on the North Sea waves, the wind sweeping me along or challenging me on my bike through the dunes. And I loved going camping with my parents, for four weeks each summer, trekking through Europe with little tents, meeting people from different countries, learning languages, realizing how many different sorts of existence there were for each person to choose from. I learnt to be resourceful and unafraid of others’ opinions. I wanted to find out more about what was possible.

As a student in France, I read Flaubert and Proust and Rousseau and Verlaine and Valery and so many others who inspired me. I became immersed in phenomenology after reading Descartes and Hegel, moving on to Husserl, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and also discovering a new favourite in Spinoza. Reading Camus, Sartre, Anouilh and de Beauvoir was intoxicating. I was fortunate enough to study for my masters in philosophy with Michel Henry, an existential philosopher who was inspirational in the way in which he drew wisdom from controversy and who remained aloof from academic rivalries. He gave me the confidence to pursue my therapeutic practice as a form of applied philosophy.

The defining idea of existential therapy is that it is philosophy in practice. There is no defined picture of the human psyche and no essence of being. People create their lives out of what has been given to them and what they have managed to understand of life. Human life is a relatively brief experience, which starts with conception and ends in death, leaving each of us to make something meaningful out of what happens in between. The golden rule of phenomenology is to describe rather than to interpret and this allows us to approach the mystery of human consciousness in a careful and respectful manner, noticing that life is rather different according to our different cultures, situations and circumstances though we have some fundamental experiences in common and we are all capable of transcending our early givens to some extent.

To be free is to have choices, and to have choices means being anxious about making the right ones. Anxiety or Angst is a core experience of living. In existential philosophy anxiety is not assumed to be a symptom of mental illness or dismissed as a weakness. As long as we are alive, rather than dead, energy flows in us. Whenever we take responsibility or take a new direction, we put energy into our actions, and this creates turbulence inside us, which we can experience as anxiety. Anxiety is the price we pay for making conscious choices. It calls us to ourselves. It is the shadow side of freedom. ‘Learning to be anxious in the right way’, as Danish philosopher Kierkegaard put it, ‘is learning the ultimate’. The right way is to key up enough to come to life and not so tense that we become dysfunctional.

Anxiety is distinct and different from fear. Anxiety is a generalized feeling of Unheimlichkeit as Heidegger put it, a sense of not being at ease, not being at home in the world. Fear is something quite different: it has a concrete object and incites us to flee from this threatening and dangerous reality. If we flee from life and hide away in fear, we become disenfranchised and disconnected, unmotivated and despairing and may call that depression, when it is actually a form of decompression or suppression of our energy. Engagement and connection create meaning. Courage and action are therefore better remedies than avoidance, evasion or medication.

The application of these existential ideas to existential psychotherapy means that clients are not offered reassurance, but are encouraged to consider their anxiety as a valid starting point for the work that has to be done. They are helped to face facts and find the resilience to make changes for the better by affirming their freedom and capacity for choice, always in open fair-minded conversation and with a view to exploring the consequences of choices with a careful weighing up of rights and duties.

When I work with my clients I aim to help them to understand their lives better, to regain their balance, their perspective, their sense of direction and to find the meaning that they have lost or purloined, or perhaps never found in the first place. And hopefully they will discover to their delight that times of crisis are moments for reflection rather than moments where we should rush into panicky action. They learn to thrive on anxiety and find their true depth when despairing or upset. People who are engaged with something of value always surprise themselves. They find new energy and purpose to engage with life in a new and wholehearted way. A calm and kind, quiet but searching dialogue is all it takes.

I have done this job for over forty years and continue to be amazed at people’s resilience and intelligence in overcoming their problems once they put their mind to it. Since it is Camus’ 100th birthday I shall end on a couple of quotes by him, for they sum up what clients discover, as they face their fate and learn to love their life. Camus says it so elegantly:

‘In the depth of winter, I finally learnt that there was in me an invincible summer’
and:
‘Happiness is nothing except the simple harmony between human beings and the life they lead.’

To listen to Emmy reading this essay, go to:  http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03hjw9f
A full version of the talk also appears in Existential Analysis 25.1, the Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis.
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The Unexamined Lifestyle, The Yellow Caterpillar, This Isn’t About My Daughter, The Prognosticator, The Wizard. These are the titles of unfinished stories and essays I’ve started in the past month. You can’t easily tell what these pieces are about from their titles, but hopefully once you read them, aha!

But no one will read them, so no aha. Unless you write your own story with one of those titles. I would love to be the one to say aha. Do it. I’m lonely and I want our thoughts to touch. I mean this.

There’s no lack of ideas, on my part, just a lack of faith. What is too personal quickly becomes confessional, trivial, ridiculous, and unworthy. But what is impersonal is even worse than unworthy, it’s worthless.

What is in the narrator’s heart, really? Although she allows us a glimpse into her deepest spiritual self when she first hears Azan and in the final sentences, her true intentions and beliefs are hidden from us for most of the piece. The narrator, as the piece stands now, is more or less impenetrable and non-forthcoming about her feelings ‘til the end.

These thoughts were shared with me by a sincere and painstaking editor regarding a piece of mine that is being considered for publication in an international journal that I love to read.

That’s not to say she needs to take us on an emotional roller-coaster about her marriage, etc. Rather I think if we can see more of her insights and genuine ambivalence and spiritual longing and questioning throughout – culminating in that wonderful moment when the penny drops, so to speak…it will be a richer, more interesting piece.

Lately, I’ve wanted to make something with writing that is simultaneously true and optimistic, rather than habitual self-justifications, the relentless coming-back-to-where-we-start wisdom, like a cat who chases its own tail. But I’ve been afraid of getting stuck in a new attitude – the more hopeful, optimistic one – because it may well become false as soon as I try it on. There are no guarantees, right?

The piece that needs changing is about the physical experience of spiritual longing (literally azan, the call to prayer) and at the same time it’s about the nagging doubt, because spiritual fulfillment is always elusive. I wrote the piece a couple of years ago, but I continue to be faithful to that cycle of epiphany and disappointment. Even though I long ago recognized there is no room for growth or fulfillment in that closed circle.

I’m reading Krishnamurti for the first time. He’s highly quotable and I see in his point of view a brilliant justification for my natural tendency to doubt and hesitate.

The very desire to be certain, to be secure, is the beginning of bondage. It’s only when the mind is not caught in the net of certainty, and is not seeking certainty, that it is in a state of discovery.

Observation without evaluation is the highest form of intelligence.

And my fave, ‘Freedom from the desire for an answer is essential to the understanding of a problem.’

The journal, however, having no room for my lingering doubts, offers a more forceful prodding to awaken my own need for clarity. It seems simple, so why does it feel so hard?

We must continue to make choices, especially where there is doubt, because uncertainty is everywhere, or we risk paralysis. We can’t know in advance whether we have made the right choices, only that we must act. If we don’t act – when we procrastinate or pass because we are afraid of being wrong, and call this kind of stagnation The Wisdom of Uncertainty – are we depriving ourselves of the chance to grow? There will always be doubt, if we’re honest and intellectually open-minded, but doubt can be as tight a bondage as certainty.

What if the journey and not the arrival is what matters, if longing – rather than doubt, fulfillment, or certainty – is the point? What if even the thirst for intimacy through writing, which is a transmutation of what is private to what is shared, expresses this deep longing?

There is an idea in Sufism that spiritual longing can be regarded as an end in itself. We can look at this longing as a spiritual state of consciousness that is to be observed, honored and nurtured, not escaped or cured. In other words, the pain of unfulfilled longing isn’t the same as doubting the existence of the divine – which means I no longer have to characterize myself as a doubter. For some of us, living authentically means ceasing to resist our yearning for something we can never apprehend, that nevertheless exists here and now, but always beyond our comprehension.

The penny dropping is not the divine union that the narrator had hoped for. The penny dropping is a free fall: the unreasonable, fully conscious surrender to the anguish of divine longing. Am I a Sufi if I don’t pray, but I accept that the way I know the divine is by my unfulfilled longing for it? This is how I understand the Sufi poet Rumi’s words,

‘Don’t look for water, be thirsty.’

The cat still seems to be chasing its tail, but maybe it doesn’t always have to be an absurd image of futility. The Ouroboros, the serpent who swallows its tail, is an ancient Greco-Roman symbol representing the cycle of infinite return and renewal. The Chrysopoeia Ouroboros of Cleopatra the Alchemist, an image from second-century Alexandria, even contains the unapologetic Sufi words one is the all.

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Love is the experience of connection. Fear is the experience of disconnection. In love we fearlessly and truthfully are one-with the other. Yet in fear we anticipate abandonment and loss, grieving those we have yet to loose. We spin out into the future, making groundless predictions, based on past experience, meanwhile ignoring being present and connected with the world as it is.

Fear makes us question everything, paralysing us. Imagine this internal dialogue: ‘Should I stay with my husband? If I stay we will both be miserable and so will the kids. I must leave him. But if I leave him I’ll be lonely and miserable and have no money and the kids won’t have a father’. What ever this wife does, fear has told her she is doomed. Fear gets in the way of the truth.

Fear is so unpleasant that we search for escape. Our chosen method of escape may be addictions, television, intellect, religion, or our bodies. Alternatively we are ‘good’ as a protection against what we fear: ‘I am good, so bad things won’t happen. But if they do, at least I won’t be to blame’. These escapes are meant to mute the fear.

Conversely love is the experience of being in the world as it truly is without escape plans, or false notions of control. In love we experience the wisdom of no escape (Chodron, 2004). After all, ‘we live in the world when we love it’ (Tagore, 2002) and live outside the world when we fear it.

Love, as it is referred to in this article, is the love that Martin Buber (1960) called ‘I-thou’. In this hyphenated state we are ‘one-with’ (Trungpa, 2007). The hyphens are integral, they are the connection. Yet ‘being-in-the-world-with-others’ (Heidegger, 1968) creates existential anxiety. City dwellers daily come into contact with more people than our distant ancestors did in a whole lifetime. Thus our immersion in the world with others explodes the treasured dream of our own specialness. So we narrow our focus, or cling to the familiar like drowning men to flotsam, or we endeavour to make ourselves more special than anybody else.

Conversely many of us do experience moments where we lift the veil on this struggle and simply experience deep contentment, connection and love in the here and now – ‘I-thou’. Have you sat on a quiet beach, or a busy train and felt deep and transcendent connection? Or maybe you have felt this love in a partner’s arms or a friend’s company? Rather than being special or worthless you were one-with.

Yet, for most of us, these moments are fleeting. Many of us live in fear, trying to live just above it, out of its reach. We split from this frightened aspect of ourselves and the vulnerable aspect of our self that the fear claims to protect, thus becoming internally and externally divided. That is, we are too scared to connect to ourselves and others. To admit our fear is to allow the possibility of touching that vulnerable, painful, shamed part of ourselves. So we live superficial lives, conning ourselves and others that we are living authentic lives.

We give conditional love to others in the hope that they can love us enough so that we can love ourselves. Yet truly loving ourselves means facing ourselves without fear. Instead we shield ourselves from deep connection as a vaccination against possible exposure, loss and failure. But it is like the fairy tale of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’. The fear is an illusory protection that does nothing to hide our vulnerability.

With existential insight we begin to recognise fear and its impact on our choices and relationships. We start to recognise and own the truth beyond the fear and recognise our inability to control almost anything! It is in this ‘letting go’ that we finally move closer to love.

Imagine the husband from earlier is a committed smoker. They both know the risks and both imagine his final illness and death. Do they let this issue split them up and bring an end to their relationship precipitously, or do they ‘let go’ and be with each other in love? The choice is a controlled ending now, or accepting an end wrought who knows when, by some unseen and as yet unknown death? Both choices will result in suffering but one offers love too. Fear would have us believe that divorce is a protection against loosing them. The fear also makes the marriage intolerable they should decide stay in it.

Fear and love are the theme of Larkin’s poem, ‘An Arundel Tomb’. It describes the tomb of a medieval couple lying in the repose of death, romantically holding hands. The poem ends thus:

‘Our almost instinct almost true,  
That what remains of us is love.’

Larkin points to our longing for eternal love, that death makes a mockery of. We might obtain love in our lifetime, if we are lucky, but that dies with the last breath of the last remaining person who loved us.

We know change and death are inevitable, yet often we seek to preserve moments in aspic, or petrify them in stone – like the tomb of the dead couple lying forever in Larkin’s poem. Petrifying a life, or a moment, in stone does not mean love remains. Life is a procession of ends and beginnings. Being ‘petrified’ is fear of change and a kind of death. The Arundel tomb, according to Larkin, is a monument to our wish for eternal love in the face of death and ceaseless change. Petrification, then, is our response to this existential anxiety (Laing, 1960).

Buddhists claim it is the human desire for things to remain unchanged that is the root of our suffering – in other words petrification. Imagine our couple again. It is the wife’s desire that her husband not die that is resulting in her ambivalence. Should she stay or go? When he was young his smoking was fine as death was a distant concept. But she has had an existential awakening she stay or go? When he was young his smoking was fine as death and ceaseless change. Petrification, then, is our response to this existential anxiety (Laing, 1960).

Equally we can imagine a husband who, when he finds out who his wife really is, stays in the marriage pretending they are still the person he thought they were when they first met. However it is only when he is able to let his wife be who she truly is, that he really loves her.
A MEDITATION ON LOVE AND FEAR
CONTINUED

Love, Buber’s love, helps us let go. This is not an abdication of responsibility or care, but a deep capacity to allow the other to be as they are. We can offer help, guidance or an opinion but we have to admit that we have no control. No more ‘I love you, but...’. Nietzsche (1974) warned us to be wary of the void lest it look back, but if we are to live and love in the world we need to drop into the void and stop being petrified. ‘The condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak and understand that truth is a way of life rather than a set of propositions in the world’ (West). You and I have propositions and rules that are starving the truth of oxygen.

Time to love and go out in the world with courage. The truth is suffering will come and go, ebb and flow but it’s time to free ourselves from the illusion of control. Fear has never prevented the suffering, never brought more love and happiness – ever. Let go of the fear. This is not an argument for a resigned acceptance of a crap life. On the contrary, letting go of fear, will let us inhabit a truthful space where our life can be genuinely and truthfully lived and loved.

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References

PLACEBO

BY CHARLOTTE HECKSCHER

We woke up this morning to deep snow and a muffling, white hush. School cancelled, work cancelled, for a few minutes the day itself seemed to be called off. But quickly all the neighbors are busy. Mr Tiepolo pushes his second-hand snow blower up and down both sides of Walton Street. I open the front door and call out to him, Thank you’, but he’s tunneling. Bundled in his parka and knitted hat, scarf, gloves, deaf to everything but the sound of his blower, he carves an immaculate path. Diamond-sharp walls of snow appear almost to assemble themselves, luminous white planes at right angles. Other neighbors dig their cars out with shovels. Even little Teddy, who is five, works at his front steps with a miniature yellow shovel. Even little Teddy, who is five, works at his front steps with a miniature yellow shovel.

Of course I’m cheered by all this industrious work, this business of getting-on-with-life.

But, then again, what’s the rush? I feel guilty – no, not because I don’t help clear the snow away, but because I wish to Christ these god damned idiots would just leave it the fuck alone.

The scraping shovels, the ice scrapers squeaking against windshields, the sound from the snow blower that is so like a military drum roll: just shut the fuck up.

Still, I hear it under the ugly, percussive layers of human noise: the wind on the snow sounds like the ocean breaking. More resonant than all human sounds, this continual hush is gentle and deadly. Heavy snow on the branches scatters like confetti blown by a phantom. The rushing sound inside a bell with no clapper, a seashell, the invisible tearing of the sky.

James Joyce said it better, naturally, in the last paragraph of The Dead, after the boring party and all the good manners and bad manners.

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, further westwards, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too upon every part of the lonely churchyard where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

Sometimes it’s alright to want to lie under the snow instead of pretending. Maybe it’s not always so valiant to dig roads and carry on. Sometimes isn’t it just as admirable to let the snow fall and settle, as we know it always has, and does, and will? Arent the well-meaning shovelers and snowblowers and little Teddy with his toy shovel all playacting?

I think it should be okay, for a little while, to welcome the snow each in our own way. My daughter has gone out sledding with her friends – she will revel in it; my son sleeps like a bear, glad for the excuse. I hear the wind on the water at Lambert’s Cove – not when I was there as a child, but right now.
A few days after my mother died, I became numb, and I’m tired of apologizing for it, but I keep apologizing. Before she died, I bleated the strangest sobs, beyond my control, like a seizure of hiccups. Around the time I stopped apologizing for my grief, it closed up on itself.

A few days ago, a neighbor came to my door to give her condolences and kept prolonging the conversation. I think she was waiting for me to break, wanting me to cry for her.

I said, ‘Thank you so much for your concern. I’m sorry, I’m quite numb at the moment’. The way her head tilted to one side in a pantomime of questioning, with one ear cocked, I found myself wondering what kind of ears she would have if she were a dog. Short spaniel ears, I decided, with wavy brown fur, cocked back to reveal the tender, pink underside and the warm, empty orifice.

Yes, I love my numbness. I protect it. If my neighbor tries to dig me out, I will cover myself back up with snow. It seems like a normal self-protective mechanism, not to be tampered with. When I was in a car accident many years ago, I remember waking up the following morning to a nauseating headache, unable to turn my head in either direction. I recall the slow-motion impact of my head against the side window, pillowed, light, and inevitable, in equal measure.

I recall my mother in pain and I bounce off.

I see my mother waking up from anesthesia, smiling suddenly as her eyes focus on mine. She calls me Beautiful, and I bounce off.

Boris and Zelda, her meowing Siamese cats, who were always with her, lead me into my mother’s bedroom, and I bounce away.

All the times I didn’t kiss my mother, bounce.

For now, I prefer to think of it as my superpower. With the blink of an eye or the wave of my hand, I banish pain and comprehension. It’s only a matter of time, after all.

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POEM

RESILIENCE

BY ALI ROSS

I’m speaking.
Thoughts ask but I’m busy now.
Rough, grey crete.
It’s enough.

Images, words question quietly so I turn them down.
I breathe, my head weighs and I breathe.
I’m me.
Me this whole time.

It will last because it won’t.
Not love, not acceptance:
It’s this and it’s ours.
It will last because it’s not so it is.

I can’t share it with you so I am.

MATURATION IN ANXIETY

BY MEHRSHAD ARSHADI

Your voice is like falling rain behind the prison bars.
Your voice is like the melody of hailstones in the springtime.

Your voice is the rhythm of breaking down, when the love is gone.

Your voice is the maturation of a soul in an anxious time.

Your voice is the resonance of my heartbeats, when you hold me in your kind arms.
AUTHENTICITY AND BAZZANO

BY JOHN ROWAN

Manu Bazzano (HC October) writes in praise of inauthenticity. I do not find him persuasive, although he does clear some of the undergrowth impeding a clear vision of authenticity. It is interesting that he never mentions the late Jim Bugental, one of the best writers on authenticity and a former member of the editorial board of Existential Analysis.

One of the errors he makes is easily corrected. The idea that authenticity implies transparency is found nowhere in Bugental, nor in any of the other authors I respect, such as Jenny Wade, Ken Wilber, or Jean-Paul Sartre. The whole point about authenticity is that it renounces any identification with a single position, whether it be transparency, honesty, openness or Marmite. It is committed to reality in the moment. Consider this quote:

As authentic beings, we recognise our individuality. Further, we recognise that this individuality is not a static quality but is, rather, a set of (possibly infinite) potentialities. As such, while in the authentic mode, we maintain an independence of thought and action, and subsequently feel ‘in charge’ of the way our life is experienced. Rather than reacting as victims to the vicissitudes of being, we, as authentic beings, acknowledge our role in determining our actions, thought and beliefs, and thereby experience a stronger and fuller sense of integration, acceptance, ‘openness’ and ‘aliveness’ to the potentialities of being-in-the-world.

(Quoted from: Bugental, 1981: p.109)

Authenticity is a difficult concept. Just because it is not a Mental Ego concept, most people have only the vaguest idea as to what it could mean. They are not satisfied with the simple statement – It is seeing through your own eyes, instead of through the eyes of others. Bugental says: ‘It is my feeling that congruence is a part of existential authenticity, that the person who is genuinely authentic in his being-in-the-world is congruent within himself; and to the extent that one attains authentic being in his life, to that extent he is congruent’ (Bugental, 1981: p 108). Or again, he says: ‘An authentic acceptance of responsibility takes the form of commitment. The contrasting, avoidant response is blaming’ (Bugental, 1981: p 246). A more recent writer is Jenny Wade, who says: ‘Authentic consciousness differs dramatically from earlier stages because it is free from commonly recognised forms of ego-distorted cognitive and affective perception. Traditional theorists view this stage as markedly free of the ego defenses seen prior to this level, so that persons at this level are able to experience and express themselves fully’ (Wade, 1996: p 160). This is closest to the self as described in existential psychotherapy, as described by Friedenberg (1973):

the purpose of therapeutic intervention is to support and re-establish a sense of self and personal authenticity. Not mastery of the objective environment; not effective functioning within social institutions; not freedom from the suffering caused by anxiety – though any or all of these may be concomitant outcomes of successful therapy – but personal awareness, depth of real feeling, and, above all, the conviction that one can use one’s full powers, that one has the courage to be and use all one’s essence in the praxis of being.

(p.94)

In the light of all this, what are we to make of Bazzano’s statement that ‘an idealized (or, equally, a quasi-metaphysical) notion of authenticity does not do justice to the multiplicity, complexity and sheer eccentricity of the human position’? The key phrase here is ‘the human position’, as if there were but one. In fact, this assumption runs all the way through the article, and is frequently found in other existential writing. There is no concept here of levels of consciousness. But if we adopt a more sophisticated view, as I have argued elsewhere (Rowan 2001), there are in fact several different levels of consciousness, which Wilber (2000) has labelled as Magic-Mythic, Mental Ego, Centaur, Subtle, Causal and Non-dual. The Mental Ego level is the most common in Western civilization, and is generally inauthentic. The Centaur level is authentic by definition. At the higher levels the concept drops out as irrelevant. According to this reckoning, the Centaur level (the usual level for existential and humanistic persons) is actually a mystical position, very often characterised by an experience of breakthrough, where there is a sudden opening-up of the realisation that we are responsible for everything in our own lives. This is well described by Rollo May (1983).

The research of Jenny Wade (1996) shows very clearly how this development normally takes place, and offers good descriptions of each level. One of the most interesting developments in psychotherapy in recent years has been the rise of the relatedness movement, based on the discovery of the concept of intersubjectivity. And actually it is people at the existential end of the humanistic therapy continuum, such as Hans Trub, Richard Hycner, Philip Lichtenberg, Kirk Schneider and others who have been the most eloquent of all the proponents of this more recent position. They are all people who I would say have picked up the ball of authenticity and run with it, showing that authenticity and relatedness or intersubjectivity go naturally hand in hand.

I therefore reject the desirability of inauthenticity, and feel that Manu Bazzano has backed quite the wrong horse here. I certainly regard myself as authentic, when I am attending to the world from a Centaur position, and would resent any suggestion that this were impossible or undesirable. For a therapist, it is in my view an important position to adopt in the majority of cases, with any client.

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References


‘SEXUALITY AND GENDER FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS – A PRACTICAL GUIDE’ BY CHRISTINA RICHARDS AND MEG BARKER

BY ROSEMARY LODGE

I had been eagerly awaiting the publication of this book. Apart from the Pink Therapy series of books there has been very little published in relation to working psychotherapeutically with sexuality and gender. Many training courses are sadly lacking in gender and sexual diversity training meaning that some practitioners, unless they go on to do further training, are ill-equipped to deal with a whole range of client groups and presenting issues. This book goes some way to filling that gap as it is crammed full of facts and information about the field, all delivered in a knowledgeable and authoritative voice.

The introductory chapter sets the scene by explaining in a clear, matter of fact way issues around terminology and language, for example outlining the difference between practices and identities. This is done clearly and succinctly – for example the point is made that one can like making toast without necessarily also identifying as a ‘toaster’. Since this is a point which is often missed by practitioners not familiar with the field (for example assuming that a man who has sex with men must – or even worse, should – identify as gay) it is pleasing to see the point made so memorably right at the start of the book. Indeed, this is just one example of how the book is both packed to bursting with useful information and at the same time encourages a phenomenological, enquiring stance from its readers.

The introductory chapter also gives good advice on terminology a practitioner might wish to avoid (words that are described as ‘unsafe’) unless the client uses them about themselves and terminology that can be considered ‘safe’ to use. For example, the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are considered safe whereas ‘homosexual’ is considered unsafe unless the client specifically refers to themselves in that way. Although this might feel prescriptive, it is probably helpful for practitioners to have an understanding of, and be educated about, the different meanings and connotations that are attached to particular words and the ‘norms’ of language within different communities. This advice is supplemented by a wonderfully long glossary at the end of the book covering many words and phrases relating to sexuality, gender and relationships.

After the introductory chapter, the book is then pragmatically broken down into three broad sections – gender practices and identities, sexuality practices and identities, and relationship structures. Each section is broken down into chapters covering different identities and practices such as transgender, intersex, further genders (hurray for stepping outside the gender binary), BDSM, asexuality, cross dressing, and non-monogamy. It is unlikely that you would come across a client who did not fit, at least partially, into one of the sections in some way. What I really like about this book is the way that it covers a very full range of sexualities and gender expressions without prioritising or pathologising any of them. So for example, there are chapters on heterosexuality, cisgender (people who are happy with the gender assigned to them at birth) and monogamy. This may sound like a small point – but it is actually very unusual to see this done and represents a huge sea-change in attitude. Traditionally, books covering gender and sexuality have left out heterosexuality and cisgender: such an omission contains within it the hidden assumption that these gender and sexualities are somehow uncomplicated and not particularly requiring of any special consideration. By including them, the point is powerfully made that being heterosexual and/or cisgender are just two ways of being in the world among many others – and that these ways of being contain as many issues and problems as any other. The hidden assumption is made transparent.

The authors also refreshingly advise practitioners to be genuinely matter of fact about any aspect of the client’s gender or sexuality rather than being ‘tolerant’ or ‘accepting’ – terms which place the practitioner in a position of power (and also, incidentally, terms which would not be in keeping with a phenomenological attitude of curiosity and enquir). They also make the obvious but often neglected point that terminology need only be used when pertinent: a trans person is simply a person when dealing with non-trans related issues. Similarly, when working with any particular client group the work may not necessarily relate to issues around gender, sexuality or relationship structure – a ‘lesbian’ client may be there to talk about career issues in which case sexuality might be irrelevant in the same way that it might be for a heterosexual woman.

Each chapter follows a similar format, starting with a list of chapter aims, an introduction, common concerns of the particular client group, key practices of the client group, wider society, group norms, summary and conclusions, and further reading. The chapters therefore cover a wide range of issues relating to the client group, and also helpfully deal with clinical and practical issues that might arise for practitioners who inhabit one or more of the communities described in the book. For example, issues of disclosure, boundaries, dual relationships and traps to avoid are all covered. The conclusion to each chapter helpfully summarises and gives some ‘good practice’ points.

At times, this format becomes a tiny bit repetitive if one is reading the book all the way through from cover to cover. However, I don’t think this is the way the book is meant to be used. The structured approach is probably necessary to order such a huge amount of material into a manageable and accessible format, and
so is more in keeping with the style of a reference book, which is what I think this book is best seen as. It is the kind of book that one can keep on the shelf and return to again and again as and when necessary, rather than read through once and then put away.

Just as one would expect of a reference book, each chapter is packed with useful facts and information. For example, in the chapter on Transgender we learn that The Gender Recognition Act 2004 states that if a professional finds out in the course of their work that someone is trans it is a criminal offence to disclose that information. This is exactly the kind of useful information I would hope to be informed about in a practical guide. In this respect the book is an invaluable, must-have resource for any practitioner. I suppose if I had one minor complaint, it is that the book does not then go on to discuss the implications of this for practice. For example, is it ok to tell my supervisor that my client is trans – or do I need specific consent from my client to do so? It would be really helpful to have some practical examples to help the reader think through different scenarios. The book does contain some welcome ‘pause for consideration’ boxes, raising different issues and questions for the reader to consider, and it would have been nice to see a bit more of this, with a few more pointers.

Similarly, (and it seems churlish to criticise such an excellent book) it would have been really helpful to have some case illustrations and examples to bring some of the material to life. The matter of fact, informative and altogether wonderful voice that this book is written in, would have been complemented well by some vivid descriptions and emotional content – the authors must have a rich store of experience in the field and it would have been lovely to hear more about their own personal experiences by way of fictional or disguised case histories, and possibly some service-user perspective as well.

However, this is really a very minor criticism of a fantastic, much needed book. It achieves so much in terms of informing and educating, changing attitudes, challenging assumptions, and encouraging an enquiring attitude. In terms of what it sets out to do – to provide quick, accessible information for the busy professional covering both clinical issues and community knowledge – it certainly delivers. In addition to recommending this book to all practitioners, I would also like to see every training course have this on their required reading list, and for trainers to have read it from cover to cover before delivering any sexuality and gender diversity training.

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The best thing about the conference for me as an outsider was becoming aware of the questioner, of one particular questioner. It was a relief to be understanding so much of what was given in the papers, so much plain English and so little jargon. Over the course of the day, when the time came round for questions and comments, one member had reached so deeply into the subject matter of the paper, and came out with such good questions, that I was amazed. It was as if the whole point of the paper was to get this question asked at the end. (The best questions are better than the best answers, I contend, and it seemed a pity that the paper givers felt they had to answer immediately.)

Philosophy has for a long time seemed to me to be about elaborating answers into systems and then the systems falling short, making way for the next generation of philosophers. Here I felt myself in the presence of someone doing coal-face philosophy, of getting to the right question. Unfortunately, perhaps, I did not catch his name.

I am still left wondering whether the great love project is not a distraction from our existential isolation, but perhaps this was covered in a session I had to miss. Also whether, when fear can be discovered as the opposite of love, can it also be considered as an Elaborative Choice?

Equally a question can seem innocent enough. When the king asks his daughters how much they love him, this presupposes that love can be a quantity -measurable in metaphors - rather than a quality (how well do you love?) and that there is an answer expressible in words, the ineffable rendered effable. Can we learn by dismantling the question?

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NEWS FROM THE NEW SCHOOL

Existential Perspectives on Relationship Therapy, a new book edited by Emmy van Deurzen and Susan Iacovou was released on the 7th of December at a well-attended launch function at NSPC. The book had already been for sale at the SEA 25th anniversary conference a few weeks earlier, but this was the official launch, where Emmy van Deurzen spoke about the book, though Susan Iacovou was unable to join the festivities. Contributors Martin Adams, Naomi Stadlen, Jacky Lewis, Donna Christina Savery, Jyoti Nanda and Digby Tantam presented the insights and challenges that led to them writing their chapters. The book has already proven popular with readers and we have anecdotal evidence that it has helped staff and students reappraise aspects of their own marriages and relationships.

This was the last public event to take place in the NSPC’s teaching space in the Decca building, where NSPC had been based for the past 3 years and the irony that we were trading in the Decca Building for a younger and more attractive model soon after this event was not lost on some.

Indeed the New School is preparing to move to newly built premises in Fortune Green, West Hampstead. This will present a considerable upgrade in premises and will secure NSPC for the next 15 years. Though our offices will remain in Belsize Road until the summer, we hope that the move will take place in September. Watch this space for further information.

The new location will be an opportunity for NSPC to establish itself within the local West Hampstead community, an area that will be going through a considerable amount of development over the next few years. The area has a rich history of Psychotherapy, which makes for a highly appropriate location. In the interim we have organized temporary teaching spaces at the Swiss Cottage Central Library for the next two terms. The library also allows our students access to its special Philosophy and Psychology collection, which they can consult without having to register with the Library as member.

These are very exciting developments that we shall report on further in the next newsletter.

With all these arrangements taking much extra energy and time to organize, Emmy and Digby artfully took a well-deserved break and substituted the miserable Christmas weather for the balmy climes of South East Asia. Digby gave a talk on the implications of changes to the classifications on the Autism Spectrum in the DSM V to a packed audience at the Singapore Science Centre. The Multimedia University in Melaka interviewed Emmy in Kuala Lumpur, for a project on existential therapy on line. Back in the UK, barely a week has gone by without her being ushered into a studio or into an interview. Elsewhere you can read the text to her contribution to the Radio 3 series The Essay: The Existential Me where she puts her case for the relevance of existentialism and phenomenology to everyday living and therapy. The series, that also included the novelist and computer game writer Naomi Alderman and theatre director Paul Hart, was well received. This reflects the growing appetite for sober discussion of challenging ideas in the mainstream media, which are so often concerned and preoccupied with serving us novelty and excitement. Emmy shall also be collaborating with the London Psychology Collective to create a film about her life and work in the Spring. She has been asked to provide five teaching videos to the Latin American project of online teaching on existential therapy. If this continues NSPC will soon have to hire a film producer.

In Spring Emmy and Digby will be travelling to the north of Denmark for several lectures on existential therapy for The Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Århus and for the Danish Psychological Society.

Don’t miss Digby’s lecture on ‘What we can learn from people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder’ for the Society of Psychotherapy on 18 February. www.societyofpsychotherapy.org.uk

We have a free copy of Existential Perspectives on Relationship Therapy, edited by Emmy van Deurzen and Susan Iacovou, to give away to anyone willing to review the book for a future issue of the Hermeneutic Circular. Reviews should be approximately 1,000-1,500 words and will need to be submitted by the end of April 2014 for publication in the May edition of the Circular.

Contact the editor if interested.

SOCIETY OF PSYCHOTHERAPY PROGRAMME 2014

The 2014 Programme of talks at the Society of Psychotherapy, a meeting place for friends of psychotherapy. All events take place at 254 Belsize Road, London NW6 4BT from 7.00 to 8.30pm, and thereafter in the Priory Tavern. Further details at societyofpsychotherapy.org.uk

18 February: Digby Tantam
Coaching People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

18th March: Naomi Stadlen
Alone Together: Intimacy and its Difficulties

15th April: John Bennett:
Modern Maenads: Women’s Ritual Alcoholic Binges

20th May: Joel Vos:
Title TBC
WHAT I OFFER AS AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST?

Two years ago, we published some statements written by the then finishing students on the Advanced Diploma in Existential Psychotherapy.

Here is the latest offering from students finishing 2013. Just to be clear, they are published as work in progress, nothing definitive. We would be so pleased if they provoked a response, a dialogue, a process. Perhaps something might come to light or unfold.

Jonathan Hall
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ADEP Course Leader, Regents University, London.

I offer a relationship based on phenomenology. When I think of phenomenology the following words come into my mind – awareness, openness, clarity and letting go. If I am able to cultivate those in the relationship with the client, they will be influenced and will move toward greater awareness, openness and clarity themselves, as we are interconnected and never separated.

Vladimir Urban

To be alongside a client – with an openness of mind and body – as they share their struggles, search for meaning and clarification of values, and to reflect on how these might or might not be embodied by their lived experience.

Author wished to remain anonymous

It means pursuing a philosophical exploration aimed at clarifying and challenging the client’s (and the therapist’s) assumptions and beliefs.

Attending to our relational, embodied and always unfinished process as it unfolds, step by step, during the lived experience of the session.

Chiara Vincenti

As an existential-phenomenological psychotherapist I work to establish a trusting relationship with my clients through attentive listening and an interactive, flexible and non-dogmatic dialogue.

This collaborative activity aims to be tough, provoking and creative and to foster a questioning and constructive approach to their personal narrative and life circumstances in order to shed light on and positively to consider the meanings they attach to the present and past events affecting them.

Rossella Vaccaro

I have no clue.

When asked ‘what do you do?’
I reply: I’m an existential therapist...
Yes, but what does that mean? What do you do?
And now I’m stuck searching for a clue.

Courage appears almost out of the blue...I begin by attempting to be present.
I attempt to be true.

I realise I need courage to face the other I realise I may fail too
I attempt to feel the encounter To respond to a call And I realise that this may drain my endeavour

I attempt to listen with my body and mind And sense when I may need to waver Or turn a blind eye to my own pretender.
I realise that I don’t know the other
Despite my best intention to discover.

I attempt a dialogue with the them
And hope they have the courage to uncover.
I realise we both meet with one another
And through this shuddering thunder
We encounter something we fail to utter.

We realise we both have courage to muster And in this moment we see a possibility A possibility of meaning like no other We discover we can handle it together.

So...when I am asked ‘what do you do?’
I feel an urge to say ‘like you, I don’t have a clue!’

Titos Florides

I respond.

Author wished to remain anonymous

Struggle better.
Is this the life you really want to lead?
How would you know? How do you find out?
I will help you try to find your own truth.

Jonathan Hall

My intention is to remain open to an individual’s search for meaning. Working relationally through dialogue and embodied experience allows for an awareness of choice and possibility.

Alanah Garrard

Just for today, existential psychotherapy is about being with and responding to another which fosters trust, openness and authenticity.
A space to be with how we live, suffer and struggle with an attitude of compassion, scepticism, unknowing and uncertainty. With the endeavour of using my life experiences to be with another that fosters intimacy whilst equally with an attitude of respect for the other’s otherness. An endeavour to relate with creativity, courage and naivity. All wrapped up in a boundaried containment.

Cristalle Hayes
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*This award is currently validated by The Open University
CROSSWORD FEBRUARY 2014
BY ANAMNESIS

Across
1 Mammals of an order including apes and humans (8)
5 Becomes, or causes to become, late or slow (6)
10 Explanations or ways of explaining (15)
11 Persons invested with interim authority on behalf of another (7)
12 Of the usual or ordinary amount, level or rate (7)
13 Set free, especially from imprisonment or oppression (8)
14 Correspondence of sound between words or endings of words, especially when used in poetry (5)
20 Theoretical rather than physical or concrete; denoting an idea, quality or state (8)
23 Highest in authority or rank (7)
25 A narrow-edged tooth at the front of the mouth, adapted for cutting (7)
26 The state of being discontented, displeased, lacking satisfaction (15)
27 Ran or travelled in a great hurry (6)
28 Uprightness; loyalty or faithfulness; honesty (8)

Down
1 A monastery governed by a prior (6)
2 The quality of having strong moral principles; uprightness (9)
3 To put in a neat, attractive or required order (7)
4 Gains (eg money) as the reward for hard work or merit (5)
6 Ask (someone) earnestly or anxiously to do something (7)
7 A pleasant or distinctive smell (5)
8 A state or feeling of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen (8)
9 Types of saucepan in which food may be steamed (8)
14 Relating to education and scholarship; scholarly rather than technical or practical (8)
16 More than is necessary, normal or desirable (9)
17 Was in a position of authority in a meeting, court, etc (8)
19 Lift to a higher position (7)
21 Use again; convert (waste) into reusable material (7)
22 Agrees to give or allow (something requested) to (6)
24 (informally) Annoying persons or things (5)
25 Deduce from evidence and reasoning, rather than from explicit statements (5)
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