The Edge of Space
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Of Mere Being

The palm at the end of the mind,  
Beyond the last thought, rises  
in the bronze décor (distance).

A gold-feathered bird  
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason  
That makes us happy or unhappy.

The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.  
The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Wallace Stevens 1954

This elusive meditative poem was written during the last year of Stevens’s life. He knew he was slowly dying of stomach cancer. The poem conveys the liminal world between living and dying. Although brief, only 12 lines and 75 words long, it expresses something that is actually beyond human comprehension, our dying. Exploring the limits of our living and dying: “at the end of the mind;” “beyond the last thought;” and “on the edge of space.” The poem is ambiguous and ineffable, ending with the alliteration, “fire-fangled feathers dangl(ing) down.” Stevens, ever the master of imagination, seems to be saying that the phenomena of life and death can’t be adequately explained in words or feelings. So, is that the “it”, or…..? The eternal verities defy simple delineation. Note his very title, “Of Mere Being” is full of paradox, since we know from his correspondences, that to him, “being: meant “life-itself”

Stevens’s and we know that our beings/our lives are hardly small or unimportant to us or our loved ones, and yet we humans are paltry things, barely a fleeting speck in the cosmos. But, let’s not try to parse this poem too much, but rather just stay with the rhyme, the words and their sounds, paying attention to what gets evoked inside each of us.
Death is in the air! Death cafés are opening up at a rapid pace, in Los Angeles, New York City and throughout the country in many other cities; having been originated in Switzerland and France some 10 years ago or so. People from different walks of life, ages, belief systems and religions are coming and sitting together and talking, over tea and cake, about death. In different ways, they address how their views of death affect how they currently live their lives and/or would like to alter their lives.

A number of years ago the late Studs Turkel interviewed the opera singer Catherine Malfitano. She said while talking about welcoming risky moments in her art: “I think one has to always have the sense that death is right next to you (2005).” And, the popular singer Tim McGraw has a song entitled, “Like you’re gonna Die,” and so on.

In this morning’s talk I want us all to think about death as an ongoing companion throughout our lives with the hope of beginning the process of developing some kind of relationship, if not a friendly one, then at least some kind of acceptance of the inevitability of death and loss of ourselves and loved ones. I am hoping we can create an “intermediate zone” (Elliot Tressam) or space for us to talk about death. Indeed, much has been written about the irony that in many ways we can only fully appreciate the living of our lives by experiencing the endings.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must tell you that I wrote a rather lengthy introduction to this paper and then put it aside as other matters drew my attention. When I returned to it, I discovered that it was no more! I had unconsciously neither saved it nor printed it out. Indeed, what I had written had completely disappeared, just as we all will disappear someday. I suppose this was my unconscious reminder of the transience of my life and my work, an enactment of my death anxiety? Certainly, trying to face my/our fears of death is very scary business!

As we all know, Freud, who had many losses in his life early on (e.g. his brother, his parents, one of his beloved daughters) was himself terrified of dying.; even proclaiming an age when he feared he would die. He believed we humans are incapable of comprehending our own death.
The unconscious thinks we will live forever. To quote Freud (1915), “It’s impossible to imagine our own death. … In the unconscious everyone is convinced of his immortality.”

Kohut, on the other hand, believed it was possible for we humans to contemplate our own death. Indeed, he said that “man’s capacity to acknowledge the finiteness of his existence and to act in accordance with this painful discovery may well be his GREATEST PSYCHIC ACHIEVEMENT.” (“Search for the Self,” ed. Ornstein in “Forms and Transformations of Narcissism” (1979)). Facing this impermanence is difficult, but we can develop a higher forms of narcissism, namely, “cosmic narcissism,” a capacity to “transcend the bounds of the individual.”

Jung, for his part, says the unconscious attitude towards death is that the psyche is continuous and doesn’t end. And yet, he proposes that “soon after the middle of our life, the soul begins its secret work getting ready for the departure.” Elaborating, he says, “Death is a goal that has been unconsciously lived during at least half a lifetime.” Building on these ideas he suggests that “death is an accomplishment, a ripe fruit on the tree of life.” Something for we non Jungians to ponder!

Now, I would like sketch thoughts and feelings I have had over the years about my own death, and share with you some dreams that suggest themes of my death. My underlying reason for using myself as, “a case example,” is that you can all join me in this process. Talking in this way about the most difficult and terrifying matter for all of us, our extinction, will hopefully, help inform the quality of our lives and enrich us all.

So let’s begin!

I grew up in a family of myself, my parents, my older sister and my younger brother. My maternal grandmother also lived with us in a rather small apt in the Bronx until I was in my teens. My grandmother had a large impact on me and my life. I’ve come to see through the years how I had internalized some of her existential anxieties. She came to NYC, via Ellis Island, from
Russia/Eastern Europe when she was 3 years old, and brought her family’s shtetl mentality with her, namely, the ever-present feeling that something terrible could happen at any minute.

My grandmother’s youngest son, my uncle, was in the army during WWII, and I remember her huddling with some of her friends who all seemed very old at the time and they would be crying and whispering to each other, clearly highly distraught. I think some of these women had tragically lost their sons during the war. No one said that directly to me, but I sensed something terrible and very scary had happened, like a tragic loss.

I remember then that at a quite young age, about four or five years old, having a conscious realization of death and asking my family about this. They responded in the stock manner. Yes, everyone dies, but I didn’t have to worry about that for a very long time. I adopted that attitude for a very long while and held on to it as long as I could, in order to assuage my fears, indeed terror of loss, and of course, fears of my own passing. Death was something no one talked about at home or in school or in most walks of my life.

In my own life, I was fortunate to not have any traumatic deaths in our family as a child. Like many of you, I have worked with patients who lost parents at early ages (in fact I am working with two such people currently), and we all know the devastating and lasting effects of such early parental loss. I recall, wondering how my grandmother, who was old and therefore closer to death was feeling about it. However, she was fully absorbed with the problems and challenges of everyday life that she did not seem to give much thought to her mortality.

I remember my sister saying, after my grandmother died, followed by my uncles, that “Our family doesn’t believe in dying.” When each of them was terminally ill they fought and fought to live. They did not go “kindly into the night.” Nor did my mother, who many years later at 96 years old, while making the transition from independent living to nursing care, she yelled with anger and indignation at the nursing care staff, “I came here to get better and you’re making me worse.” She simply could not or would not accept her sad reality that she was coming to the end of her life and that there was no getting better anymore.
I’ve come to think that parts of me been trying to come to grips with my mortality for a very long time, as well as for those around me that I need and love. Indeed, I have been trying to face the physical and psychic limits of all living beings, the transient nature of all our lives and the inevitability of all of us ending and being no more. I now see that some of the papers I have written, presumably on other topics, have had the recurring theme of termination and endings in treatment and was in some ways my looking at the eventual loss of myself and others. Of course, I’ve written and presented many other topics and themes, but it’s this theme that I am highlighting today.

I have been hovering around the edges of loss since the late 70’s when I wrote a paper called, “On Interruptions in Treatment.” Note some of these other titles. In 1982, at the CICSW June convocation, I presented a talk called, “Revisiting Termination.” Many years later at IFPE in 2009 in Seattle, Joanne Culbert-Koehn built on this theme in our presentation, “Patients Who Stay With Us.”

Once again, in 1987, I presented some other thoughts on endings that I entitled, “Leaving is like Dying a Little” (an Italian proverb). In that paper, I talked about endings as they touch on our fear and denial of death, and how the therapists’ sense of loss and mourning for their patients can possibly serve integrative functions for each.

In 1989, Lise Blumenfeld and I presented a paper entitled, “Exploration of the Therapist’s Experience with Termination/Or Where did my Patient Go”?

In 1999, I gave the CICSW Commencement Address entitled, “Commencement: Beginnings and Endings in an Expanding Universe.” And then, on Nov. 2003 at an IFPE Conference in Pasadena, Merle Davies, Lise Blumenfeld and I presented a paper entitled, “Changing Views-Ties Across Time.” One of the many questions we posed was what roles do various endings and beginnings play in creating transformative experiences and consequently fostering growth?

In 2005, I actually approached death directly while writing about my younger brother’s dying from ALS in a paper entitled “Suffering and Its Vicissitudes: My Brother, Myself and My
Patients.” During the period of my accompanying my brother as he was dying, I had a particularly painful experience with a patient I had worked with for many years and was only a few years younger than my brother. During a session when he breezily said that he was having a physical examination, but he knew there was nothing wrong with him, I found myself making comparisons between him and my brother, and I found this comparison unbearable. I began to intensely feel I could not go on with this work. I had never experienced such strong feelings of this nature in all my previous years of practice.

In fact, I did go on and continue to practice, and I found my feelings easing, and somewhat to my surprise, I felt more involved and invested in my work with patients. I became more capable of receiving each person I saw on their own terms, struggling with their unique constellations of problems, wishes and dreads. I felt a renewed value in each person trying to make the most of his/her life, however trivial or mundane it might appear on the surface. I was, after all, engaging with each of them in the stream of their life and mine. This felt very worthwhile and important to me. Facing imminent death; my brothers, and by extension my own, however agonizingly painful, paradoxically, also energized me. It offered me a perspective on life and its value “I know the place/ It is true/ Everything we do/ Corrects the space/ Between death and me/ And you.” Harold Pinter, 1975 (Pinter’s words hang in the air, a charged distillation of his life’s work. His plays have to do with a mix of false bravado, mortal dread and the struggle for human connection.)

Now, I would like to share two dreams, one quite short and the other a bit longer, that illustrate my unconscious trying to grapple with my death. Of course, given the over determined nature of dreams, there are many other meanings as well. However, for today’s purpose that’s the aspects of these two dreams that I will be focusing on. I see these dreams as providing me with an unfolding map, which can help me come to terms with my mortality, as if my unconscious is preparing my ego for my eventual end.

Dream 1: 4/16/08
I’m going on a trip with many other people (maybe Barry (my husband) too). It was a strict Communist country with severe restrictions as to what items you could pack and take with you.
It was not exactly clear what would be confiscated. I had to keep checking what I could take with me and what had to be eliminated. Could I take my address book, etc.? How could I manage without that and that? Paring away, I had anxiety regarding decisions of what/how to eliminate. Some of my associations and thoughts and in discussion with my Jungian analyst are:

- Going on a trip = dying.
- Paring away = giving up my long held attachments and expectations and in a sense ongoing belief that I’d keep on going on. James Hillman talks about eventually all of us leaving and being left. Leaving those things, attachments, people who are close to our hearts. Entering a more forbidding strict territory, where the rules are definitive and simple.
- Associations to Ancient Egypt = Where the dead in their sarcophagus are loaded up with things believed to be important to the dead person and that they will need when they get to the other side. There were severe limitations on what the dead could take with them and detailed instructions in The Book of the Dead as to what to take. For example, every Pharaoh had the same things in their tombs (e.g. gold items, specific foods, etc.).

Other thoughts led to the image of dying. I’m giving up things intimate to me and my life, paring away, cutting back. My address book represents my connections to people in my world; my identity of who I am and who I’m connected to. Everything (and everyone) had to be left behind.

Dream 2 May23, 2010 (daughter’s birthday the next day May 24).
I’m sleeping in my bed. I hear a banging. It sounded like someone deliberately pounding or tapping on the floor with a cane or staff. The next thing I know my bedroom door is being opened and a flashlight’s beam is moving around the room. I don’t open my eyes. I think to myself, make believe you’re sleeping. Sometimes that works. I stayed still and made believe I was sleeping and didn’t know the intruder was there. After a short while, the intruder closes the bedroom door and leaves the house. I awaken. I was quite shook up. It was so real! All of it: my house, my bedroom, my bed and me in the bed. It felt like the nightmare lasted just a second.
When the door was being opened and I saw the flashlight beam moving around, I thought to myself that this can’t be really happening. This dream is everyone’s worst fear, but it was real in the dream. The whole dream with all its anxiety, fear and terror felt totally real. After all, it took place in my actual bedroom.

What associations do I have to this dream? First, that day I had felt quite relaxed in the late afternoon and evening. I was with the kids in the afternoon, buying them shoes. Barry had left for Europe and I had gone out with a friend and her friend to an enjoyable movie and dinner. I was reading an interesting novel (Amy Bloom’s, *Away*). I was perplexed that I had this anxiety dream and couldn’t find any day residue connections.

In the dream, I remember thinking I hadn’t locked all the windows and doors before I went to sleep. In a later association, I thought about a novel I had read where a man had come into the narrator’s bedroom through some attic door that he hadn’t locked (a Paul Auster novel). Then I remembered that in the current novel I was reading, the Russian woman protagonist had lost her entire family on a pogrom. Why should these novels have clicked into my unconscious in that way, especially since I was in such a relaxed state of mind?

In a sense, this was almost like a dream within a dream. It had a profoundly layered quality to it. Is my unconscious trying to call my attention to my eventual death? At the same time, my ego is seeing death as an intruder? The grim reaper seems to be represented here, but I stave him off, at least for the time being. The dream is about my terror of death encroaching and the hereafter. It is almost as if my unconscious is saying death is going to come and get you at some time, whether you like it or not. While my ego is denying it and fending it off, is this intruder the angel of death? And, what about the beam of light? Does that represent lighting up the dark? Several of my other associations were: Capt. Hook in Peter Pan with his stark terrifying peg leg tapping, tapping, coming menacingly towards you. Also, I associated to a classic painting, maybe Caravaggio of the disciples sitting at a table and the hand of death pointing at one of them, whose facial expression depicts sheer terror. Who me? The image of that expression in the painting has stayed with me for years.
Another painting was shown to me by my Jungian analyst. It’s a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, *Visions of the Hereafter; the Ascent into the Empyrean* (detail - 1500-1503). It’s a visionary image of the afterlife, represented by a tunnel with a beam of light.

Further work led me to dialoguing with my dream. Via Active Imagination, I attempted to engage with the intruder. This was no easy matter and as soon as I set myself the task, I found myself bucking it. NO, I thought and wrote I can’t do this. It’s too scary. Gathering my courage, I ever so tentatively proceeded.


Him: *I’ve come to take you. It’s time for you to go.* {My mind goes to two dear friends and colleagues, who had died within the last few years of this dream. Death came to take them.... I can’t go on. Where to go with this? What happens after I die? Nothing!}

Me: *Wait, you are a pirate. What are you doing here? You belong on the high seas. You’ve gotten lost. You don’t belong here.* {I feel like I’m being a sissy, a coward. I’ll try again and this time offer to go with him and see what happens}.

Me: *OK I’ll be brave, if you want me to go with you. I’ll go. I won’t hide and/or flight.*

Him: *But I don’t want to take you.*

Me: *Then, why did you come in the first place? H. I was just searching around and I wanted to scare you.*

Me: *Why?*

Him: *To make you realize you are in danger.*

Me: *What kind of danger are you talking about? Can I do anything about it? Or, are you talking about that I’m in danger of dying? And, there’s nothing I can do about it?*

Him: *No answer.*

Me: *So, I have a kind of reprieve, a temporary reprieve? How temporary I wonder, and then what?*

Him: *No answer.*{Yet again, I feel I’m stalling. I’m still avoiding confronting the inevitability of my dying and death. Maybe I’ll try again later}.*

Me: *Let’s go. I’ll go with you*

Him: *Come, it’s time for you to get ready to die.*
Me: What will the trip be like? I know I’ll get scared. Is this some kind of mistake? Is this really happening to me?

I am struck as I am writing this with how similar Tolstoy’s Ivan Illyich’s words were when he began to realize he was really dying such as, “Something terrible was happening new and more important that anything before in his life was taking place. It was a question of life and death. Yes, life was here and now it is going… I was here and now I’m going there. Where? A chill came over him. Where shall I be when I am no more? He knew he was dying; he simply did not and could not grasp it. It can’t be. It’s impossible. But here it is. How is this?

Death is the thief in the night. And I do believe that some of the danger is not only in death itself, but in not, at least, trying to come to some terms with that inescapable reality for me and all of us.

All these dreams and talk about death, lead me even more to affirm the value of life. And to note the paradox and true contradictions that in the best Winnicottian style, we must recognize and contain. One of the ways that I have been trying to get hold of all of this is by employing some well-established Zen Buddhist principles, the noble truths of suffering and transience. It is not easy to be a sentient human being.

I, and many of us, simply cannot stand the prospect of death; we have an unfriendly attitude towards it seeing it as a rival for my/our wish for immortality. For me, as I’ve come to inhabit my life more whole heartedly, relatively speaking I feel more content, more gratefulness, more of a sense of completeness and feel I am moving toward more of an acceptance of the terminal nature of my life. This is truly a work in progress.

In many ways, contemplating my departure to the mysterious unknown, intimidating and scary as it is, seems to have contributed to my feeling more passionately alive and deeply engaged with life - my work, my family, my friends, and the world at large, indeed, all the riches that life has to offer and that I eagerly and enthusiastically participate in.
While writing this paper I observed with some humor, that while I’ve been thinking and writing about my and our mortality, I’m having a wonderful time planning trips, going to the opera, restaurants, socializing, theatre, reading wonderful novels, being with my grandkids, and taking a course I’d never had the opportunity to take before on Infant Observation. So, I guess we could say I’m considering, indeed covering, the life span from beginnings to endings!

So, am I still afraid of dying? Yes!
Will I continue to try and have my conscious meet up with my unconscious as I work with my own mortality? Yes!
Am I going to aspire to “live my dying,” as Jung talked about? Yes!

Because, in the end, replete with its multiple paradoxical meanings, we are indeed, as Wallace Stevens said, “all Mere Beings”.

Lest we end on too sober a note, let me share this quote by Elbert Hubbard (writer, publisher, artist philosopher and exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement): “Life is just one dammed thing after another…..Don’t take it too seriously… You will never get out of it alive!”

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