An Existential Case Study of Madness: Encounters with Divine Affliction

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WITH DIVINE AFFLICTION

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Summary

This article presents an existential case study of a psychotic episode that the author experienced, focusing particularly on a phenomenological description of the actual process of psychic breakdown and subsequent recovery. Primary importance is placed on depicting this process as an empowering source of meaning formation as well as a spiritually transformative experience. The experience of psychosis is thus portrayed as a crisis of meaning in which the individual is challenged to reestablish an ontological ground and integrated sense of self through the recreation and deepening of personal existence. The presentation is a first-person narrative account, followed by an existential analysis of the experience’s value in terms of transformation and meaning creation, as well as a discussion of the existentialist sources in philosophy, psychology, and literature, that have contributed significantly to the author’s psycho-spiritual development.
Many people who have suffered from severe mental disorders have published accounts of their experiences. I suppose that they have done so for various reasons, such as out of a need to purge the mind and thus forget, or reconcile an incomprehensible torment with the reality of a life that nevertheless must continue; possibly even to assert an unconquerable courage that the devastation of a nameless terror could not extinguish, to create meaning in the midst of a seemingly absurd and merciless pain. I have struggled greatly in deciding whether my account should be shared publicly. I am doing so because such a sharing appears to be needed, not due to any perceived uniqueness or specialness of my own experience, but simply because sharing these stories is essential to the healing of our deeply wounded humanity.


I wish to state unequivocally at the outset that my intent is not to in any way glorify or romanticize madness. The experience of psychosis is horrifying and damaging, and there is nothing intrinsically romantic or artistically advantageous about it. I simply desire to communicate, as others have done, that such an experience can be deepening, strengthening, and transformative if one can summon the will and ability to make it so. The best that I can hope for, then, is that others who are similarly afflicted will move
closer toward their own wholeness through reading my account, that they will not feel as alone and will understand the meaning and purpose that are buried deep within their suffering. We are not meant to live as caged and tortured victims but, rather, as free, evolving persons who can create vital meaning out of any and every experience (May, 1983).

During the period surrounding my 22nd birthday, I experienced a severely damaging psychotic break. Years previously, I had suffered from an experience of severe depression but, at the time, was neither aware of its nature or how incapacitating it could be. Some may argue that the advent of a second episode would be less terrifying and stressful by virtue of being known through past experience. Perhaps this is the case for some, I do not know. It most definitely, however, was not the case for me. This second episode of severe depression, which rapidly progressed to psychosis, was for me all the more terrifying precisely because I recognized exactly what was happening when I began to go mad. I knew this overwhelming terror, and quite possibly the only thing worse than this was that it knew me as well. I believe that it was even more horrifying than it would have been otherwise because it was not unfamiliar, not a complete unknown. Rather, the crushing sense of panic was intimately familiar. It was too familiar. The taste and touch and smell of the desperation and paralysis had burned their names into my being; they had seared their identities eternally onto the template of my still very young consciousness. It was not possible for me to forget. Internal devastation of that magnitude and extent leaves in its wake scars like canyons that can never be erased or forced out of existence. So when the wasteland of nothingness came to claim me yet again, I was utterly helpless and undone in any attempt to free myself from its grasp.

I do not use the term psychotic break lightly. It was infinitely more than a fleeting few days or week of moderate despondency. It was much more than an extensive period of severe sadness, grief, or mourning. The previous episode had been severe in its mental and emotional debilitation, yet the symptoms had appeared gradually—professional intervention had not become essential—and I was able to continue basic, necessary functioning. However, in my psychotic break, symptoms emerged with rapid force; it became obvious that I could no longer maintain even a base level of practical daily functioning, and eventually professional intervention became an absolute necessity.
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF PSYCHOSIS

The Language of Isolation: A Prelude to Solitary Confinement

At the time of my breakdown, I was attending a new college at the opposite end of the country, farther away than I had ever been, and it was my first semester. Although I had begun to create some substantial friendships, I felt very lonely and isolated. Having never coped well with major life transitions, it became embarrassingly obvious that I was not coping well with this one either. I began to notice some frequently occurring depressive symptoms such as diminished concentration, restricted affect, the loss of pleasure in all activities, and an emerging sense that I, others, and the external world were unreal. Of course, I tried not to panic. I resolved to grit my teeth and bear it and go on. I had to make this new situation work; failure was not an option. I did not want to believe that this could happen to me again.

During the 2 weeks before the end of the semester, I spiraled downward fast—unbelievably fast. I tried to talk to new friends, to reach out for help, but they could not understand. I began talking to a school counselor who tried valiantly to help me. He didn’t understand either. I’m not sure what sort of counselor he was; he said that in counseling more than 700 students in his career, he had never seen anyone in my condition. Upon hearing that, my panic increased, and I sank deeper into hopelessness. Not only could I not save myself from the coming onslaught, but it seemed that those in a position to help could not save me either. The director of the school’s counseling center spoke to me briefly, asking me only if I had previously been a victim of satanic ritual abuse or if I had witnessed a traumatic event such as a murder. In response to this, I was completely exasperated and nearly hysterical. What was wrong with these professionals?

I had become extremely reclusive and paranoid. I locked myself in my dorm room for hours at a time and would not go out except at times to eat. I paced up and down in my room for hours, completely unaware of time and bordering on incoherency. I fantasized about potential ways to kill myself and thus prevent the deterioration that I sensed was coming. I began to settle on the plan of wandering out into the snowy woods and freezing to death. It seemed so peace-
ful and insidiously alluring, yet it terrified me. Everything fright-
ened me. I was afraid to leave my room, afraid to encounter anyone,
afraid most of all that I was losing my fragile hold on sanity.

The Final Snap: The Center Cannot Hold

I distinctly remember the exact moment in which I experienced
the final snap of the last frayed thread that was holding my mind
together and keeping me anchored in reality. I got up late one Sat-

urday morning (as was typical) and began trying frantically to
study for a final. I opened a textbook and read the same paragraph
5 to 10 times and couldn't understand a thing that I was reading. I
felt completely and hopelessly separated from my present experi-
ence, I could not remember the past, and I could not anticipate any
potential future. Where was I? What was I? It is still difficult for me
to fathom, but there was an actual moment in which, after the
increasing of psychic tension and the rising tide of intense panic, I
suddenly realized that I was right at the edge of losing my mind,
and I could see it approaching. For a brief instant, the awareness
came over me, and then it was as if I felt a small, frail branch or
twig snap, and then a cracking, a breaking, an agonizing severance.
I literally saw, as my mind was disintegrating, the image of a
descending and chaotic spiral, and I felt my being recede and van-
ish into this black, abysmal whirlpool. I felt it dissolve and become
zero, become absolute nothing. After this point, I was gone, gone in
a way that I had never thought possible. I had disappeared into a
somewhere that was essentially a nowhere. From this nowhere, I
could not speak, hear, see, touch, or taste. I was cut off from the liv-
ing, from anything that was alive at all. As terrible as this state
was, it still seems absurd to me that it could possibly get worse.
But, of course, it did get worse. There were new depths of
incomprehensible horror waiting for me.

Navigating Charybdis: The Trip Home

After this final break and severance, the school counselor made
arrangements with my parents for me to go home a week early. I
threw an odd mismatched array of clothes into a suitcase in a fran-
tic and detached manner. I was hardly aware of what I was doing. I
was vaguely aware of a strong but fragmented sense that I did not
want to leave this way, yet the counselor had said that if I didn't,
the likely scenario would be an ambulance taking me away to a hospital. I felt extreme panic at the thought of being the subject of such public humiliation. During the 1.5-hour drive to the airport, I alternated between manic, incoherent rambling and muteness. The counselor stared at me wide eyed and looked scared. I can't blame him; it was utterly bizarre. When he left me at the airport, he said something about hoping that I would be okay, but he looked very uncertain, as if he did not believe himself. I didn't believe that I would be okay, and I didn't believe that he thought I would be okay, but then I didn't know what to believe. I was barely conscious.

I don't remember much about that trip home, only isolated memories suspended in space and time, forever outside of a flowing historical continuity. As my ill fortune would have it, I had to navigate a connecting flight to reach my destination. Unbelievable. I recall trying desperately to find this connection, thinking that if I missed it I would end up roaming the streets of an unknown city, homeless, crazy, never to be heard from again. As I waited to board, I paced back and forth in an agitated manner. I tried to sit and look "normal." People looked on at me nervously. It wasn't working. It was truly a miracle that I made it through those flights to my waiting parents. Still, it would only get incredibly worse.

Descent Into the Maelstrom: The Threshold of Hospitalization

During the next week with my parents, I underwent experiences that previously I would never have thought possible: delusions of guilt, persecution, physical decay, and impending death; visual hallucinations and perceptual distortions; rapid fluctuations of consciousness; increasing paranoia and intense panic; and suicidal and homicidal ideation. I saw accounts on the news of abandoned babies found in dumpsters, natural disasters, atrocious crimes committed, and I was responsible somehow; it was my fault that they occurred.

I couldn't sleep because I was convinced that if I did, my heart would stop beating. When I did try to sleep, my head felt like it was on fire; a tremendous heat was building and my head was going to explode. When I did briefly drift into unconsciousness, I awoke with an agonizing sensation that I was suffocating and couldn't breathe. At these times, I couldn't speak; I could only emit an inhuman sounding moan and writhe on my bed. As my parents slept, I...
would wander around the house lost in an internal hell that I could not understand, communicate, or escape. I would stand still for hours in the same spot, watching the headlights of cars pass, trying futilely to make a meaningful connection with something, anything. How was it that people could drive past, unaware of my torment, and immersed in the midst of vital life, while I was desperately alone within my invisible prison?

One night, I slept in my parents’ room, and I remember waking at some point in the early morning to find that their faces appeared indistinct and disfigured to me. I thought that very soon I would be blind. Finally, during one morning at the end of the week, I experienced a massive panic attack accompanied by visual and tactile hallucinations as well as severe delusions. I was convinced that I was dying, that my skin was melting away and my vital organs dissolving. I began to yell for my mother to call an ambulance. She was beside herself, and not knowing what to do, she took me to a local private mental hospital.

*Entering the Wasteland: Orienting With Hell’s Compass*

My parents sat with me throughout the intake during which I understood nothing of what was said yet was still required to initial page upon page of entrance forms. I was again in and out of consciousness, alternating between rapid, incoherent speech and muteness. At one point I looked into a mirror and my reflection appeared to me to be horribly distorted, like the image of a devil or demon. I began to wonder if I was becoming possessed by some evil power, perhaps by Satan himself. I was terrified because of what I imagined such an evil power could do through me completely against my will. Eventually, I was taken into a room that I would share with another male patient. He was sleeping while I was left there to settle in and complete the mammoth Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. Yeah, sure. A piece of cake in my current condition. Did the hospital staff have an underlying sordid and sadistic sense of humor?

I sat on my bed and watched my roommate sleeping. I was paralyzed with fear as I experienced an overpowering force that seemingly was attempting to coerce me into harming this man. I thought that I would be forced to commit violent acts within the hospital, the police would arrive, and I would be shot and killed in a
bloody standoff. I resolved to will against this force as much as I was able to; thus, I physically braced myself for it, tightening all the muscles in my arms and hands. The tension in my body was incredible. An intense pressure was mounting underneath my skin, and I watched in amazement as the veins in my hands bulged outward, raising and stretching my skin. My skin seemed to be bubbling as my blood felt like it was boiling. Thankfully, after a relatively brief period of time, these sensations subsided.

**Kneeling Before the Warden:**

Guilty Until Proven Innocent

I was in the hospital for 2 weeks. At the beginning of my stay, I saw a medical doctor. He was sarcastic and impatient with me; he seemed to think that I was feigning symptoms or making outrageous statements for the sole purpose of being difficult. As I was still very much convinced that my body was rapidly deteriorating, I asked this doctor what would happen when I could no longer speak. Apparently, it did not occur to him that, being a patient in a mental hospital, it was perfectly natural and legitimate that I was psychotically delusional. To compound this, the entire hospital staff seemed to believe that I was under the influence of drugs, and when I told them that I had never in my life abused substances, they stated directly and sarcastically that they did not believe me. When the test results came back negative, they appeared not to change their opinion and remained suspicious. I felt completely alone, misunderstood, and trapped. Those who were supposed to help bring me back to reality were, in fact, openly hostile toward me. In my delusional state, overwhelmed with a crushing sense of guilt concerning the impact of this experience on my parents, I stated that my parents would be better off without me, that it would be much better for them if I were dead. In response, I was told that I was very selfish and cared only for myself. To whom was I to turn now?

During the first week, I did not move closer toward reality. Rather, I steadily slipped deeper into the abyss of nothingness that I felt was swallowing me whole with every passing hollow moment. I became increasingly paralyzed as external forces attempted to affect me. I was terrified to leave my room and be around others, yet the structure demanded it. So I sat in groups, vacant and inert, ashamed and embarrassed about my condition. I had no inner
strength with which to will anything; the slightest, most minute action required more energy than I seemed to possess. Didn’t anyone understand that? Yet I was forced to do things. In group therapy, I waited in mortal dread as I saw my turn to speak approaching. When it came, I felt extremely anxious because there was nothing there to give or “share.” I felt an expansive void open out from me into the room, which seemed to threaten to pull everyone and everything into it. It was awful. I sensed the uneasiness, apprehension, and fear in the others. They were scared. Scared of me.

*Orbiting Pluto: Confronting the Cruelest Question*

Toward the end of my first week in the hospital, I became catatonic for about 3 days. I stood still in the center of my room, fixed and rigid like a stone statue. It was snowing outside, and I looked out of the window at the snow, the passing cars on the highway, and the barrenness of the landscape. I comprehended nothing. It was all completely meaningless to me. It was not there. I was not there. The only coherent thought in my consciousness assumed the form of a repetitious, tightening cycle that continued over and over again, relentlessly, agonizingly. Simultaneously, I thought, “How can this be happening? This can’t be possible—yet it is possible—this can’t be possible—yet it is possible. . . .” How could I continue to exist in a state of nonexistence? Of course, I could not consciously formulate the actual question in this way; yet on some deep intuitive level, I was aware of it, and the possibility of its affirmative answer horrified me. My physical movements began involuntarily to rigidify and take on ghastly shapes. I could not control it. Nurses came in, picked me up, laid me on my bed, and stuck a needle in my arm. I thought my life was over, that I would not wake up or become conscious ever again. But somehow, miraculously, I did.

*Resurrection: Creation and the Meaning in Divine Affliction*

I will never be able to explain exactly how or why I ascended out of this abysmal void and rejoined the land of the living. I know now that I do not need to, because it was simply my experience. During
my second week in the hospital, I emerged into the light of consciousness and being. I became alive again. I took tentative, faltering steps toward speaking again, thinking coherently, and feeling emotion. It was like being held under water for a very long time, giving up hope of survival, blacking out, and then breaking through the surface gasping desperately for air and awareness. I began to see dimly into the potential significance and meaning of what I had just come through, of what I was still very much immersed in. Through various therapeutic means, among which were group therapy, psychodrama, and art therapy, I was gradually reunited with my most precious and primal meaning-symbol, that which had been developing prior to this descent and which has continued to evolve intensely ever since: paradox. I began to draw visual representations of this symbol, images comprising the overlap and integration of opposite and contrasting colors. These images were infused with an inherent and pulsating sense of redemptive power; they spoke to me in a restored language that I had lost but found again, showing me that my suffering could be more than mere suffering. I knew in the depths of my being, however vaguely yet profoundly, that this terrible experience would make me stronger, deeper, and more real. I began to see that it would ultimately be my salvation if I were courageous enough to make it so.

After being discharged from the hospital, I began an extended period of recovery. I was still incredibly frail and weak and now was faced with the daunting challenge of re-creating my life and existence literally from the ground up. Thus, I willed my new and uncertain existence "ex nihilo," so to speak, out of the ruins and the tumultuous ash. In doing so, I struggled intensely with paranoid fears concerning the response of others regarding my breakdown, whether I would ever work again, and the possibility of pursuing my deepest passions and vision. Complete reliance on serendipitous grace, a strong support system, and weekly psychotherapy sessions facilitated my rebirth in this time of recovery.

Slowly and gradually, I began to experience the vital and constituting relation to the divine transcendent that I had always known so intimately. The divine voice became increasingly audible and familiar as it revealed to me that there was tremendous purpose and reason within the affliction that I had experienced. My parents, with whom I lived during my recovery, were tireless in their encouragement, as day after day they believed in me when I could
not believe in myself. They challenged me to reengage in the life process and work hard at regaining my inner strength. I was fortunate to be able to see the psychiatrist who directed the hospital in which I had been admitted—a man who, although we certainly did not connect meaningfully in many ways, honored my humanity and utilized my passion for literature in attempts to help me come back to life. In these attempts, we read and discussed passages from Thomas Merton’s (1968) *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* as well as Henry David Thoreau’s (1854/1993) *Walden*. I rediscovered the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly “The American Scholar” (1837/1950c), “An Address” (1838/1950a), “Self-Reliance” (1841/1950b), and “The Over-Soul” (1841/1950d), which I read voraciously. I cannot adequately describe the intensity and hope that his words breathed into the vacuous shell from which I was emerging. I began to take risks, open myself anew to life, and my confidence grew. Slowly, I became reconnected with my internal depths, my center, and my ground. As this happened, the isolated fragments fused together; a beautiful, chaotic order appeared, and I lived. I envisioned future goals and dreams because a future became possible again. I was, and remain forever, indescribably grateful for the gift of life.

**EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL NARRATIVE**

I believe it is readily apparent that this case history description of my experience is rich in existential themes and dynamics.

*Meaning and Meaninglessness*

The theme of meaning is essential to and inextricable from my experience of psychic breakdown. When one becomes ontologically separated from self, others, and the external world, there is invariably an acute crisis of meaning, for how can there possibly be meaning in a life in which one has been denied access to inner values, thought, consciousness, interpersonal communication, engagement with an environmental context, sensations of pleasure, and hope for an anticipated future? There can be no meaning in such an existence, and one cannot persist in such an existence for long. Meaninglessness is somehow not a viable base upon which
to fashion an existence. Meaninglessness is perhaps the most primary to my experience. I am convinced that the intensity of my pain was centered in my awful sense that I could not encounter meaning anywhere, in anything, or in anyone, and as a result, I suffered tremendously. There was no meaning to be lived, because I was not really alive. I did not really exist. I was nonexistent.

However, I believe that I survived and have continued to live because I willed to create meaning out of my experience. I willed to make moment-by-moment choices to explore any possible latent meaning in my suffering. The meaning that I discovered was that psychic and spiritual suffering are not inherently meaningless but, rather, can be experienced as divinely bestowed opportunities to live a deeper, stronger, and more passionate life. I learned that I cannot begin to truly live until I know how much I am willing to sacrifice for the life that I am constantly taking for granted (Nietzsche, 1889/1954c).

Will and Freedom

The themes of will and freedom are also apparent in my experience. It could be argued to what extent I truly possessed any power of will within the constraints of psychosis. I have no definitive answer to that question here. What I can say in regard to this issue is that I am well aware of actively willing in some capacity, however debilitated, during the process of my breakdown. I willed not to commit suicide, a desirable escape from my agony. I believe that my upbringing and developed value system have saved me from this tragic alternative. During my first depressive episode, I had made a foundational promise to myself and to God that no matter how painful my internal world may become, I would never take my own life. I could not bear to think of the devastation this choice would cause to loved ones, and it has also represented to me, although entirely understandable given the context, the final and absolute violation of life itself. I willed against violent impulses that terrified me and that I could not understand. I willed to engage in available treatment that was offered in the hope of getting better.

Most importantly, as I stated previously, I willed to create meaning out of meaninglessness, to be free and not let my lost freedom control and dictate my continuing life. This is primarily evident in
the way in which I chose to define myself not as a psychiatric inpatient, a victim of psychosis with nothing of value to offer the world but, rather, as a freely constituting person who can determine an enlivening interpretation of my experience (Bassman, 2001). I chose to learn from my pain and grow out of it instead of denying and suppressing it from awareness.

Naturally, this is how I found healing in my suffering, and this healing is what sustains me. Intuitively, I knew that if I did not choose to experience my pain deeply and thus learn from it, my suffering would be only negatively damaging as opposed to constructive and life enhancing. My suffering had to heal me or it would destroy me completely. I would never be free again. But in some ways, I was not free because I had lost my most precious freedom: the freedom of being united meaningfully to my own self, to my being. Although this loss was excruciating, I chose to be free in the midst of my imprisonment, and that is ultimately what matters.

*Reality, Illusion, Life, and Death*

The themes of reality, illusion, life, and death must be mentioned as well. I was separated from reality, both subjective and objective, in perhaps the most complete and painful way possible. I was psychotic. Not only was I disconnected from reality in a transcendent or spiritual sense, I was out of touch with it in all other ways as well. Illusion had claimed me not only in a psychological or spiritual sense but to the extent that I could not function in the most rudimentary and necessary ways. Biologically, I was alive; objectively, I was there. I was not yet physically dead. In all other respects, however, I was dead. My experience was an ongoing, seemingly eternal, lived death. It was, paradoxically, a death that could not die but could only be lived. Yet also paradoxically, I lived through dying this death completely by experiencing it to its absolute limit and demanding that it become life when I came through to the other side. This resulted eventually in a far more intense and passionate living, a deeper living that I could not have known before such an experience. I am able to engage more fully and deeply in life because I have so fully known the anguish of its absence. My longing to be more wholly real is that much more desperate and savage because illusion had so intimately merged into the quiet places of my being (Kierkegaard, 1849/1946).
Presence and Empathy

The themes of presence and empathy are crucial as well. An invaluable gift that developed out of my own suffering was a heightened capacity to be authentically present and empathic toward others who are in pain. As I consider this my life’s work, I am profoundly grateful for this gift and am proud and honored to be known as, in Rollo May’s words, a “wounded healer” (Schneider & May, 1995, p. 98).

WHY AN EXISTENTIAL INTERPRETATION OF PSYCHOSIS?

In the most fundamental sense, an existential interpretation of my breakdown is of primary importance simply because a traditionally based clinical formulation, like that placed on me while in the mental hospital, would gut the experience of its true meaning and deeper significance. Many clinical diagnoses could legitimately be superimposed onto my real experience, yet none can adequately describe what actually occurred or what I endured.

Professional clinicians could sit in an office and discuss my subjective experience in objective, scientific terms, yet such an analysis could never achieve an accurate understanding of me as the actual person who experienced the reality behind observed symptoms (Siebert, 2000).

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND LITERATURE AS A GROUND FOR MY HEALING PROCESS AND LIFE

Existential philosophy, psychology, and literature have made a tremendous impact on me and have transformed the way that I interpret experience in general, as well as my own experience including my breakdown. Many existentialist writers have contributed to this transformation.

Philosophy

In philosophy, these writers have been Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-
Paul Sartre. As recognized forerunners of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have touched me the most deeply and thoroughly. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche presented extensive depth analyses of human nature as divided against itself and emphasized the primacy of active willing in the process of becoming fully human. Kierkegaard, in such works as “Sickness Unto Death” (1849/1946) and “The Concept of Anxiety” (1844/2000), is brilliant in his discussions of despair and anxiety as fundamental human experiences that are essential to psycho-spiritual transformation. Nietzsche’s brilliance is evident throughout all of his writings, particularly those of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book For All and None* (1892/1954b), *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How One Philos- phizes with a Hammer* (1889/1954c), and *The Antichrist* (1895/1954a), in which he emphasizes the pervasive falseness and unreality of human existence and the consequent desperate need for individual human beings to pursue an existence that is deep, passionate, and grounded in what is real. They have each moved me powerfully because of their respective illuminations of transcendence as rooted in voluntary suffering and as the ultimate goal of human life.

Jaspers has influenced me significantly through his works “On My Philosophy” (1941/1975a) and “The Encompassing” (1935/1975b), which is from his work *Reason and Existenz*. His description of Existenz as Being, the Infinite, the Transcendent, the Encompassing, and Deity, as well as his definition of philosophizing as the central process of human beings becoming whole through dynamic relation to this ultimate ground, has inspired me with great hope concerning the purpose of human existence.

Heidegger has had by far the deepest impact on me of the 20th-century existentialist philosophers. Through such works as “My Way to Phenomenology” (1969/1975a), “What is Metaphysics?” (1929/1975c), “The Way Back Into the Ground of Metaphysics” (1949/1975b), and *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), I have been revitalized in my search for a grounding in the transcendent and to exist authentically in relation to reality. This has occurred primarily and more specifically by contact with Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the human being as *dasein* and of dasein’s relation to Being.

Sartre has influenced me significantly as well, particularly in his works “Self-Deception” (1943/1975a) from *Being and Nothingness*, “The Wall” (1939/1975b), and *Nausea* (1938/1964). His discus-
sion of bad faith, or self-deception, has deepened my understanding of the nature of human choice as well as the central importance of honesty, integrity, and authenticity in the process of becoming. Sartre’s vivid literary descriptions of the phenomenological dynamics involved in death confrontation and of the extreme human ambivalence toward the acts and process of existing have contributed to my conviction that an intensified awareness of life is contingent upon an equally intense awareness of its absence.

Psychology

Rollo May is clearly the writer who has most greatly affected my passion for and understanding of existential psychology. Through such works as his coedited Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958), The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology (1983), Man’s Search For Himself (1953), Love and Will (1969), and his coauthored textbook The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective (Schneider & May, 1995), my academic and personal experience of existential psychology has been heightened tremendously. In particular, his phenomenological description of being, cultural analysis of the human dilemma, and primary emphasis on the indispensability of active willing, meaning creation, and the creation of the authentic self have become an essential aspect of both my academic and personal development.

Next to May, the other existentialist writer who has influenced me the most significantly is Viktor Frankl. His work Man’s Search for Meaning (1946/1959) moved me considerably and has been a substantial foundation for my developing knowledge of existential psychology. One need hardly mention the vast impact that his personal testimony and psychological theory have had on generations throughout the entire world. When I first read it, I was awe-struck and realized instinctively that Frankl’s conviction that meaning creation through the experience of suffering is humankind’s most essential drive and task was also my fundamental conviction. Having read this work not long after my extended recovery process, it helped me tremendously in my struggle to create meaning out of incomprehensible suffering.

Frankl’s work The Doctor and the Soul (1946/1967) contributed further to my foundational understanding of existential psychol-
ogy through his insistence that medical professionals view patients holistically and address their spiritual concerns.

Other core writers in the existential psychology tradition who have significantly affected me include Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm, and, more recently, Irvin Yalom and James F. T. Bugental. Rogers has had a substantial impact on me since my initial study of him in my graduate therapy training program. The person-centered therapeutic approach has shaped the principles that underlie my understanding of persons and therapeutic style, and I resonate strongly with the central assumptions of Rogerian theory. The classic work *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Rogers, 1961) has touched me powerfully in its conception of human nature and personality change. The work of Maslow, as a widely recognized founder of the existential-humanistic movement in psychology, has enriched the way in which I view human nature and the process of personality transformation through his discussions of the self-actualizing personality and the primary function of transcendence in human experience. His essential work, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Maslow, 1971/1993) has catalyzed and challenged my search to become a person who is creative and open to what is unfamiliar and difficult. Fromm, like many of the authors that I have discussed, has deeply affected my own heart through his analysis of human nature in *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (1968). Specifically, his discussion of the biophilous and necrophilous personalities has increased my understanding of the life-and-death conflict that lies at the center of human existence.

More recent, because of an existential psychotherapies course that I took at Saybrook Graduate School, I was introduced to the work of Yalom and Bugental. Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) has provided me with a strong basis for understanding existential psychology theory as well as the practice of the existential psychotherapy process. In particular, his discussion of primary existential themes such as death anxiety and its compensatory dynamics; the centrality of freedom, responsibility, and willing in personality functioning; the experience of isolation; and the vital necessity of meaning in human existence has further advanced my conceptualization of the human condition. Finally, Bugental's work, particularly that of *The Search For Existential Identity: Patient-Therapist Dialogues in Humanistic Psychotherapy* (1976),
has literally moved me to tears as I sat stunned and realized that I want to practice the style of therapy of which Bugental seems to be a master. His relentless focus on being deeply rooted in the here and now of present experience and his constant attention to the inner subjective world of the client have greatly inspired me. As I read *The Art of the Psychotherapist* (Bugental, 1987), I felt liberated concerning my own professional development in response to his validation and affirmation of the integral role of the therapist’s subjectivity in the therapeutic process.

**Literature**

The primary existentialist literary writers who have had the greatest impact on me are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, and Albert Camus. Literature has always been my first love and is the expressive form of communication that is most able to penetrate my inner depths. In my view, it is only right and natural that literary artists—the novelists, short story writers, essayists, and poets—provide the most powerful and insightful descriptions of existential realities.

Dostoevsky is simply a literary genius and is arguably, in my opinion, the greatest novelist who has ever lived. “Notes From Underground” (1864/1975) is searing in its stark revelation of the depths of human nature. It has both haunted and given me tremendous hope in its depiction of human existence as a fundamental inner contradiction, a gaping schism resulting in a fragmented and dual personality at war within itself. Again, light is revealed through darkness; before psychic unification and integration can occur, an awareness of the psyche’s primal conflict must become conscious. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the existential concern of the human being’s relation to a transcendent source, or metaphysical absolute, is evident in Dostoevsky’s famous conception, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted” (1880/1981, pp. 708, 760, 782). Indeed, it seems that the primary existential crisis for the human being is rooted in this very question. Also within this work is Dostoevsky’s famous parable, “The Grand Inquisitor” (1880/1981), in which he offers what may be the most powerful metaphor in all of literature for depicting the roles of anxiety, choice, and freedom in our existential condition. Thus, the question remains for me, “Will I sacrifice my freedom, authenticity, and integrity as a human being for the illusion of security and comfort?”
Kafka has influenced me profoundly through several of his works. *The Metamorphosis* (1915/1986) has portrayed for me the horrifying condition of existential isolation, or alienation, particularly in the form of the conflict between individual identity and interpersonal expectations. In his parables “A Message From the Emperor” (1912/1996a) and “Before the Law” (1912/1996b), the essential existential dilemmas of meaninglessness and the demands of authenticity and responsibility have reached to my core and have challenged me to examine my own ground of meaning and commitment to pursue authenticity in the midst of suffering.

Rilke is, and has for some time been, one of my favorite poets. The depth and intensity of his vision astound me. What is most striking and moving for me in Rilke’s poetry is his passion for the deepening and widening of human existence. This passion is seen in the following lines from his *A Book for the Hours of Prayer* (1903/1981): “I live my life in growing orbits which move out over the things of the world” (p. 13), and “I love the dark hours of my being in which my senses drop into the deep” (p. 19). Equally moving for me is Rilke’s fearless emphasis upon experiences of darkness, pain, and suffering as holding the greatest potential for wholeness and transformation. This emphasis is palpable in the lines, “You darkness, that I come from, I love you more than all the fires that fence in the world . . . it is possible a great energy is moving near me. I have faith in nights” (Rilke, 1903/1981, p. 21), and the following from his *Letters to a Young Poet* (1934/1954):

> How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us. So you must not be frightened, dear Mr. Kappus, if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. (p. 69)

Eliot is also one of my favorite poets. Although not typically placed in the existentialist tradition, I believe that his poetry is saturated with existential themes and concerns. “Ash-Wednesday” (1930/1952a) has had the deepest impact on me, and I usually can-
not read through any of its poems without weeping. Poem V of this work is central to my life and has brought me much pain as well as much healing. It embodies for me the naked revelation of humanity’s condition, the agonizing ambivalence toward being in relationship to an ultimate center or ground of existence. The revelation takes shape in these lines:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent . . .
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.
O my people, what have I done unto thee.
Will the veiled sister pray for . . .
Those who chose thee and oppose thee . . .
For children at the gate
Who will not go away and cannot pray: . . .
for those who offend her
And are terrified and cannot surrender . . .
O my people. (Eliot, 1930/1952a, pp. 65-66)

Another of Eliot’s works that has meant a great deal to me is *Four Quartets* (1943/1952b). In “Little Gidding” of that work, there are these burning words:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire . . .
We only live, only suspirer
Consumed by either fire or fire. (Eliot, 1943/1952b, pp. 143-144)

I believe that my recovery process was a pyre and that I was only redeemed from the fire of my destitution by the redemptive fire of integration.

Camus has exerted a significant influence on me, primarily in regard to his central theme of the possibility to choose one’s response and attitude toward any experience, especially the experience of suffering. In *The Plague* (1948), this is evident in the
unique responses of Camus's characters and the choices that they make in attempting to cope with the effects of a plague that has afflicted their entire town. Through their individual responses, one sees the inherent freedom that each person has to determine their attitudes and actions in response to extreme suffering. Through Camus's protagonist, it is shown that the most noble and necessary choice in response to senseless suffering is not to give up and die but, rather, to persist sacrificially and actualize healing in the midst of it.

In Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1955/1975), the stark and raw truth that meaning can be created in the very midst of meaningless suffering is forcefully declared and passionately celebrated. In Camus's interpretation of the ancient myth, he argued that we must imagine Sisyphus to be happy in his meaningless toil precisely because he is conscious of his torment. Human consciousness is thus seen as a peculiar two-edged sword. The consciousness that suffers through the awareness of suffering is the same consciousness that can transform its suffering through willing a uniquely personal, meaningful response. As Camus stated,

That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than is rock... The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. (1955/1975, p. 377)

My study of existential thought—philosophical, psychological, and literary—has provided me with an expanded and deepened understanding of human existence and the nature of human experience. I would even go so far as to say that the primal meaning discovered through this study (recently and in previous years) has, in a very real sense, saved me. This primal meaning that has saved me is the liberating truth that suffering does not have to be experienced as irreparably damaging and meaningless but, rather, can be experienced as an enlivening, meaningful, and sacred source of transformation and healing. It is the paradox that pain resides at the very center of psychic and spiritual evolution; it is the shocking yet comforting answer to our desperate cries for meaning and our hopeless ruminations about ever becoming whole human beings.
The reality of our beautiful and terrifying existence is that our salvation comes to us in our encounters with divine affliction.

REFERENCES


An Existential Case Study of Madness


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