

## EXPLORING ATTITUDES TO- WARDS DEATH AND LIFE THROUGH STORY AND META- PHOR

ZVI BELLIN, PH.D  
Loyola University, Maryland

### ABSTRACT

This article sought to blend the clinical, literary, and research perspectives about death in order to explore the theme of living a full life in the face of the salience of death. The author employed two theories about death acceptance and death anxiety (Tomer & Eliason, 1996; Wong, 2008) for the purpose of interpreting a self-authored story, *Born Again*. The author presented his story as a way to explore the question of how one moves from the experience of being dead in life to being fully alive. The interpretation of the story in light of theory suggested that the journey from death anxiety to acceptance involves an affirmation of meaning through the being of the individual (*meaning through being*) in life. In addition, the author emphasized the possible role of writers, clinicians, and researchers to frame how death is encountered that may lead to more meaningful living.

The elements of story and metaphor have been used as powerful tools to explore the complexities of existential issues. In the modern era, we have the works of Sartre (1964), Hesse (1951) and Coelho (2009), to name a mere few, who literarily plunged into the hu-

man experience of transformation that comes through facing death, meaninglessness, freedom, and loneliness. Their use of narratives to wrestle with the subtleties and sufferings of human experience is a logical model, as Wong (2008) expressed, “only the creative process of story telling is capable of revealing the whole, full-bodied person actively engaged in the dynamics of the business of living (p. 76).”

One reason why the story is a suitable tool for existential exploration is because of the free realm it provides for meaning to dynamically surface subjectively to the reader (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

In the study of attitudes and approaches to death, the scientific community has a unique opportunity to look both at the current empirical research (Tomer, Eliason, & Wong, 2008) in conjunction with the tomes of existential-themed stories which represent the cultural pulse of society’s relationship towards death. To this end, I present a self-authored story that will serve as an implement for extending the discussion about death beyond research statistics. Amato (1993) criticized Western philosophers for attempting to banish death to the category of inexplicable and unworthy of exploration. Instead, he posited that stories have been used in every culture to tame the existential terror of death. As the young protagonist, Lyra Belacqua, befriends her Death in Pullman’s (2000) *The Amber Spyglass*, and lives out her days with full awareness of her mortality, this paper too seeks to blend the literary, clinical, and research facets of death study to sharpen the reader’s focus of death awareness in life.

## Empirical Attitudes towards Death

Tomer and Eliason (1996) presented a comprehensive model of death anxiety that attended to three antecedent constructs. *Past-related* regrets refer to those achievements that have not been actualized in the person's lifetime. *Future-related* regrets refer to personal manifestations that are prematurely cut short because of death. *Meaningfulness of death* refers to one's beliefs and understanding of the concept and coherence of death. If a person experiences a high sense of past and future-related regret and understands death to be meaningless or have negative meaning, they will predictably experience a higher rate of anxiety towards death. An interesting aspect of their model which relates to the exploration of death through stories is that their model is activated when death becomes salient. Thus, acknowledging death can cause a person anxiety, or alternatively, positive emotions, depending on the framework in which one becomes aware of death.

This conceptualization provides potential insight into the types of stories that can be created about death. We can choose elements of a story that might reduce anxiety in the listener. Wong (2008) proved a related point when he looked at the relationship between meaning-management and death acceptance. He showed that we ascribe meaning to death in multiple categories: psychological, societal, spiritual, and cultural. The way that we relate to the multifaceted meaning of death significantly relates to our sense of well being and our ability to allow for the coexistence of the inevitability of death and the fullness of

a productive life. As shall be seen in the story below, death is contextualized amidst contradicting emotions and lenses, such as frustration and liberation. My intention for writing the story was to acknowledge death and to elicit a sense of empowerment to choose a life worth living.

## Personal Background

In the summer of 2007 I joined a chaplaincy training program (CPE) in a mental institution. As CPE programs go, the trainee is forced to explore within oneself his or her relationship to life and to death (Lawbaugh, 2005). In the mental institution, there were not many deaths that occurred, though there was a threat to life and a threat to existence. What came into question for me was the nature of reality. The picture of life that I had did not include a place for people who struggle to hold a sliver of existence. Most people were walking a tight rope between mental stability and psycho-social-spiritual annihilation. This way of understanding mental illness, as a core ontological threat, fits with Frankl's (1962) diagnostic model of meaning-based disorders, as explained by Roberts (2007).

My encounter with chronic mentally ill patients during CPE training has deepened my phenomenological grasp of death. Physical death may be defined as the last breath or brain death (Lawbaugh, 2005), but it can be preceded by emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual deaths. Through my clinical interactions on the wards I began to understand that truly facing death is to explore one's vital-

ity, one's sense of aliveness, in life. As a final project for the CPE program, I wrote a story which, for me, examined the theme of being dead in life versus living fully under death's unwavering gaze.

## Mapping out the Story

Following is an existential fictional prose which challenges the reader to think about the possibility of living a dead life versus seeking out opportunities to reawaken and find meaning in a finite existence. Recreating the existential fictional feel of Sartre's (1964) *Nausea*, the story is written in thick descriptive language and has an intentional dream-like quality. The story is written in four parts for clarity sake. The first part finds the main character waking up in the middle of the night and has a flashback to a traumatic event where he has a serious brush with death. The section represents a moment of the salience of death. The second part gives the reader access to the thoughts and feelings that the protagonist experiences when faced with his own mortality. Most notably is the character's changing belief about God and his move towards greater self acceptance of who he is in his present moment. The third part is a story within a story, and is a fable-like tale that allows the protagonist to streamline his disparate thoughts into a singular message. The final section is a short conclusion which ties the moral of the inner story back to the main story and hopefully leaves the reader with a point of contemplation.

I called the story *Born Again*. It is a play off the religious idea of somehow reaching a conclusion that one must turn one's

life around and devote oneself to the service of God. A born again person is someone who makes a commitment to attune their personal values with the values of a specific religious community. The main character in *Born Again* finds himself recommitted to the core experience of being alive even as death becomes a an inescapable reality. By doing so, his very existence is transformed into a message of living a fully vital life that is imbued with meaning.

## THE STORY: BORN AGAIN

### Part one: The traumatic flashback.

I wake up in the middle of the night.

Reaching out for the small table on the side of my bed with stumbling shaking hands, I grab for my glasses. My hands reach over things that I feel, but know not what they are. Something soft and delicate. Something hard and cold.

What day is it today? I hope that I am alone in this bed. I feel the wiry rim of my frames, pick them up and fit them over my eyes. The little hard plastic bends on both sides find their usual places, hugging my ears with just the right pressure. I hate when they are too loose or too tight.

I am thrust into a world and I live.

The room is dark. Of course I knew this even before I opened my eyes. Darkness can be sensed. And it's more than just the absence of the shine of light that you can see behind closed eye lids in a lit room.

It's a sense of safety and submission that is a paper thin mask of complete terror, submitting to the mystery of the unknown.

When I put on my glasses the darkness changes. Suddenly, I am not just in a fuzzy dark space. I am immersed in *clear* darkness. There is no escape from it now. My awareness is completely attuned to the emptiness that surrounds me. And in this moment, I feel so free. I can stop wondering about where this ride is going. I am at the end. In my simple pine box. And I am content.

A baby's cry disturbs my peace. It is not a cry from the outside. I am sure of it. The last time I heard this cry, I went around the house searching for hours. I did not find a baby crying. I looked everywhere. I even went outside and circled the block a few times peering into neighbors windows.

*Please, someone comfort that child.*

The sounds of suffering make my skin crawl. Perhaps it needs a bottle, or a diaper change. Would you want to spend more than a second in a soiled diaper? The thought of it makes me sick. This baby is wailing so.

*God kid shut up.*

I start shouting out loud for help. My shouts become screams directed to everyone and to no one. No one hears the cries of children. They wash upon dammed ears. And because they cannot enter into the ears they are soaked up by the skin. The cry invades every pore of the body. It fills the

veins and organs with gut wrenching howls. We become walking flesh sacks, filled with invisible tears and silent ear-piercing shrieks of pain.

My mind is seized by memory.

I am walking down a familiar street in my neighborhood. It's a nice day. The sun is bright, and there is a light perfect breeze that tickles my earlobes. There are shallow puddles on the sidewalk, leftover evidence from a rain soaked evening. I inhale deeply...

I smell smoke. My strut and smile are broken by the smell of smoke. I peer in the direction of the scent. The sky is pure blue, a perfect sapphire crystal with swirls of steady white cloud. And there emerging from behind a four story brick apartment building, I spot the dragon-like tail of a smoke cloud. My peace shatters and my body is hurled towards the belly of the beast. I run around the corner and can now hear sirens in the distance. Heat rattles my body as I come face to face with a small house that is set aflame.

I hear the baby's shriek. It comes from the second floor of the burning house. I impulsively run towards the front door, and am fiercely repelled by the scalding temperature of the air around the house. The sirens get louder, but still there is no hero filled fire truck. The cry gets louder. It becomes insane. I am driven to madness and a thought erupts like a volcano.

*The back door.*

I flash around the house and see that it has not yet caught fire, not as bad anyhow. I ram the wooden backdoor with the full force of mustered courage. My shoulder crushes hard against the thick wood. I shout in pain. Inhaling sharply, I grab the door's handle. With luck it turns. The idiots or lucky bastards, whoever they are, left the back door open. I enter into a fiery hell. The fear of every fanatic believer is alive in my site. The scream continues. My eyes wildly search for a way upstairs. As I look across the open kitchen into the living room, there is a framed picture of Jesus' face that is slowly being devoured by fire. It is one of those picture perfect pretty boy Jesus'. His mouth is closed and eyes are soft and inviting. For an instant the baby's shrill seems to come from behind his serenity. It is pouring out of his skin defying his pleasant countenance. I inhale a thick gust of smoke and become lightheaded. My body becomes weak and I sense my knees wishing to collapse. With valiant thought I take a step forward. As my foot sets down against the bamboo colored linoleum floor, the front door is splintered open by a fireman's axe. The heroes have arrived in a fullness of glory, drabbed in yellow fire retardant armor. I allow myself to faint into unconsciousness, a true victim of circumstance.

The next afternoon, as I head to the Metro, I grab a free local paper from a familiar gloved outstretched hand. I am returning home after an expensive night in the hospital. Perhaps I needed the rest. The front page headline reads, "New Public Parking Complex Transforms Downtown." In the bottom right corner of the second

page there is a small column that tells the tale of a heroic fire squad that saved the lives of a man and a baby that were caught in a house that was on fire. Cause of fire unknown. Why those people were in the house, unknown.

### **Part two: Reactions to the salience of death.**

Here alone in my room, the burning picture of Jesus visits me. With fiery lips and blazing hair, he asks questions that I cannot answer,

"Where are you heading?"

"Can you tell me what is becoming of this world?"

I simply want to get lost in laughter. The image of this holy "prima donna," who has hallowed God's name, whose face is the foundation of this country's faith, makes me want to laugh. Am I really the one who is lost? Trying to wrap my head around his unceasing questions is like trying to fit a tiny rubber band around a banana tree.

I remember when you were enough God. You were the answer to all my questions. When lost, I could look up at the Heavens and feel the shower of purpose rain upon me; a radiant downpour of honey tasting manna. My tongue would sup up meaning with each breath, as I inhaled the soul breath that you exhaled into me.

This was unsustainable!

As I came to know you things changed. You were knocked off your throne of glory and bound with doubt. Then your wretched body was tossed carelessly, but with joy, into a flaming inferno. Your skin was cremated to ash. When your ashes were held to the light, they glimmered a dazzle of perfect polished diamonds. Galaxies of stars filled my palms. You whispered in the ringing song of wind chimes and the shimmer of rustling autumn leaves, "I am here." The wind lifted the ash and carried it over all the land, as far as the eye could see and even farther. I gazed at my hands, and they shined brightly for a moment as my skin absorbed the powder that was once your flesh. The world, with me in it, became truly alive with your presence.

*Attention Israel: the Mystery, our Master, is Mystery, Just One.*

Tonight I can finally look into the mirror and know that the Me that I am seeing is enough. My name is Paul. I stand proudly short at five feet and five inches. I have a head full of gorgeous black curly locks. My eyes are the color of ripe hazelnuts. They reveal an infinite depth: pain, power and wisdom. My nose is sharp and regal. Lips are full and pursed with passion. My cheeks are two apples that speak of stern gentleness. I am sick of living life in the slime of potential nothingness. I am a devotee of the Light and find meaning in all. I want to be free to be.

Twenty-seven years have passed. I sat in a prison of loneliness. Lonely because I never met myself. I did not understand

that I had to choose who to be. The magic moment for which I waited for, when the Me would collude and emerge, never came. I am a puzzle of infinite pieces and I construct myself in every moment. I was doing it all along, but without awareness. Now I choose myself. I have unlimited fun being one person in my bedroom, and a completely different person at work, and a third person at school. Life is not meaningless because there is no objective meaning; no God on high that is separate from me directing my life. Meaning is a flourishing garden that is seasonal and forever being gleaned.

This is not a story about nothing. There is a tale that I have to tell, though I have trouble getting down to the root of what I am trying to say. Inhale ... breathe deeply and here I go.

### **Part three: The story within a story.**

Once upon a time there was a farmer that lived in a quaint little house made mostly of brick, but thatched with thick wood. His wife lived with him too, only they did not share a bedroom. They had trouble getting along. Even though they lived in the middle of a vast field of corn rows, pumpkin and cabbage patch, cucumber and tomato vine, they could not seem to internalize the Edenic peacefulness that surrounded them. Early mornings, while the farmer was watering, tilling, or weeding, he would wonder what went wrong in his marriage. When he searched his soul he would witness there a deep hatred for his once beloved wife. He watched this pit of

disdain grow inside of him. It tasted of rotted prune and thick resin. Until one day, as he was tugging on a particularly large stone that was buried in the path of a new herb garden, he was struck with insight.

“The reason that I feel this way is not because I hate my wife, but because I hate this house and this field. I hate waking up early each morning and getting dirty working with these crops. My back hurts and legs ache. If I was not married, I probably would never have settled down to this life. I would be out adventuring in the world, taking in new sights. There is so much to do. So many unexplored places. I think it’s time to start living!”

The farmer, a tall and slender, just below middle-aged man, with a still rather full head of sun bleached blond hair, and deep hazel eyes, stood up from his hunched position and rounded his shoulders down his muscular back. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, he turned his gaze to his cozy green-roofed cottage, and prepared his mind to share his thoughts with his once beloved.

As if responding to a subliminal call, Edna appeared on the small wooden porch that jutted out quite randomly from their home. She was a short stocky woman, with her head reaching up to her husband’s chest. Her hair was kept in a long tight braid and her skin, untouched by worry, was smooth milky white. Gazing out across the field she saw her husband standing tall and facing the house, a strange look upon his face. She wondered what he might be

thinking about standing there in his lanky dusty overalls. Their relationship had deteriorated into a silent storm. They even stopped eating meals together. Instead, she would prepare something for two, and set his plate with utensils at the small table that stood under the porch’s awning. She would let the screen door slam shut to alarm him that the food was ready.

“He is a good, hard working man,” she thought, “but had I not been pushed into this marriage by my parents, things would have been different. I would not have ended up a farmer’s wife, married to a kettle and stove. There is a great wide world out there to discover and I want to be part of it.”

She tilted her head away from the direction her husband was standing, letting her tears flow freely down her cheeks. “No! I mustn’t cry,” she thought, “I can be strong like him and tell him how I feel. Perhaps, he might even want the same thing as me?” With the back of her supple wrist she wiped away a final tear and turned her body to proudly face the man whose heart she must break.

With surprise she saw that he was no longer standing there. “Very odd,” her mind blurted frustrated, “Where has he gone off to now?” She took a few steps closer to the rail of the porch and gazed the field in front of her. What she saw made her give out a short and muddled yelp. Her heart raced and stomach quaked as she saw her husband’s body lifeless on the ground at the spot that he stood only moments before.

“Jim,” she called. “Jim!” she yelled. But Jim did not stir.

One minute before, as he was looking at his wife, and past his wife to his new destiny, he felt a sharp sudden pain shoot up his right arm, followed by an intense explosion of pressure in his chest. It bolted directly to his brain. He opened his mouth to call for Edna, but all that came was the faintest cough, as his last breath exhaled his limited existence into the infiniteness of nothingness. He died there, his body landed cushioned between two newly plowed garden beds.

Edna jolted down the three short steps of the porch and quickly made her way to kneel next to Jim. *What now?* Her tears began to flow more heavy now. *He has no family left to tell, a handful of friends that he sees once every few years.* Her head shot up toward the blazing sun above as she shouted, “Have we even begun to live?”

With automatic resolve she grabbed hold of the shovel that was lying next to her husband, thrown aside by Jim when its slightly rusted tip stabbed uselessly into the deeply embedded stone. Edna rose. Her fingers firmly gripping the thick wooden shaft of the shovel. Surprised, she noticed how natural it felt to hold this tool. She was Eve, the first midwife helping the Ultimate Mother bear fruit.

She plowed hard next to the spot where the stone jutted out of the ground. Using her foot, powered by her short bulky

leg, she forced its head deeper. With all her weight she pushed the shovel’s shaft protruding now from the earth. She felt it give slightly, and pushed even harder. She could feel a furrow of catharsis carve itself into her once perfectly smoothed forehead, beads of sweat now freely dripping from her brow. With a grunt of pain and passion, Edna pressed her whole body against that shovel. With sweat and tears she felt the stone give way to the upward force of the shovel. Tearing through layers of dirt and tangled weed, the stone emerged from the ground. In unison with the stone breaking through, Edna’s body was treated to a free fall as the shovel like a lever pressed down toward ground. Her head landed with a soft bounce on the belly of her dead husband. There was startled silence for a moment as Edna pieced together what she had discovered.

Laughter. Deep chortles and high pitched cackles erupted from Edna’s full lips. Her body quaked and quivered with shockwaves of laughter beginning from her belly and ending at her fingers and toes.

*I’m alive.* She understood. *Dear Lord, I am alive.*

#### **Part four: The concluding message.**

I’m about ready to wrap all this up. I am going to put this writing into a manila envelope. Fold the pages in half and carefully sharpen the crease with my thumb. On the outside of the envelope I am go-

ing to write in black marker: *For the baby who almost burned in this house*. Then I am going to leave it outside of what is left of that charred hovel. I doubt that someone will deliver it to the caretakers of the baby who would then save it for when Junior can read. My hope, though, is that someone will read these words and they might appreciate how I was saved. Perhaps you will stop for just a moment and evaluate if you are who you wish to be.

### Unpacking the Story

To restate one goal of presenting this story was to show how literary, clinical, and research explorations of death can be combined. *Born Again* grew out of my clinical experience in a CPE program. Through my interactions, I began to wonder about the alive-ness of institutionalized people with severe chronic mental illness. My curiosity grew beyond the brick walls of the hospital, and I began to think in general about the nature of being physically alive, but perhaps being dead on other levels of being: socially, spiritually, or emotionally, for example. I chose to write a story that would help me to struggle with my concerns about being fully alive in life while being fully aware of death.

Blending the literary expression of my clinically-based questions with the models mentioned above (Tomer & Eliason, 1996; Wong, 2008) has enabled me to think about my story in expanded ways. *Born Again* is based on the experience of when death becomes inescapably salient to an individual. Upon becoming aware of death, the protagonist, Paul, can be seen as moving from death

anxiety to death acceptance through the process of affirming his sense of meaning in who he is as a living person, which I will refer to as *meaning through being*. This affirmation begins with a shattering of his current beliefs about God. According to the Park and Folkam (1992), one can say that Paul's global meaning system became threatened when death became salient. In order to restore a sense of meaning, he altered his global meaning in order to accommodate a new belief in a God that is more personal and immanent. Thus, his changing beliefs about his world allowed him to have a different attitude towards death. Perhaps this alludes to a piece that is missing in the death anxiety model presented by Tomer and Eliason (1996). Paul's reduction of death anxiety is not because of a change in the meaning of death, but rather changes because the meaning he attributes to his life. Reiterating my earlier point, *truly facing death is to explore one's vitality, one's sense of aliveness, in life*.

Paul's movement from anxiety to acceptance of death connects back to Wong's (2008) meaning-management theory. The main character explains how his encounter with near-death has altered his way of thinking about death. My intention was to show how death becomes a wake-up call for Paul. Not just a motivation to accomplish more, but rather a startling understanding of a more intimate relationship with the Divine and a bolder acceptance of his own being. Both of these awakenings, of God and of being, can be seen as connected and equally sacred (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005). Paul thinks before going into the story within the story,

Now I choose myself. I have unlimited fun being one person in my bedroom, and a completely different person at work, and a third person at school. Life is not meaningless because there is no objective meaning; no God on high that is separate from me directing my life. Meaning is a flourishing garden that is seasonal and forever being gleaned.

The movement from death anxiety to acceptance as a function of a revitalization of life is the emphasis of the farm couple's story. Edna, the farmer's wife, discovers liberation when she encounters the death of her husband. The transformation that took place was less about the experience of death in itself, but more about how the encounter with death pushed Edna to reconnect with her *meaning through being*. She was able to marvel at the chance to choose a life for herself that is aware of death and accepts her calling in life. In *Born Again*, Edna discovers meaning in working the land, a role that for this story is limited to the male gender. Thus, I clarify the connection between the outer Paul story and inner Edna story. Paul shares Edna's story in order to emphasize the point that he has found death acceptance in life and the ability to connect to his *meaning through being* via death salience.

## Conclusion

Through the use of story, I was able to more deeply explore the transition from death anxiety to death acceptance. As suggested by psychology of death theories (Tomer & Eliason, 1996; Wong, 2008) the change from anxiety to acceptance seems to involve more than beliefs about, and reactions to death. The main characters, in both inner and outer stories, undergo a shift on a macro-global meaning scale. Their foundational meaning structures, about God, their world, and their own beings are changed. I believe that presenting death in connection with such a transformation is in itself a tool that might help members of our society maintain well being and stability as they respond to the salience of death. As suggested by the final line of *Born Again*, I hope that this exploration will encourage further thought to how writers, clinicians, and researchers can frame death for our social sphere to enhance aliveness through death awareness and acceptance.

## REFERENCES

- Amato, J. (1993). Death, and the Stories We Don't Have. *Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*, 76(2), 252-269.
- Coelho, P. (2009). *The winner stands alone*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers.
- Frankl, V.E. (1962). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hesse, H. (1951). *Siddhartha*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- Lawbaugh, W. (2005). Existential, theological, and psychological concepts of death: a personal retrospective. *The Journal Of Pastoral Care & Counseling* (1-2), 17-27.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: reading, analysis, and interpretation*. USA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Pargament, K., Magyar-Russell, G., & Murray-Swank, N. (2005). The sacred and the search for significance: Religion as a unique process. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61, 665-687.
- Park, C.L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of General Psychology*, 1, 115 – 144.
- Pullman, P. (2000). *The amber spyglass: His dark materials – book III*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf.
- Roberts, M. (2007). Modernity, mental illness and the crisis of meaning. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 14(3), 277-281.
- Sartre, J. (1964). *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing.
- Tomer, A., & Eliason, G. (1996). Toward a comprehensive model of death anxiety. *Death Studies*, 20(4), 343-365.
- Tomer, A., Eliason, G., & Wong, P. (2008). *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes*. Mahwah, NJ US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Wong, P.T. (2008). Meaning management theory and death acceptance. In A. Tomer, G.T. Eliason & P.T Wong (Eds.), *Existential and Spiritual Issues in Death Attitudes*, pp. 65 – 87. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.