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EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VOID

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Abstract

Loneliness is one of the most common of all human conditions, but it is largely misunderstood by the general population and clinicians alike. In this article, I draw sharp distinctions between “pathological loneliness” (what people usually mean when they say they are lonely) and “existential loneliness,” the central focus of this paper. I briefly review the former in order to differentiate it clearly from the latter, arguing that pathological loneliness derives from the unsuccessful resolution of existential loneliness. The two are fundamentally inseparable, constituting different manifestations of the same human condition. Existential loneliness springs from our very nature as human beings. It speaks to the fundamental emptiness and disconnectedness we feel as we grapple with the profoundest questions of the uncertainty of life and death. I argue that we must come to grips with our existential loneliness if we are to fully embrace our humanity and that love is the only healthy response to our dilemma. Finally, I discuss our need to resolve our existential situation by adopting an alternative epistemology—unitary consciousness—an epistemology that understands the fundamental oneness of being.

Millions of people are desperately lonely every day (Cutrona, 1982); still, loneliness remains perhaps one of the most disregarded and misunderstood of all psychological conditions. It is not considered a formal diagnosis nor are there any but the most meager clinical efforts devoted to its amelioration. In our culture, which is so competitive (Kohn, 1990) and, in many other ways, alienating (Booth, 1996; May, 1969; Slater, 1976; Weiss, 1982), we may not be surprised that loneliness abounds; however, given that it does, why do we do so little to relieve those who suffer its multiple torments and psychologically disintegrating dynamics?

Arguably, loneliness is a “silent” condition, by which I mean two things: (1) many lonely people fail to recognize that what they are experiencing is actually loneliness, given that depression, feelings of helplessness, low self-regard, and loneliness overlap in significant ways, rendering discrimination difficult; (2) to admit one’s own loneliness in a public way is socially embarrassing—one is simply “not supposed” to be lonely and, if one is, the feelings are not to be discussed. The lonely person is, in this sense, a social pariah. Just imagine going to a social event where someone asks you, “How are you?”, to which you respond, “I am very lonely.” Your honest response would likely stop conversation and the other person might even move away from you, not knowing how to react or what to say. In fact, Fromm-Reichmann (1959) noted this tendency in her very early work on loneliness. We do not seem to possess the requisite cultural tools for dealing with people who tell us they are lonely and we seem to intuitively avoid them. An example of how people feel when admitting (or seeming to admit to) being lonely can be gleaned from the following scenario.

Each semester, I give my undergraduate students at least one article on loneliness because I know college students are at high risk for loneliness and I believe that understanding it confers an advantage in dealing with it. The important element here is that I *used* to ask students if anyone wanted the handouts before I distributed them. I altered my behavior because virtually no one raised their hands and I knew the odds were against none of my 200 students being lonely. Now, when I distribute them, I tell this story and ask them why they think I changed my behavior. They readily respond that, if they were to signal that they wanted a handout, they would be self-identifying as lonely and would be embarrassed and feel inferior or, as one student put it, “It would make me feel like there was something wrong with me and that others would avoid me.” So, even at a young age, people seem to know that the expression of their loneliness is not positively socially sanctioned.

In addition to the “silence” of loneliness, I think people have a sense (and this may be shared by scientists and helping professionals) that loneliness is so common that it is “just part of life.” If that is what they believe, they are partially correct; however, the “just part of life” type of loneliness is not synonymous with the type of loneliness I have been discussing. On the contrary, I have been talking about pathological loneliness and they are thinking about existential loneliness, but, not realizing the difference, they are confusing the two. These two general types of loneliness are “flip sides of the same coin,” as it were, different aspects of the same dialectic. But, while existential loneliness is an immanent, fundamental, intrinsic part of being a human being—virtually the price for being alive, if I may paraphrase Fromm (1956)—pathological loneliness is a method of adapting to life’s challenges in a less than healthy manner. It is a reactive process at best and a chronic, plaguing desperate lifestyle, coupled with depression, at worst.

WHAT IS PATHOLOGICAL LONELINESS?: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CORRELATES

While the past two decades have yielded a rich literature enlightening the nature of pathological loneliness, there is still no universally accepted definition of it. Weiss (1973) describes pathological loneliness rather than defines it, but his description is poignant: [Loneliness is a] “gnawing, chronic distress without redeeming features” (p. 15). He sees nothing positive in being lonely, and later data support his hypothesis. I would argue, given the data, that, whether loneliness is reactive and short-lived or long-term, cognitive, affective, and behavioral components all play vital roles in constituting it. It is dysfunctional because lonely people are not happy people and they do not enjoy life (Booth, Bartlett, & Bohnsack, 1992; Fordyce, 1986). They tend to reject, directly and indirectly, the very resource they most need to ameliorate their condition, namely, other human beings (Jones, 1982).

Pathological loneliness is correlated with a multitude of counter-productive interactive styles (Russell, 1982), diminished problem-solving abilities (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982), and significant social skills deficits (Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981). Lonely people tend to talk too much about themselves without asking about the well-being of others, they tend to have poor eye contact with others, and they find it very difficult to commence and/or maintain social relationships. Pathological loneliness is also positively correlated with suicide, alcoholism, self-protective defenses, and, at times, extreme narcissistic self-preoccupation (Booth, 1983, 1985a, 1985b; Laing, 1960). Lonely people self-describe as “worthless,” “dead inside,” “unacceptable to others,” and “separated from others” (Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981). They feel alone and unwanted. They tend to think less abstractly than nonlonely people (Booth, 1985a) and they tend to experience fewer feelings of well-being, including spiritual well-being (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Developmentally, chronically lonely people often experienced less intimacy as children than others and frequently engage in symbiotic relationships (i.e., “codependent” relationships) since, given their early bonding deficits, they often crave, in a powerfully compensatory way, to be loved (Johnson, 1991).

This brief descriptive analysis in no way exhausts the characteristics associated with loneliness. Suffice it to say that pathologically lonely people are sad people. They feel alone and depressed, negative, worthless, hostile, and overly anxious. The problem is not that they have too few relationships; the problem is that they perceive the relationships they have, regardless of the “objective” quality of those relationships, as inadequate to meet their needs (Booth, 1996). In many cases, their expectations far exceed what can be reasonably expected from human loyalty and friendship, not to mention love.

This brief overview stands in stark contrast to the nature and character of existential loneliness, but, before I move to this—our central—topic, two points, frequently misunderstood, should be made clear.

First, loneliness (pathological or existential) is not the same as being alone. In fact, we all need time alone for reflection, creativity, and reintegration. Voluntary isolation for these purposes is healthy and even necessary to offset the challenges of social life. Solitude can reinvigorate us so we can reconnect with others in balanced ways (Storr, 1988). Being alone can also be useful in allowing ourselves the time and space we need for spiritual or non-material concerns, that is, for re-evaluating our lives or contemplating the deeper aspects of life and death.

Second, loneliness is not synonymous with depression. If people misidentify their loneliness by naming it depression, they will not merely obscure the true nature of what they are experiencing; they may also begin to behave as if they were depressed, which complicates their situation considerably. Since emotions and behaviors flow from cognition (Anderson, 1990), people should be conceptually clear about what they are feeling so they can deal with the real issues challenging their lives. Clearly, this has critical implications for psychotherapy.

It appears intuitively true that everyone is lonely sometimes, even if for short periods. However, we would be in error if we were to dismiss loneliness as too commonplace an experience to warrant concern. It carries with it far too many risks, both physical and psychological, to merely be ignored as if it were meaningless.

EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

Fromm (1956, 1976), the eminent psychoanalyst and theorist, argues that human beings are caught up in a “thrownness” from which we cannot extricate ourselves, specifically, that we are intrinsically and inexorably linked with the animal world because we are animals and that we are also alone in the universe as a function of our complex human consciousness, a level of awareness we do not share with the rest of the animal world. Because we are aware of our sameness with the rest of nature as well as our difference, we feel torn between our two levels of being as if they were unrelated (i.e., the dualism of flesh and spirit) and, unless we resolve the perceived split, we will not be happy. Somehow, we must integrate our animal aspects (e.g., drives, historical evolutionary survival patterns) within the broader context of our transcendent consciousness. We must learn to deal effectively with knowing we will die, though we do not know what death is, while simultaneously possessing the sense that we want to live forever. In effect, however, the split can never be completely resolved; hence, humans are, by our very nature, lonely and vulnerable in the universe—and we know it. This constitutes the essence of what Fromm calls the existential dilemma; it is the foundation of existential loneliness, uncertainty, and “angst.” Similar ideas can be found in the works of Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and others. Fundamentally, we are dealing with dread—the dread of knowing we cannot know, the dread of the forever unknowable. Klocker (1962) puts it well:

Dread is felt before the indefinite and the nameless. It is just because one does not know what he fears that he experiences dread. It is a fear of nothing, and simply because it is nothing it is all the more dreadful. This nothingness closes in on man from all sides. Around him things come to an end and are no more. There is a lack, an emptiness, an absence in being which continually shows itself. (p. 184)

Moustakas (1972) also argues that the most salient of all types of human loneliness is existential loneliness, which he describes as “a reality of being human, of being aware, and of facing ultimate experiences of upheaval, tragedy, and change, the intrinsic loneliness of being born, of living at the extremes, of dying” (p. 20).

For both Fromm (1956, 1976) and Moustakas (1972), existential loneliness is an inescapable aspect of human life. It is part of who we are. It is the reality we live from the time we are born until we die. To be existentially lonely is to know and embrace our humanity. It is to experience the deepest levels of insecurity and despair, but it is also the impetus to move beyond these to the creation of meaning (Frankl, 1978).

An example of existential loneliness in human life is bereavement (Brabant, 1990; Brice, 1991). The deepest realities of the cycle of birth and death are manifested in the physical loss of someone we love (Ajaya, 1983). In dialectical fashion, we do what we are drawn to do, that is, we give ourselves to another. We give of that which is most precious to us—we give the gift of ourselves (Fromm, 1956). We support the growth of the other, we attempt to live with the limitations of the other, we try to accept the reality of what the other cannot provide. We cry with the other, we cry for the other, we miss the other when life demands a short separation. Then, when we have given what we have, when we have emblazoned the other in our hearts, the other side of the dialectic appears: the beloved dies. And, we know they must die—we know that we all die, but to know is not necessarily to understand. How does one understand the permanent absence of one's beloved after perhaps a lifetime of living together? How does one fill the hole in one's heart? How does one ever trust life enough to love again?

So, we are left in a quandary, an existential quandary. We are helpless to change the fact of death; we are helpless to obliterate our consciousness of it. We are left with the inevitable reality and are expected to continue to trust in life. And, even though a multitude of others may have loved the one we love, each is alone in bereavement. Ultimately, we are—all of us—alone together.

Angyal (1965) argues that the source of all neurosis is anxiety and, in turn, anxiety's source is the existential fear of death. But, we would not need to be concerned about anticipatory anxiety if we were not first *aware* that we will die, which is the essence of Fromm's dilemma. When we feel true anxiety, in whatever form, we should look—not to the symptoms alone—but also to the source of that vague and mysterious feeling and ask ourselves about the relationship between our felt anxiety and unresolved death issues.

The above notion may have powerful implications. Suppose we take the quite common case of an agoraphobic person. This person, fearful of open spaces possibly to the point of experiencing anxiety or panic attacks, enters psychotherapy. While the therapist may choose to remediate some of the symptomatology with, for example, desensitization or cognitive-behavioral therapy methods, for Angyal (1965), that is merely the beginning; for in this view, the symptoms will probably recur if the therapy does not trace the agoraphobic condition to its root—namely, the vague sense that “open spaces” present some underlying, if unconscious threat, having to do with death. The therapy must employ metaphor if it is to connect with the source of the problem, that is, it must discover what danger the client unconsciously “perceives” open spaces to hold. What can open spaces *do* to me? What hidden “demons” might lurk there that could threaten my very physical and/or my psychological existence? It is very much the same with all anxiety-related conditions, even those that are sub-clinical. For example, why become upset when a friend does not invite me to her party? Can I not easily survive without attending a party? But, I fail to understand that it is not the party itself that matters; rather, it is what the party signifies for me and the fact that my validation has experienced a perceived decrement because my friend has failed to invite me. This rejection is a type of “felt” annihilation: I am not worthy of being invited to the party by my friend; therefore, I am no longer important. I am “dead” to my friend. At this juncture, I might even become depressed or pathologically lonely, since my expectations were that I *should* have been invited to the party (for validation) and I was not.

Feinstein and Krippner (1988) and Krippner (1986) have suggested that life presents many "little deaths" every day. Someone we admire ignores us, a friend fails to return a call, a person we like rejects us, someone else is selected before us, a loved one fails to understand us, a friend moves away—these are all little deaths. Why deaths? We are still physically alive. We are breathing and walking and working. Why consider these deaths? The answer lies in the fact that the deepest kinds of death are not physical; rather, they are psychological and spiritual. They have to do with vulnerability and deep fears of annihilation. They have to do with our fear of being reduced to nothingness (Fromm, 1976; May, 1979). They have to do with killing the human spirit.

Some people go to great lengths, probably unconsciously, to offset their fear of death, their sense of existential loneliness. Pathological power and aggression toward others are merely two examples of this reaction formation. Fromm (1975) makes this point painfully clear in his analysis of several high-ranking Nazi leaders of the Third Reich. Also, Adler (1964) made the same point in a general way when he developed the construct of overcompensation. Some have argued that the creation of religion itself stems from the human need to project oneself into eternity in order to be saved from the alternative: unconsciousness in perpetuity and the dread of thinking about dying all of one's life. If life must mean something, then death must mean something. If there is no intrinsic meaning in any of it, humans create the meaning and they sometimes wage wars or persecute others or ritualistically sacrifice humans or sanctify burnings at the stake in the name of their own savior-deities. It would appear that human beings, as a group, are a frightened lot who construct thought and belief systems, create monuments to themselves, procreate, establish cultures, amass fortunes, and seek power in order to project themselves into the future, into eternity (Becker, 1975; Cahill, 1995). Some of these behaviors are constructive; others not.

Closely associated with existential loneliness, in fact, inextricably interwoven into it, is Moustakas' (1972) notion of "anxiety of loneliness." This is not real loneliness, Moustakas argues, but a defense against confronting the important questions of life and death. Being truly lonely, for Moustakas, is, in its deepest sense, embracing an inward search in which one is open to the fundamental issues of nature and being. Even if the search becomes what James (1958/1902), borrowing from the mystic, St. John of the Cross, called "the dark night of the soul," it must be engaged. Human beings must come face to face with the "awe-full" side of their psychospiritual nature, relinquishing, at least for a time, the preconceived notions learned during early socialization. We must suspend the security of what we think we know in order to discover that we really know nothing at all, at least about the most important questions. This awareness inevitably leads, at first, to an intense insecurity and a feeling of floating alone in an unanchored universe. Nothing is certain, nothing final. Everything is fluid, there is nothing to hold on to. Now, we are at the heart of existential loneliness. But, once faced and felt, we can begin to transcend the dreaded angst and build as if for the first time. Fear abates, anxiety abandons our dreams, and we become comfortable in the universe. Uncertainty becomes our friend and we find anchoring in that because we understand that it is the deepest truth, the most human of all human realities. We have transcended the diminishing aspect of our cowering fears; we have moved beyond the slavery of anticipatory anxieties about our own deaths; we have found our freedom. Watts (1951) discusses this notion brilliantly and in such a way that one feels that the deepest level of the psychological life is the engagement of these frightening psychospiritual realities coupled with the hope of moving beyond them in a psychology of transcendence (Neher, 1990). One also has the sense that this was James', May's, and Fromm's goal, namely, the engagement followed by the extrication. But, first the engagement. Frenetic activity, material preoccupations, social climbing, acquisition of power, and other distractions are indicative of failing to engage loneliness properly.

May (1953, 1969), agreeing with Angyal (1965), furthers Moustakas' idea by arguing that all true anxiety can be traced to humans transforming the dread of death into a more manageable

dynamic, namely, anxiety. Thus, people focus on the anxiety as the problem rather than as a symptom of a deeper, underlying conflict. Hence, for May as well as Angyal, anxiety and associated disorders stem from an inadequate engagement of existential loneliness. Instead of moving into (and eventually through) it, the anxious work feverishly, if unconsciously, to avoid considering the fundamental human dilemma. Interestingly, unlike the pathologically lonely and the anxiety-ridden, those who engage their existential loneliness are learning to love (Fromm, 1956; May, 1969; Moustakas, 1972).

For all three theorists, true love is the closest human beings can come to transcending the existential dilemma of our "thrownness." It is the closest we can get to being meaningfully connected in the world. In fact, love is the only *real* connectedness, limited though it might be; everything else is an illusion of connectedness. In love, as in existential loneliness, people openly and honestly confront the fleeting realities of human life; love and loneliness are but different dimensions of the same involvement in and commitment to life. Moustakas (1972) intertwines the two into a virtual psychological necessity when he says, "love has no meaning without loneliness; loneliness becomes real only as a response to love" (p. 146).

But, the illusion of love is commonplace. Many people, fearing the vulnerability of their aloneness too much, create symbiotic relationships that deny them access to the truth about what life is about at its deepest levels. They close off the avenues that lead to the pain of feeling unanchored in exchange for the appearance of love. It is this closing off that leads to codependence, in which all of life, including one's own identity, is falsely found in another. This false solution has its own consequences, but blunts the larger picture by shrinking reality down to the presumed "all-importance" of one other person. In addition, codependence ultimately presents its own form of alienation and uncertainty. At times, codependent persons become desperate and very narrowly focused, saying things like "I can't live without you," "If I can't have you, no one can," "You are my whole life," and "I live only for you." This is not love; it is a substitute for love. It renders the codependent persons totally dependent on each other for their very subsistence and survival. Both have sacrificed their personal identity for a "folly of two," as Fromm (1956) says. It is as if two fractured, partial people desperately attempt to become one integrated person. But, the strategy, being ill-founded, does not succeed. Integrity is sacrificed and pathological loneliness, together with fears of abandonment, replace it. Alcoholism, drug addiction, gang membership, and sex addiction are among the many other forms of substitutive, false solutions. The first two numb, the third provides a false sense of belonging, and the last confuses bodily fusion and love.

Mijuskovic (1977, 1979) agrees with the above when he rejects a unidimensional view of loneliness as pathological, but he carries his argument further when he posits loneliness as the fundamental motivational principle in human life: "Once a man has established his more obviously physical and biological drives and comfortably secured the necessities of air, water, and food, he then strives to alleviate his desperate loneliness" (p. 114).

In this view, loneliness motivates people to avoid isolation, but this is natural rather than aberrant (Mijuskovic, 1977). Even when social, however, people are really alone and need to face that reality. In other words, we are always alone and, when we are with each other, we are alone together. People are only "apparently not alone" when they are together (Mijuskovic, 1977, p. 115). While discussing fundamental human motivation, Mijuskovic (1979) suggests that, had Freud realized the profound importance of loneliness in human life, he would have argued that loneliness, rather than sexual energies, motivates all human behavior.

The existential therapist and thinker Yalom (1980) also discusses existential loneliness but names it "existential isolation" (p. 355). He argues that existential isolation is natural to the human condition; it is not pathological and can never be "corrected" because it is an essential

part of being human. For Yalom (1980), as for Fromm, May, and Moustakas, love must exist despite this isolation. He says that people:

are often isolated from others and from parts of themselves, but underlying these splits is an even more basic isolation that belongs to existence—an isolation that persists despite the most gratifying engagement with other individuals and despite consummate self-knowledge and integration. Existential isolation refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being. It refers, too, to an isolation even more fundamental—a separation between the individual and the world. (p. 355)

Having confronted who we are as human beings in the world, we may enter either into love or despair. Psychologically speaking, it is love that is the life force; despair paves the road to the melancholy of hopelessness. It is this kind of despair that may lead to all manner of evil (Becker, 1975) and the shriveling of the human spirit. Thus, love is our only healthy option, again, limited though it might be. But, love is more than an emotion. If it were not, we would love when we “felt” loving; love would be as fleeting as the feeling underlying it. Love is a choice and a gift. It is our way of reaching out to others and, ultimately, to all of life. Love is all we have to connect us in a world which leaves us uncertain; it is the foundation of all human connectedness in a world in which we find ourselves utterly and, at times, frighteningly, alone. Fromm describes love beautifully when he says:

Giving is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. . . . What does one person give to another? He gives of himself, of the most precious gift he has, he gives of his life . . . of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness—of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in him. (Fromm, 1956, pp. 19-20)

RESOLUTION OF THE EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA: IS RESOLUTION POSSIBLE?

In beginning this final section of the paper, I want to draw upon a distinction that Marcel (1949) made regarding the difference between a “problem” and a “mystery.” If I may reconstruct his words, a problem is a situation that possesses a solution, that is, even though a solution may not be evident or perhaps even discovered yet, it is possible (*in potentia*, at least) to alter the situation that requires change (i.e., a problem). A mystery knows no solution; a mystery just is. We will never understand it, not to mention alter it. That is the nature of a mystery. I would argue that pathological loneliness is a problem; existential loneliness is a mystery.

If we were to deal therapeutically (or, for that matter, personally) with pathological loneliness, we might analyze its subtype, its constituents, the deficits that help constitute it, and possible alterations in behavior, attitude, and cognition that may serve to effectuate change. This is all possible. We can learn social skills; we can learn how to listen to others; we can learn to temper our expectations. But, one does not learn how not to die; one does not learn how to prevent the death of one’s beloved; one does not learn how to be healthily unconscious of one’s aloneness in the universe. Hence, while we can change the former, the latter is insoluble. Existential loneliness is a mystery. It just is. And, its “is-ness” is who we are; it is our thrownness, our being-in-the-world.

Resolution, on the other hand, is a viable and no less valuable response to existential loneliness than problem-solving is to pathological loneliness. By resolution, I mean to come to grips with, to reduce internal conflict about, and to become comfortable with (i.e., to transcend) our dilemma. Resolution, in this sense, implies restraining our desperate attempts

to numb ourselves or fool ourselves or to bury ourselves instead of confronting our situation straightforwardly. It implies that we consider alternatives to the dualisms we have been so well and thoroughly taught. It implies that we develop an alternative epistemology that incorporates a healthy monism and replace the splitting we have engaged in for so long.

When we think dualistically, we split the dialectic, as Ajaya (1983) says. We think in “either-or” terms instead of “both-and,” and this is what complicates our situation with respect to the existential dilemma. When we consider that we are either alive or dead, we fail to remember that the one is a necessary requisite for the other and both are part of who we are. That is why, when we fear life, we also fear death, and, when death is a specter we cannot shake while we live, we never really live. Biologically and psychologically, as we know, we are living and dying all the time. As we age, cells die and others are born; as we change, new patterns replace the old. We never remain the same. Fluidity and immanent change are fundamental processes of nature.

Moreover, when we split our consciousness into thoughts about whether we are alone or connected, we misperceive the underlying reality of unitary consciousness—that we are at all times both alone and together. I carry within me all that I have ever experienced. While I may be physically alone, I am never psychologically alone. And, deeper, because I am a part of all of nature and the entirety of the universe, I am never really physically alone either. I am always both alone and connected.

If we can become comfortable knowing we are already dead (while yet alive), what can frighten us? If we can know we are never really separated (although we may be separate), how can we be lonely? The difficulty in reconnecting the split is buried in our narcissism: we *do not want* to die. But, that is merely another desire, like the millions we have experienced all of our lives, and it may also be placed in perspective. *I do not want* is a linguistic construction emerging from the notion that dying is a “bad” thing. To die and to be alone are neither good nor bad—they just are. Narcissistic resistance serves only to make the process unpalatable and aversive. And narcissism springs from our unwillingness to face the limitations of natural life. Wilber (1977) says it well:

Because man has separated his organism from his environment and then identified himself exclusively with the former, the problem of the organism’s existence or non-existence now becomes of paramount concern. Thus, because and only because the organism is separated from the environment by the Primary Dualism, there is generated an existential “angst,” the anxiety of being versus nullity, of existence versus non-existence, of life versus death....the underlying unity, in other words, is now projected as a multiplicity of “separate things.” (pp. 118, 122)

When we begin to understand the underlying unity of all nature, we become aware that we “see” the world in illusory dualisms. Even modern physics tells us this (Capra, 1975, 1980). All elements in nature are representations of the same energy. We are fueled as the flower is fueled; the flower and we are, fundamentally, different and the same. So with all of life. Moreover, we grieve the loss of the flower as it dies because we are invested in it; it is part of our lives, part of us. We also grieve each other’s deaths and we grieve our own long before it actually occurs. But, to grieve is neither good nor bad, either—it just is; grieving is a part of us that renders us beautifully vulnerable in the horror of our pain. And even horror and pain *just are*.

Finally, we are not without choice. We can fight nature if we choose to do so. We can become angry that death has deprived us; we can become outraged that we can anticipate our own demise. But, to what end? To spend the energy we have been given in such a way that

we resent the very nature of which we are a part? That would be self-hatred at its zenith. But, we can choose to do it. We will not win, of course, but we can choose to waste the life we have and the outcome will be agonizing pathos.

Or, we can choose to live life as it has been delivered to us in our thrownness. We can live it to the fullest and move beyond the limitations of dialectical thinking. In short, we can love. We can give ourselves over to the task of recognizing that we are enmeshed in a mystery, and mysteries are unfathomable. We can begin to recognize the interrelatedness of all life forms and their fundamental interdependence. What happens to me affects the whole since I am a part of the totality of the universe; I am a part of the ebb and flow of the process. I am embedded in life just as life is embedded in me. And, I derive even my uniqueness from relatedness to the rest. Thus, if I can rest comfortably in the knowledge that all is one, that we are all in this together, that what happens to you also happens to me, what need I fear? Certainly not death, for we will all be there together. And, not fearing death, I need not fear life. I need not concern myself. I can merely live because I am now eminently free to do so.

But, all of this is not to imply that the resolution of our dilemma is easy. It requires a difficult inward journey from which we never waver. It requires courage, or heart, since feeling the pain of the journey's lessons demands constancy. And, it requires hope—yes, hope—the deepest trust in the process of nature itself—that, while we were part of it all, we contributed to it all and that the gifts we gave will help those who follow us deal with the challenges of life and death with a nobler kind of grace. So, in the end, having understood that I cannot understand, having loved even though I have lost those I loved, and having given, trusting that my gifts were useful, I can move away more easily, with anticipation, and with peace, into whatever mystery may follow this one.

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