EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH AND LIFE THROUGH STORY AND METAPHOR

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Introduction

In the summer of 2007 I joined a chaplaincy training program in a mental hospital. The trainee is forced to explore within themself their relationship to life and to death. In the mental hospital, 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 tightrope between mental stability and psycho-social-spiritual annihilation.

This experience has deepened my phenomenological grasp of death. It may have very little to do with the final breath leaving the body. The physical death may or may not be preceded by emotional, mental, and spiritual deaths. To truly face death is to explore one’s vitality in life. The heart of this exploration can be touched through the unit of the existential—through story and metaphor.

Following is an existential fictional work 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 dying world. The story is written in the thick physical language of the existential narrative. There is a story within a story, and multilevel access to meaning. The intention though is that this is one story about facing death in life and life in death.

The story: Born Again

I wake up in the middle of the night.

Reaching out for the small table at 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 eyelids 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 then 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. By 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 sight. 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 Jesuses. His mouth is closed and his 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.

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?”

“And 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, 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, 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.

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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 patches, and cucumber and tomato vines, 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 were 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, 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 alert 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 frustrated mind blurted; “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.


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 landing 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 heavily 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 on 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 the 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 shortles 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._
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 going 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 whether you are who you wish to be.