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Death Anxiety and the Self-Transcending Drama:

Considerations for Christian Therapists

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Abstract

Ernest Becker claims that death anxiety is part of the human condition and that people “maintain a constant psychological effort” to repress it (1973, p. 17). This paper uses Becker’s *The Denial of Death* to support the claim that death anxiety is a critical issue for psychotherapists to consider, both in terms of how they will address it with clients, as well as how they will work through it personally. It is suggested that, in place of seeking techniques, skills, or automatic answers, we might learn from others who handle death anxiety well. In other words, we might seek good models for integration. This paper introduces two models from fictional works by Marilynne Robinson: *Home* (2008) and *Gilead* (2004).

The paper is divided into four major sections. In the first section, Becker’s work is reviewed in order to demonstrate that, despite the extent to which Western culture in particular denies death, anxiety about death and finitude is present in every psychotherapeutic encounter. The second section argues that this is problematic for therapists because the discipline of psychology is inherently limited in its ability to work through it adequately. In many ways, death anxiety is outside psychology’s scope of practice. Indeed, themes or issues related to death anxiety are often ignored in psychotherapy and in clinical research (Yalom, 1980). Existential therapies are an exception to this trend in that they provide the proper space to explore death anxiety, and yet they are unable to prescribe solutions, even when both therapist and client are Christians. With these tensions in mind, it is asked how Christian therapists might best “treat” death anxiety.

In the third section, Glory Boughton, a character from the novel *Home*, is introduced as a model for therapists who must work with clients who are struggling with the “higher-tiered” questions and yet have no theological framework for addressing them. Although Glory is not a therapist, and the person she is attempting to help (her brother) is not dealing directly with death anxiety, it is helpful to see the various ways in which she creates an atmosphere of safety and understanding. Other qualities, such as her refusal to oversimplify the nature of God’s judgment and mercy, serve as reminders that therapists need not carry generalized or automatic answers for their clients. Glory models a willingness to sit in ambiguity with humility and trust. This enables her to listen, which enables her brother to express himself genuinely for the first time.

The fourth section addresses the issue of death anxiety at a personal level. Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* (1980) is employed to remind the reader that the courage to face existential anxieties entails finding meaning which transcends the self. Tillich’s work illustrates the point that theology, unlike psychology, is able to entertain questions of ultimate meaning. His ultimate meaning involves faith in a God whose power encompasses nonbeing, but he does not advocate a casual faith--we must struggle against the temptation to shape (and shrink) God for ourselves while ignoring hard truths. The “absolute faith” (1980, p. 177) that Tillich describes is hard work. It is argued that the character of John Ames from the novel *Gilead* demonstrates a Christian faith which responds to death anxiety rather than engulfs it. Ames’s view of his own impending death is realistic and hopeful, searching and faithful.

It is acknowledged throughout the paper that death anxiety is very much a personal issue for this writer. It is hoped that this paper might nudge readers toward a recognition of any of their own tendencies to deny death, as well as the intense spiritual reflection that inevitably follows such a recognition. But it is also hoped that readers will recognize death anxiety as an issue for their clients, and find the courage to accompany others along their journey.

Death Anxiety and the Self-Transcending Drama:
Models for Christian Therapists

I remember the moment I realized that I would die. I think I was six. I was trying to go to sleep, and all of a sudden I was terror-stricken about the permanency of being dead. I tried to wrap my head around eternal non-being--eternal darkness--and could not. I went to my parent's room, and I must have had tears on my face, because I remember sitting on my mom's lap and telling her that I did not ever want to die. She assured me that I would not be dying anytime soon and, when this did not work, resorted to telling me to think how awful it would be if I had to live forever. This response was, for me, grossly inadequate (to live forever was exactly what I wanted!), and I remember feeling abandoned—not by my mom, per se, just alone in the universe. I did not then and I do not now blame my mom for her inability to comfort me. She had no theological foundation to draw from; her answer was simply a cognitive reframe she had used for herself.

Gregory Zilboorg wrote that the fear of death is ever-present and “becomes woven into the major conflicts of ... psychopathological conditions.... We may take for granted that the fear of death is always present in our mental functioning” (Becker, 1973, p. 16). Ernest Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death* (1973), claims that we all share a fear of death, or a death anxiety, which we repress, avoid, and deny.¹ It seems plausible to assume that such a constant yet repressed fear should be heard, analyzed, and explored in the therapeutic setting. After all, it is seldom that we are granted the time, the space, and the permission to delve into our deepest and darkest fears with another person. However, when we evaluate what the

¹ My husband has recently informed me that he has no death anxiety. While I am tempted to respond that he is simply repressing it, I am willing to concede that it is possible that Becker and I have projected our own death anxiety onto others and/or overstated the case. I hope that readers, if they do not resonate at all with death anxiety, can either relate it to some other form of existential angst, or recognize it as a potential experience of their clients.

discipline of psychology as a secular enterprise has to offer in terms of relieving death anxiety, we find that, like my mom's well-intended response, it is also grossly inadequate.

This paper is divided into four major sections. In the first section, Becker's work is reviewed in order to demonstrate that, despite the extent to which Western culture in particular denies death, anxiety about death and finitude is present in every psychotherapeutic encounter. In the second section I expound on how this is problematic because psychology, as a secular science, is limited in its capacity to handle questions of ultimate meaning. In many ways, death anxiety is outside psychotherapy's scope of practice. With these tensions in mind, it is asked how Christian therapists might best "treat" death anxiety. It is suggested that, in place of seeking techniques, skills, or automatic answers, we might learn from others who handle death anxiety well. In other words, we might seek good models for integration.² The third and fourth sections proffer two characters from novels by Marilynne Robinson as models for therapists. The first is Glory Boughton, a character from the novel *Home* (2008), whose relationship with her brother parallels therapists' work with clients who are struggling with the "higher-tiered" questions and yet have no theological framework for addressing them. The fourth section addresses the issue of death anxiety at a personal level. Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be* (1980) is employed to remind the reader that the courage to face existential anxieties entails finding meaning which transcends the self. Finally, it is argued that John Ames from the novel *Gilead* (2004) embodies the Christian faith that Tillich describes, a faith in which one can work through death anxiety rather than skim over it.

Denial of Death in Western Culture

² This approach is derived from the philosophy of René Girard. His mimetic theory posits that we are perpetually imitating the desires of others (and simultaneously denying their influence over us) at subconscious levels (Girard, 1965). One of the major implications of his theory is that, since we are bound to imitate others, we should choose our models conscientiously and responsibly (Girard, 2001). In this sense, the process of seeking out good models becomes a spiritual discipline.

Consciousness of death is one of the things that separate us from all other living things. Unlike other animals, we know that we will die, we can become anxious about our own or another's death, and we can speculate about what death means. This consciousness exists alongside our capacity to think futuristically, symbolically, abstractly and imaginatively, which has the effect of placing all humans in an existential paradox. Becker calls it the condition of "*individuality within finitude*" and describes it thusly:

Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to him literally the status of a small god in nature.... Yet, at the same time... man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it... up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. (1973, p. 26)

Becker asserts that the fear of death is both "a universal in the human condition" and a "prominent... part of our psychological make-up" (xvii). It is not customary to talk about this fear with others, or even admit it to ourselves. Indeed, according to Becker, we spend a great deal of time and energy trying to repress, avoid, or deny it. His entire book is concerned with elucidating the various maneuvers we use to do this; one of my favorite examples is: "Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing" (Becker, p. 284). Fear is not the only thing people feel about their own death--there

may be curiosity or acceptance, depending on one's stage in life and a myriad of other variables—but fear is certainly a reaction that seems to be cultivated by Western society at large.

Shuman and Meador (2003) note that our understanding of health in the West is shaped by scientific optimism. They cite Daniel Callahan's notion that medical research views death as if it was

'a series of preventable diseases.' From this perspective, the researcher is like a sharpshooter who will pick off the enemy one by one....The human-genome effort, the latest contender in the battle against death, will supposedly get to the genetic bottom of things, radically improving the aim of the sharp-shooter. (2003, p. 10)

I wonder about the incessant push to prolong life, and the innumerable ways people try to deny aging in Western society (e.g., fighting physical signs such as grey hair; my dad exchanged his white sedan for a red convertible when he turned 50). Our culture tends to equate youth with beauty and carefree optimism while age is equated with decreased vitality and relevance, instead of beauty and wisdom. When death comes for others, we tend to mourn quickly and privately. In many ways the West is a culture of denial.

Lucy Bregman (1992) suggests that the reason Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* was so popular is that Americans got a view of death that was congruent with their worldview: dying was reframed from something one has no control over to concrete stages one can progress through. We are much more comfortable with the "promise of progress toward a goal" (Bregman, p. 32) even if the goal is completely inauthentic. Of course Christians have reason to feel differently about death. Yet if we move too quickly to a stance of accepting or even celebrating death, if we refuse to dwell in the depths of what it means to us personally, our faith may lack integrity. The pastor of my church in my hometown died this year from cancer that was

discovered too late. I wrote her many letters in her remaining months; I finally sent one. I was not sure what I could or should say about death, what would be appropriate or helpful. (I ended up simply telling her how she had impacted me.)

The way we deal with an actual foreseeable death is revealing in and of itself, but Becker's death anxiety and denial of death is more pervasive and diffuse than what we feel when death is near. We deny death, he believes, from the moment we are conscious of our finitude. We try to override our inevitable end by various forms of "immortality": we desperately attempt to "stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life"; we build cathedrals, totem poles, and skyscrapers; we identify with family generations of the past or to come (Becker, 1973, p. 4-5). I think the advent of photography—a technology which allows people to freeze precise moments in time "forever"—is a fascinating attempt, at some level, at immortality which ultimately, as the photo fades and yellows with age, reveals the futility of any such attempt.

We also try to avoid awareness of our inevitable end by denying our physicality and our dependence on others.³ Becker views the Oedipal complex as fueled not by the child's innate sexual desires but by the child's desire to "conquer death by becoming the *father of himself*, the creator and sustainer of his own life" (1973, p. 36); parents are every child's reminder that her body is not a *causa-sui* project (p. 43). A child's defenses, carried into adulthood, allow her to feel that she "has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that [she] is *somebody*—not just a trembling accident....we don't want to admit...[that] we do not really control our own lives. We don't want to admit...that we always rely on something that transcends us" (p. 55).

Death anxiety concerns psychotherapists because it is hugely discomfoting for clients but this is not the only reason. It also interferes with dynamic and fruitful living. Nouwen avers

³ Klein recognized omnipotence as a defense mechanism against the realization that we must depend on objects which are both good and bad. A proactive denial of death could be one manifestation of omnipotence, and I wonder if it could indicate, for the Christian, ambivalence about the goodness of God.

that “when we can face death with hope, we can live life with generosity” (1994, p. 30). Becker believes that recognizing and understanding our death anxiety is in some sense “the main self-analytic problem of life” (1973, p. 6), as do many existential therapists. However, he goes on to describe therapeutic progress in this domain as a sort of contradiction because when we give up restricting and illusory defenses in relation to death anxiety, we enter genuine terror and despair. “Full humanness means full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day” (Becker, p. 59). He also critiques psychotherapy because it does not offer anyone “a lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death, and reality” (p. 204). Illusion is the word Becker uses for a necessarily religious project, a new reality, “creative play at its highest level” (p. 189). People “avoid clinical neurosis,” he writes, “when they can trustingly live their heroism in some kind of self-transcending drama” (p. 198). And yet psychotherapy does not provide a rubric for determining why a person is “here on earth, why he has to die, and how he can make his life a triumph” (p. 193).

Death Anxiety and Ultimate Meaning: A Boundary Question

Despite the prevalence of death anxiety and its effect on the human psyche, psychology has very little to offer in terms of the treatment of it. Psychological literature refers to “effective coping with death” by measuring the extent to which individuals display a willingness to engage in behaviors related to death (i.e., writing a will or visiting a sick friend), converse with others about death, and focus on “living life to the fullest” (Furer, 2008, p. 169). This sort of coping is woefully inadequate: “living life to the fullest” is a cliché and, as such, has no real application; even the term—coping—sounds like a goal which is limited to remission of symptoms and does not acknowledge the depth and breadth of death anxiety. These shortcomings are due to the fact that death anxiety in most psychological literature, which focuses pragmatically on the three to

four percent of those who have an intense fear of dying, is not of the same caliber as Becker's death anxiety, which is less a phobia and more a semi-conscious angst. Becker's death anxiety is harder to contain than a phobia of death. It cannot be treated by relaxation techniques or progressive exposure therapies, because it is not an irrational fear. Existential therapists acknowledge this, and they critique psychology's "collective denial" of death anxiety: Yalom writes that it is "overlooked glaringly in almost all aspects of the mental health field: theory, basic and clinical research, clinical reports, and all forms of clinical practice" (1980, pp. 55-59).

The problem of treating death anxiety in therapy may be due to this collective denial in part, but there is also a larger problem: psychology as a secular science cannot really answer questions about ultimate life meaning. Nancey Murphy puts it succinctly in Dueck and Lee's *Why Psychology Needs Theology* (2005): "The social sciences are suited for studying the relations between means and ends...but they are not suited for determining the ultimate ends or goals of human life. This is, instead, the proper subject matter of ethics" (p. 24). Robinson captures the discrepancy between religion and science this way:

[Science] has an authority that's based on its demonstrable power. But in discussions of human beings it tends to compare downwards: we're intelligent because hyenas are intelligent and we just took a few more leaps. The first obligation of religion is to maintain the sense of the value of human beings. (Fay, 2008, p. 10)

Murphy and Robinson are not asserting anything that traditional or mainstream psychologists would disagree with. Indeed, in an effort to remain neutral, objective, and science-like, psychology as a discipline has tended to shy away from all things religious for the past 200 years or so. In the county facilities I have worked in up to now, the ultimate question for mental health workers seems to be "How can we improve the client's functioning in the most cost-

effective way possible?” Regardless of what I converse with clients about during sessions, the paperwork must demonstrate that I made an empirically-validated clinical intervention every 10 minutes. The underlying ethic here is, more or less, “never mind the existential stuff, just make the current symptoms go away.” And although many psychotherapists would agree that this framework for healing is myopic, outside economic interests will always steer mental health services to some extent, at least for those who cannot afford private care. Meanwhile Becker warns that when the client’s “‘beyond’ is limited to the analytic couch and the world-view imparted there,” psychotherapy “actually stultifies the emotional life” (1973, p. 195).

Economic issues aside, Murphy argues that psychology is unable to answer questions about “the ultimate ends” because, as the study of human cognition and behavior, it simply reaches its limit—it hits a wall.⁴ She calls these unanswerable questions “boundary questions” and whereas the outer rim of psychology extends to such matters as “‘What is the ultimate goal of human life?’ and ‘What constitutes human flourishing?’” (2005, p. 28) it can only partially answer them. It is interesting that Murphy pairs those two questions together, because I think psychology has a tendency to posit human flourishing, i.e., a personal optimal “functioning,” as the ultimate goal of human life, rather than some larger communal or transcendental purpose.

Perhaps psychology should just stay away from questions of ultimate meaning altogether. Keith Meador argues precisely this point—that standards of practice for “spiritual care” have not been developed, and perhaps the “boundary questions” are better addressed by religious leaders than by psychologists (2004, p. 228). However, there are logistical concerns with this model, such as where to refer patients who are not currently involved in a religious community or

⁴ Becker agrees, noting that both Rank and Kierkegaard “reached the same conclusion after the most exhaustive psychological quest: that at the very furthest reaches of scientific description, psychology has to give way to ‘theology’” (1973, p. 196).

patients who feel that their current lifestyle would not be accepted by a religious leader. Moreover, psychology and theology are simply not as clearly bifurcated as we would like them to be. If Becker is correct in claiming that all people struggle constantly (if largely unconsciously) with their own mortality, questions of ultimate meaning are intermingled in every therapeutic encounter. Despite the fact that psychologists remain one of the least religious groups in the United States (Stark & Finke, 2000), their clinical work is strewn with religious clients and religious themes. In summary, my point is this: because of the prevalence of death anxiety, the content, even of brief psychotherapy, is inherently existential and concerned with finding some form of higher meaning; yet psychology as a “hard science” is unable to deal with these concerns sufficiently.

The tension is exponentially worse for Christian psychotherapists because we are personally committed to a self-transcending drama and an ultimate framework of meaning, yet we cannot offer it directly to those who are struggling with no such framework. Nouwen writes “I want to believe—indeed, I do believe—that, ultimately, love is stronger than death. I have no argument to present. I have only the story of Jesus and the stories of those who trust in the life-giving truth of his life and his word” (1994, p. 45). As psychotherapists, not only do we have no argument to present, we also have no story of Jesus, or at least within the confines of the profession we cannot prescribe it to another person. Of course, we should also realize that, even if the client is Christian, biblical narratives cannot be dispensed like medication as “quick fixes” to solve another’s death anxiety. Palmer teaches us that to offer advice or a solution—even if it is biblically sound—is to be less faithful than to sit and listen with no personal agenda (2004, p. 117). I can do nothing as a psychotherapist to make atheist or agnostic clients respond to the terror of impending death with religious faith. This is an integrative tension to which there is no

automatic solution, and I want to suggest that instead of looking for something to do with these clients, we consider how to be with these clients. Although Glory is not a therapist, and the person she is attempting to help (her brother) is not dealing directly with death anxiety, that integrative tension is still there and she models for us a way of being which allows some of his “ultimate meaning” questions to be addressed.

A Model for Psychotherapists: Glory

Glory is the youngest of Pastor Boughton’s eight children. In *Home* (2008), she has returned to her childhood home in the town of Gilead at a low point in her life. She feels like a failure in comparison to all but one of her siblings, who all have families and careers to be proud of. The exception is Jack, who was “so conspicuously not good” as a child that he “cast a shadow over their household” (p. 6). After he left for college, Jack never came back, called back, or wrote back. Although his parents and siblings seemingly showed him nothing but forgiveness his whole life, his 20-plus-year absence bespeaks of either great shame or great inconsiderateness. While Glory is home, caring for her father and generally feeling sorry for herself, a letter arrives from Jack which says, “Dear Father, I will be coming to Gilead in a week or two. I will stay for a while if that is not inconvenient. Respectfully, Jack.” The novel is an account of the development of Glory and Jack’s relationship, which is painstakingly slow as Glory does everything in her power to not pass judgment on her atheist recovering-alcoholic brother while also trying to protect her father (and herself) from disappointment.

It is the sensitivity with which Glory approaches Jack and the respect she gives him despite their differences that I think is exemplary. She is mad at him before he arrives because he is several days late, but when he arrives she interprets his tentativeness as an indication that he is “in no state to receive the kindness prepared for him” (p. 32) and reminds herself that “one hard

look from her might send him away, defeating all her prayers, not to mention her father's prayers, which were unceasing" (p. 31). She is curious and wants to get to the bottom of why he has returned but he avoids contact and she learns that she must resist the urge to force a relationship. She decides to take him the newspaper and a cup of coffee one morning, thinking "I'll give him these things and go away, and he'll see it as a simple kindness, and that will be a beginning" (p. 45). Eventually they form a delicate working alliance: "sometimes, if she was busy in the kitchen, he would bring his magazine to the kitchen table and read it there. A stray, she thought...testing the comforts, weighing the costs. So she was tactful, careful to seem unsurprised" (p. 52). From this simple companionship comes a breakthrough: "Once when she opened a cookbook on the table he said, 'I hope you'll tell me if I'm in the way.' 'Not at all. I appreciate the company.' She had been waiting for the chance to tell him that. 'Thanks,' he said. 'I don't really want to keep to myself so much. It's just a habit'" (p. 52). It is the consistency of Glory's presence, not anything specific she says or does, which allows Jack to begin opening up to her and imagining a different future for himself.

Similarly, the therapist may accompany the client on a journey which Kierkegaard felt was essential for living well, a journey in which one faces anxiety but is open to new possibility and choice, open to broader perceptions and experiences, open to revelation (1957, pp. 114-115). My impression of Jack is of a man who, since childhood, has felt the terror of finitude but none of the assurance of his religious family members. He has been aware of anxiety but not "schooled" by it (Kierkegaard, p. 144); aware of God but not comforted by him. Jack, for all of his 40 years, has felt one over-arching emotion in relation to his family, his community, and God: guilt. And he feels so guilty that he projects shame, judgment, and disappointment onto every religious person that he knows. This means that "minding spirituality" (Sorenson, 2004) is

inherent in every single conversation Glory has with Jack. Even after several weeks together, Jack says to her, “If you got to know me well enough, you might not want me around. You might even ask me to leave” (p. 123). He has never had true intimacy with anyone in Gilead. Glory says to him repeatedly, “Sit down, Jack. No one wants you to leave” (p. 122).

The great thing about Glory, and what allows her to reach Jack where other family members have failed, is that she is so obviously not perfect. She “takes things too much to heart” (p. 14) and, despite her efforts not to, she does judge Jack and she feels resentment for the extra attention he receives from their father. But in her insecurity, she remains genuine and Jack eventually trusts her enough to ask how he can possibly move on from his past mistakes. Glory says, “All I can tell you is what Papa would say. He’d say repent, and then—you can put it aside, more or less, and go on” (p. 99). But Jack already knows what his father would say. He wants to know what she thinks, so he persists. Glory says, “I don’t claim to know about these things. It seems to me that regret should count. Whatever that means” (p. 100). Although therapists are rarely ambivalent about their clients’ relationship to the past and Christians are rarely ambivalent about forgiveness, I think Glory’s own lack of certainty is healing for Jack, who struggles with the anxiety produced by guilt and is unable to accept God’s acceptance (Tillich, 1980, p. 163-164). Her inability to provide a “clean” Christian response assures him that forgiveness, acceptance, and grace are not easy or routine solutions.

Schwaber (1986, 1990) and Aron (1996) emphasize the importance of the therapist’s vulnerability for clients. Glory reveals to Jack her misfortunes and her weaknesses, which becomes part of the foundation of their connection. The fact that she is living at home is a sign (“what an embarrassment that was, being somewhere because there was nowhere else for you to be,” p. 37) and Jack knows it. She later admits to him that she led the entire family to believe she

was married when she was not and, although this does not compare to Jack's history, he recognizes her attempt to join with him: "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe I have just been told that I am not the only sinner in the family" (p. 120).

The point is clear, I hope, that Glory does not have any plans to fix her brother; there are no purposeful interventions. She is merely a companion. I think that the intrinsic limitations of psychology necessitate that we shift roles whenever our clients approach boundary questions from interpretation-maker or problem-solver to that of companion. In other words, I do not reinterpret a client's existential questions or try to make them go away; I certainly do not try to answer them. And in the end, I do not see this as a limitation, as companionship is not as passive or non-directive as it sounds—it can be pastoral, relational, and transformative. Conversations can be had about values and different types of faith commitments. A transformation in Jack is apparent by the end of the novel, which I believe is made possible by his finally allowing God to forgive him, but a transformation also occurs in the reader, whose view of Jack shifts alongside Glory's. I do not think we can accompany someone through a crisis of meaning and not be changed ourselves. My hope is that, like Glory, I can have the patience and the faith to accompany someone through the struggle even when I cannot see the outcome with any certainty—for the client or for myself.

The Courage to Be: Paul Tillich and John Ames

Having patience and faith in the midst of another's death anxiety is a rather daunting task! It serves psychotherapists well to have some sort of internal peace about death themselves, otherwise they run the risk of somehow resisting or denying the client's anxiety about it (Yalom, 1980, p. 59). I confess I am still very much the six year-old who lies awake at night wondering about the meaning of life and death. However, in the past year or so I have been a bit more

honest with myself and with God in recognizing my death anxiety, and although I have experienced terror and despair at times during the process, I am still glad I started it.

It is clear that as a question at the very edge of human reason and history, death anxiety must be explored within the disciplines that are able to address it sufficiently: theology, and, by extension, the arts. T. S. Eliot is enlightening here:

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been....
Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (1976, pp. 184-185)

Kierkegaard and Tillich agree that a thorough existential analysis of the human condition leads inevitably to questions about God and faith. In *The Courage to Be*, Tillich considers death anxiety in terms of how the possibility of nonbeing threatens being, and delineates three categories of anxiety related to it: ontological (i.e., fate and death), spiritual (i.e., emptiness and meaninglessness), and moral (i.e., guilt and condemnation). Whereas Becker feels that our deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of annihilation and, because life itself awakens the anxiety, people must shrink from being fully alive (1973, p. 66), Tillich is interested in how, in the face of these anxieties—especially the fear that life is meaningless—we can find the courage to affirm our self in spite of our finitude. This courage is not simply religious faith. In fact, Tillich writes that religion can “reduce the openness of man to reality” (1980, p. 73); in other words, an unthinking or dogmatic faith is not at all courageous because it is a defense against,

rather than an engagement with, reality. The “courage to be” must acknowledge despair and Christian theology must never sacrifice truth for safety.

Tillich’s uncompromised courage to be is made possible by “absolute faith”—a faith which includes skepticism but is “an idea of God” whose divine infinity includes and reveals itself through nonbeing as much as being (1980, p. 177-180). That is, “the divine self-affirmation is the power that makes the self-affirmation of the finite being, the courage to be, possible” (p. 181). He critiques a theism which makes God into an object for ourselves and argues that we must allow the “God above God” (p. 186) to be the source of our courage to be. Tillich helps me realize that the anxiety about the threat of nonbeing cannot be completely eliminated, that experiencing this anxiety is not indicative of a lack of faith, and that there is a “God above God” that I am simply unable to comprehend underlying all being and nonbeing.

John Ames, the narrator of Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004) and the best friend of Glory and Jack’s father, manages to have a personal relationship with God without objectifying or simplifying God. He is a 76 year old pastor with a relatively new wife and a six year old son, Robby. And he has recently been told that, due to the condition of his heart, he will die very soon. The novel is in fact an extensive letter which Ames is purportedly writing to Robby, to be read when he is a grown man. But he says in the beginning, “for me writing has always felt like praying,” (p. 19) and the reader understands that this letter, or parts of it, is addressed to God as well.

Ames’s narration is therapeutic for me to read--if I quote him extensively it is because I want you, reader, to experience his voice. His “letter” is full of reflections that reveal his sensitivity to what is true and what is false:

I know, too, that my own experience of the church has been, in many senses, sheltered

and parochial. In every sense, unless it really is a universal and transcendent life, unless the bread is the bread and the cup is the cup everywhere, in all circumstances, and it is a time with the Lord in Gethsemane that comes for everyone, as I deeply believe. [He recalls a memory he has of his father.] It all means more than I can tell you...If I could only give you what my father gave me. No, what the Lord has given me and must also give you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift. (p. 114)

And yet Ames is completely unassuming: "I have always wondered what relationship this present reality bears to an ultimate reality" (p. 103). He writes as he thinks rather than planning everything out beforehand so that there will be no contradictions or mysteries. He is enthralled by daily mysteries as well as theological ones: "I really can't tell what's beautiful anymore....It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over....I wonder what it is and where it comes from" (p. 5). He gives Robby a journal in this sense, which is more valuable than a letter. It is more genuine, more of a meandering dialogue than an instructive letter.⁵

Ames demonstrates an integrated approach to death in that he is able to mourn and to trust. His faith, which is grounded in a community of believers, allows him to take a generally non-defensive stance in the face of death:

Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think, All that fear and all that grief were about

⁵ He does throw in occasional bits of advice for future Robby, just for good measure: "One great benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps you concentrate. It gives you a good basic sense of what is being asked of you" (p. 7). Actually I think the fact that Ames understands and has lived a life in response to the call of the Other (Kearney, 2004; Levinas, 1981) has a direct impact on his willingness to let go of life when it is time. It is also this ethic which he demonstrates to Robby through his writing. He describes the impact a baptism has on him, when he looks at the face of an infant and understands that "any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it" (p. 66).

nothing. But that cannot be true. I can't believe we will forget our sorrows altogether.

That would mean forgetting that we had lived, humanly speaking. (p. 104)

He pairs death here with the morning, and life is the dream. Elsewhere he calls life an "errand," the implication being that he came into the world to do some work on God's behalf and will leave when that errand is done. But part of his integration, too, is that his first wife died unexpectedly in childbirth some 50 years ago, and he had to live through it. The reader intuits that a great deal of Ames's theology, as well as his tolerance for ambiguity, has been shaped by what he calls his "dark time...the time of my loneliness, [which] was most of my life" (p. 44).

I think that because he truly knows pain and confusion he is less threatened by it: he never denies the totality of death or his sorrow at having to leave life. He writes plainly, "I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life" (p. 69) and more metaphorically, "I've often been sorry to see a night end, even while I have loved seeing the dawn come" (p. 71). He also mourns frequently the fact that he will miss so much of Robby's life. When he is reminded of this there is an urgency in his tone, and he must reorient himself as he writes to trust God to provide for the family he is leaving behind. In this sense Ames's writing as he nears death embodies what Nouwen calls our "deepest vocation, that of becoming ever-more fully what [we] already are: daughters and sons of God" (1994, p. 58). Ames also enlightens in regard to Tillich when he writes

Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands. (p. 246)

Ames is my model, not just for how to think on my deathbed, if I should have one, but for how to think about life right now. When I read him, I do not hear Robinson's voice, I hear a pastoral grandfatherly voice. At times I hear my own voice. I think I am a better therapist for having read *Gilead*; having Ames's voice helps me be present for others, even though, like his inability to ensure that Robby will accept God's acceptance when he is older, I cannot ensure that my clients will follow a certain path.

Conclusion

I recognize the limitations of Christian therapists in distributing particular answers to clients and the limits of psychology in answering ultimate life questions, but I also agree with Tillich that psychotherapists can "implicitly communicate courage to be and...become a helper to ultimate self-affirmation" (1980, p. 74). Michael Mangis speaks about viewing his role as a Christian therapist in terms of Jesus's parable of the sower (Yangarber-Hicks, 2010). He says that, growing up on a farm, he understands this parable in a more nuanced way than most contemporary readers and explains how the only difference between the rocky soil and the good soil is that the farmer has removed all the rocks from the good soil, that in fact every farmer knows this is the first step to planting anything. Mangis sees his work as removing the rocks, helping people with whatever barriers prevent them from hearing the divine. Becker and Tillich show us that death anxiety or the anxiety-as-finitude is a major hindrance to leading an authentic or courageous life, but that it can be overcome when one finds meaningfulness in her "cosmic dependence" (1973, p. 196) on a "God above God" (1980, p. 186). Glory assumes the role of "clearing the field" for her brother, so that he can open himself up to the transcendent. As Christian psychotherapists, we are uniquely positioned to recognize both a client's denial of and anxiety about death, and to respond with our own courage, affirmation, and God-given grace.

These things are not, at least for me, constant or impenetrable—I cannot pretend that my faith rids me of all death anxiety or other existential fears. Rather, what it does is teach me whose name to call upon when I am feeling abandoned. T. S. Eliot once again:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning. (1976, p. 189-190)

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