

diversity, contingency, and ambivalence in human joy and sorrow.

Juhani Ihanus' biography can be found on page 279.

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The Emotions of Facing Death, Dying, and Life in the Era of COVID

Life and Death in Personal and Cultural Retrospect

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Abstract: The author describes her personal experiences of life and death during a year of the COVID-19 pandemic from personal perspectives anchored in German and South African existentialist perspectives.

Keywords: Albert Camus, COVID-19, death-anxiety, existentialist-perspectives, German, pandemic, prayer, South African

Facing Life and Death in Two Cultures

Throughout our lives, we have to deal with living in the face of death and dying. All are inevitably human topics that connect human beings across cultures. As Albert Camus said, "The reason for my death is my life." However, life and death are defined and explored differently from different cultural and philosophical perspectives.

In the German culture that I come from, death is feared, sometimes tabooed, and often neglected, until it is so much in your face that you cannot deny it anymore. Even then, I have had to witness more than once that people even neglect death when they are about to die. In Germany, death and dying are often avoided as far as possible in the mainstream culture. People raised in Germany, in

cultural comparison, are usually not prepared to live a risky lifestyle to avoid death and dying for as long as possible. It seems that a safe and healthy lifestyle is preferred to postpone death since death reflects the end of life, the giving-up of all securities and materials that a person might have gained through their lives.

From this perspective, death might be seen as either an entrance into another life, another world, or as a Godly space. Death often represents the transition into a new reality—particularly for people with specific beliefs and religions—or even into the nothing, for people of certain philosophical beliefs (e.g., existentialist philosophical theories). The fear of death seems to be relatively high in German cultural contexts and this might be a reason why, during COVID-19, Germany adopted extreme measures such as lockdowns and a strong call for vaccinations in which people who do not agree to being vaccinated are strongly discriminated against. To avoid death and dying at all costs, democratic measures are being changed and society seems to be in a state of extreme death anxiety.

In the South African culture I live in, death and dying are everyday occurrences seen as part of life. Death and dying are in our face on a daily basis and occur constantly around us. Death is always close and a somehow integrated part of life; it is basically accepted as unavoidable. We live and experience death as closely related to life. Therefore, death is seen as a part of a journey belonging to God or a higher being's plan and represents a transition into a new, better world—a world that might lead us closer to God and peacefulness, but surely it reunifies us with our ancestors. The concepts of death and dying are socio-culturally, traditionally, and religiously determined. Death is immanent in life and people are aware of it constantly because they see it permanently happening. It is not hidden or avoided at any cost; instead, it is accepted as a natural process that ends this life and starts a new part of transformation.

Ways of Experiencing COVID-19

COVID-19 brought a lot of suffering and dying into South African society. But it was not as much experienced as a “sudden threat” to life as it was in the German context—death was rather experienced as “another thing we have to deal with” or “another threat and challenge on top of all the other daily life challenges.” It was experienced as one more health risk that was added to the list of daily life experiences and challenges (e.g., poverty, illness, disease, crime, and chaos) that people have to deal with.

During COVID-19, death became so common in our daily lives globally that people—even from cultures or personal backgrounds with high levels of death avoidance—could not deny it anymore, neither in the country I come from, nor in the country I live in. The world changed and the conversations about life and death, as well as meaning and purpose, changed with it. The silent presumption that life is eternal could not be adhered to anymore; the threat of living a finite life turned into a certainty for many people. Therefore, stories about life and death became an integrated part of life and the level of consciousness about life as something to be treasured grew. People in both of the cultures I am part of developed ways to deal with the uncertainty of life during COVID-19.

Thoughts on Living and Dying in Personal Retrospect

Amidst COVID-19, I had to deal with my personal challenges, which made me think about life and death on new levels. Death came pretty close when colleagues passed on, a friend was in a coma for several months due to COVID-19, and I was diagnosed with a rapidly growing tumor that urgently needed to be removed. First, I could not go for the operation since I had tested COVID-19 positive the day before the planned operation. I suddenly was confronted with the idea that my life could be over soon and questioned what I still wanted to do in my life if I had the time to do it. I reflected upon my personal preference of dying—what was the better option: dying of a malignant tumor or of COVID-19?

I always enjoyed the concept of French existentialism from the 20th century; particularly, I enjoyed reading Albert Camus. In his philosophy, he emphasizes that life is absurd and far removed from meaning and that individuals are not able to know the meaning of life, saying that “The reason for my death is my life.” I reflected deeply on his views on freedom and responsibility and—specifically during that time—on the idea that human existence is an absurd condition and that life becomes tragic in the rare moments when humans become conscious about the absurdity and the *per se* meaninglessness of life and its struggles. Emotionally, having grown up in European contexts, I can connect strongly to the ideas of existentialism and that through facing death and dying in an aware state, we can increase our awareness, question our core values, deepen our joy in life, and recreate our meaningfulness.

I re-read the existentialist texts of Albert Camus repeatedly and found a quotation that said, “Since we’re all going to die, it is obvious that when and how don’t matter.” I reflected on that quote

for many days. In the beginning, I felt that it was not true for myself. I felt that it did matter how we die and when because there could be—on an individual level—different levels of pain, feelings, arrangements, suffering, thoughts, and regrets involved in dying one way or another. Even on an interpersonal level, it makes a huge difference for me how and when to die since my children would be involved in the process of my passing on. I became clear about the fact that I wanted to live until they were at least 18. It could be true that how and when we pass on might not make a big difference on a societal or global level since the world sees various ways and times of death constantly and the world does not care how and when.

Only later did I learn that my tumor was benign and I had survived COVID-19 without many symptoms. But for eight weeks, I had time to experience the pain and the growth introduced to me by the anticipation of (an early and potentially lonely) death. I caught COVID-19 for a second time in July 2021, this time with more severe symptoms, and I had a chance to revise my earlier reflections on life and death.

It was at the same time when I caught COVID again that my daughter experienced a sudden heart failure after having encountered COVID-19 in France. She was rushed to a hospital and soon after received open-heart surgery to save her life. During those days of not knowing how and if she will survive, death showed me a completely different and extremely painful face. Within the anticipation of her early death, I got even sicker. I received many prayers from friends in which I felt that if I could, I would trade my life for hers. The question of the absurdity of not even having lived a long life and dying at the age of 21, before life had even really begun for her, left me confused and irritated. I was sick in bed, restless, and in huge emotional pain, desperation, and distress. Not being able to fly to Europe to be with her, not being able to talk to her or take her in my arms to support her as much as I would like made me feel extremely helpless. I felt that the potential of her early and sudden death was the most terrible thing I had ever encountered and that Camus' described absurdity of life caught up in her sudden heart failure.

Camus' words came back to my mind, lying in bed, unable to get up due to sickness, emotional pain, and COVID-19: "There is a life and there is a death, and there are beauty and melancholy in between." I agreed with that. I had seen beauty and melancholy before, but never felt so desperately lost and helpless. I could not

come to the point where I could accept the situation and its pain as part of an “absurd life.” I felt that I had seen beauty in my life and that having experienced beauty and also melancholy, I would be prepared to transition into death. But I could not accept it for my daughter, since I felt that she would need to see far more beauty in the world and fulfill her dreams before she could pass on.

When I talked to others about my daughter's situation, my South African friends and colleagues—no matter from which South African cultural background—said to me that God will take care of her and the situation and that they would pray, and that only God would know the way forward and how grateful I should be that she could get health care in Germany, and grateful for her life that she had so far. In one way or another, they all said that the only thing they could do for her was pray and that we should trust in God and His ways. They even came and prayed with me or called me to pray for her or texted me to express their empathy and wish to pray for her. The collective strengths of their prayers took away parts of my despair and helped me express my sadness and concern as well as believe that even this situation should carry some meaning for her and me.

My daughter is with me now, recovering from her near-death experience, and I am full of gratitude. We talk about the meaning of life and death now and then. We ask ourselves daily: How do we want to live our finite life? What good can we consciously contribute to the life of others and our own lives? Where should our priorities in life be with special reference to our death awareness? Do our newly gained experiences and awareness contribute to an increased depth experience of life, a greater openness, a higher degree of meaningfulness?

Although we knew before that these existential questions guide us to lead a life of liberty and contentedness, we learned through COVID-19 and our own experiences that we cannot hesitate to answer these questions from the bottom of our hearts as soon as death has become part of our life, a reality we cannot deny, avoid, or rebel against any longer. We are learning to live with our conscious awareness of death and a limited ability to contribute meaningfully to this world and how we want to develop further.

Lessons Learned: Creating Meaning Through Near-Death Experiences During COVID-19

The near experience of life and death across two cultural

contexts has provided us with options on how to see life and death from different cultural perspectives, how to experience it, and how to deal with it mindfully. This is true on a societal level as well as on an inter- and intra-personal level. We have experienced the fear of death closely with regard to self and others, the struggles to be in the “in-between of life and death” and the feelings and emotions towards such existential issues, anchored in the culture of origin and provided as an alternative by the culture of residence. The experiences of the approaches of different socio-cultural settings have thereby supported the idea of creating meaning throughout the experiences.

Reflecting upon the lessons learned, I can say that the awareness and closeness of death can be very painful, especially when fearing the death of someone close to our heart. For me, the contextual threat of COVID-19 and its deadly impact, as well as the emotional pain of potentially losing my daughter, brought me back to reflecting the existentialist views of Albert Camus and the questioning of the meaning of life. These experiences provided me with the chance to explore my own ideas and feelings about life and death on deeper levels.

Living through these existential experiences created thoughts and questions regarding life’s absurdity and the struggle to make meaning not only through experiences of life and liveliness but also through the experience of finiteness and death. This in-between space between life and death and the experience of suffering, pain, and meaningfulness can become a space of learning. It can be used to recreate relationships while redefining the meaning of life on an individual and societal level through thoughts and actions.

The experience of life as being existentially threatened brought reflection upon core values and learned cultural and spiritual schemes regarding life and death. Their impact grew in importance and meaning was raised through the experience of close existential threat and loss. The strength that evolved through these experiences was anchored, on one hand in the individual possibility of facing the pain of death, and on the other hand, potential loss. However, it also brought about the new in-depth experience of strengthening and emerging cultural views in dealing with such existential crises on collective and individual levels. I experienced the strengths of meaning’s creation through socio-cultural and spiritual viewpoints in the culture I live in through facing death as a part of

life and the impact it can have on living life in a more aware, conscious, liberal, free, humble, and grateful state. I did experience the strengths of individual and collective prayer and the creation of meaning through recognizing the value of life on a deeper, spiritual, and de-materialized level. I believe that the experience provided me as well as my daughter with a re-defined consciousness about meaning in life, a deeper connection with others, and the possibility of transforming negative emotions, pain, and suffering—at least to a degree—into a growing joy and happiness of being alive.

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To a Branch Felled by Ice (in memoriam: L.L.)

Claude Barbre—Chicago School of Professional Psych.

Now that a sheer completion rests
upon your leafy radius
and maps a last diurnal round
where living continuities
to summer's greening way must go
beyond the slant of window light,
so must our severed certainties
amend the rites of measurement
for what endures. For what endures
when ice and stone become the stars
you long to shoulder still, and earth
prepares your countryside for sleep
with drifting shades of eiderdown
and silences that softly speak
in silences that sing to sleep?
Into your changes now abide
where darkness shines like ember blues
of snow at dusk that warm the dead
until their time. See how we shine
to give them life again. See how
we shine as though our heavy arms