

Looking Over My Shoulder

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I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality. *Life of Pi*, (Martel, 2001, p. 302)

The objective world can be dry, yeastless factuality. Such as I am writing, which involves my fingers touching letters on the keyboard of a computer, and in a broader view of the objective reality, it is a spring day in California in the year 2020. I am now sheltering-in-place along with all Californians due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How is this objective reality affecting me?

My isolation due to COVID-19 is bringing my subjective reality into sharp focus on my whole life and my existential questions about living and dying. I sit in silence to touch my feelings and find the words to express these feelings. It absolutely sucks watching the news on TV and learning that thousands of people are dying every day all over the world from this virus. No one I know personally has died yet, but I am sure I will know someone soon enough. And I could be one of those who dies. At age 73, I am part of the more vulnerable older population, and my chances of dying are greater if I should contract the virus.

This reality is harsh, yet paradoxically comforting to know that everyone on the planet is going through this experience together. I share this immediate focus with you, the reader, to bring you into my actual moment as I write. As you read these words, part of your objective reality is that you are holding a book and reading it or listening to this book on an auditory device. Part of your subjective reality is that what you are reading or listening to is stirring feelings, impressions, images, and other unknown dimensions of your subjective world. The objective world touches us harshly, humorously, sweetly in so many ways—and stirs up our subjective world.

The inner world of each person is immense, perhaps larger than will ever be consciously known to yourself or to others. This vast unknown territory is the landscape through which I accompany my clients on their psychotherapeutic journeys. To talk *about* me or a client is to make me or the client an *object* of observation, of speculation, or of report. Human objects are not to be confused with human *subjects*. The very fact of human subjectivity is the most distinguishing and salient feature of human life (Bugental, 1999). We have the paradox of the human as simultaneously being both subject and object. This paradoxical distinction is crucial and is at the root of existential-humanistic psychotherapy. Thus, this recognition of limitation—which I am now writing about and you are now reading about or listening to—applies to what I am saying right now.

What do we hold when our lives are threatened? What is the meaning of living? What do we hold to be true as we pass through great hardships? These questions and more are critical to me in these heightened, unpredictable moments. I contemplate these questions in the following pages and invite you to accompany me on my objective and subjective journey in becoming and being, first and foremost, an existential-humanistic person, and second, in sharing the great honor of accompanying others on their sacred journey of being, belonging and becoming through psychotherapy.

Honoring Grannie Wisdom

I have no clue what my Grannie would say or do if she lived in these times of thousands of people dying from a virus. She lived through the Spanish flu pandemic, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the polio epidemic. These tragedies I know contributed immensely to who she became.

My Grannie was tiny, maybe five feet tall, with piercing blue eyes that seemed from my perspective to see right into my soul. In other words, no lies to Grannie! She crocheted a lot. I would sit at her feet and stare at her fingers quickly moving the thin threads with a tiny needle in and out, forming the most beautiful placemats, hats, gloves, and even huge tablecloths. The thread was either pure white or light brown. Whether she chose one color over the other depended on who she was giving the item to and for what use. When she would drop a stitch and go back and pick it up, I would look closely at how she made the correction. She quickly picked the stitch up, moving her fingers and needle back to the dropped stitch.

Those blue eyes never strayed from the work of her fingers. The mistakes were quickly corrected with ease and sometimes while humming an old gospel hymn. She showed me how to be patient, how to correct mistakes, and how to let go. Sitting at her feet, watching her hands working, and rarely talking was the setting for the more-than-weekly lessons building the foundation of who I became. When she did speak, it was profound. I remember asking Grannie what were those funny purple things peeking through the skin on her hands.

“Child, those are veins the good Lord shows to us as we grow older, reminding us that our time here is limited.”

“When will the Lord show veins on my hands?”

“In time, little one, in time. Don’t worry yourself; it happens to everyone.”

“What does it mean that time is limited, Grannie?”

“Now that is a big subject I will answer when you are older. For now, remember to use your wonderful giggle no matter what happens. Promise me?”

“I promise, Grannie.”

We never had that talk about time being limited. Instead she would tell me regularly, “Remember to giggle, because you will need it.”

The power of Grannie wisdom comes as a great balance with the tragedies I, along with millions of others, are living through with COVID-19. She was right, laughing at times helps me tremendously right now. Not to diminish the immense losses both physically and economically, but to assist in bringing hope into the moment and the future.

Grannie was the first existential-humanist I knew. She walked her talk. I am sure she never knew the term existential-humanist and would probably laugh to see those words beside her name.

I remember the veins on my grandmother’s hands, and I see the veins on my own hands steadily showing and marking time. My hands are like a faithful old clock, reminding me daily that I am aging and more vulnerable emotionally and physically. As I look over my shoulder at my life, I see it with older eyes, hopefully with wise eyes similar to my Grannie’s.

White Privilege

I was born into a middle class white family in Savannah, Georgia, in 1946. My father was Judge of the Family Court. Anyone could call him at home and they did. There were no cell phones, and the Judge’s home number was in the phone book, making him an easy contact for everyone. People called regularly, and as soon as I could reach that phone I pleaded to answer it. Daddy did not want to take the court calls at home and agreed to have me basically appease the caller. He instructed me to tell whoever was calling that he would

talk with them by phone tomorrow at his office. There was the caveat that if this was an emergency, they should hang up and call 911 for the police.

I was so excited to answer the phone using the most adult voice I could find in my seven-year-old body. I would say, “You need to call the police if you need help right this minute, and you can call my Daddy at his office in the morning.” I proudly gave them Daddy’s office number and proceeded to limit the conversation and hang up the phone.

But the people calling often wanted to talk, and I wanted to listen. Of course, the conversation would go a little longer. These phone experiences taught me a lot about people whom I would otherwise never have known. I was white and privileged in the South in the early 1950s. Most of the people who called were women who were being mistreated by their husbands, physically and/or financially. They were desperate, and they wanted the Judge to instantly fix their situation. I encouraged them to call the police immediately if they were in harm’s way.

But what was harm’s way? I never saw Daddy hit my Mom or even threaten to do so. Many of the women calling were frightened knowing that the men in their lives might hurt them. I had my eyes opened to the dark side of life and saw the power of listening and referring those in need immediately to someone with more power than this seven-year-old girl had.

Often I would run to Daddy after a call and report I had done my best by listening carefully, and then telling them to call the police. Daddy always seemed calm in his reactions to my stories, reassuring me the police would handle the situation. I had listened to darkness but was also very protected from darkness. From these sheltered roots, I listened and learned that I was privileged—and with privilege came responsibility.

The responsibility showed up every Sunday after church. My family would walk the halls of the Methodist Hospital, where Daddy was chairman of the board. Daddy would stop and ask each employee—including nurses, doctors, janitors, and cooks—how they were. We would eat lunch with the employees in the cafeteria. Yes, cafeteria food accompanied by kind inquiry into the lives of each person who made the hospital function.

This memory reminds me of a wise saying: “The service we render others is the rent we pay for our room on earth.” These weekly hospital visits created deep gratitude to my family for helping me understand the existential fact that we are simultaneously in the process of living and dying together.

Curiosity

I was an innately curious child. I consistently asked the adults in my life obvious questions. Often these questions were uncomfortable for the adults, but thankfully I was not punished for asking. I would not say I was encouraged, but I kept asking.

We had an African American maid named Vangie, who in addition to cleaning our home, washed and ironed our clothes, often staying late to finish her work. I remember asking my parents at the dinner table, “Why can’t Vangie eat with us?” My mother’s reply was always the same to many of my questions, “When you are older, I will tell you.” This quick dialogue ended with me picking up my plate and saying, “Well, in the meantime, I am going downstairs to eat my dinner with Vangie.”

Down the stairs I would go with my dinner plate in hand. No one followed me, but rather let me do my thing. As I settled into a chair next to Vangie, who was ironing, I asked her, “Why can’t you come upstairs and eat dinner with us?” Vangie never looked up, but kept on ironing and said, “Child when you are older, I will answer you.” Wow, Mom and

Vangie have the same boring answer, so I am going to come downstairs and eat my dinner next to Vangie until I get older. Right?

Makes sense doesn't it? In a child's world, I did not want to leave Vangie out and actually loved being with her. Some evenings I would eat my dinner next to Vangie while she ironed and other evenings I would eat upstairs with my family. No one stopped me or questioned me. In retrospect, this was grace! At the ironing/dinner sessions I would ask Vangie more obvious questions.

"How come your skin color is different than mine?"

"It just is the way the Lord made us, different in color."

I learned that skin color made a huge difference in our lives. When I would sometimes hop in the car with Mom to take Vangie home, I saw more differences in the neighborhood where Vangie lived. I saw poverty there, but the paradox was the respect Vangie merited from her family for being employed in the Judge's home.

I was in awe of these differences with no answers from the adults regarding the pronounced disparity. I soon came to understand injustice and how it worked, but never why. I made a commitment to do something about this injustice. For me, the color of skin did not matter; Vangie and Grannie modeled for me wisdom through compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and love.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1966, fifty-four years ago, I had the great honor to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak at the Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) in Charlotte, North Carolina. I along with my white college roommate, Leigh, were the only white people in the audience. Our connection to get into this event was a friend of ours whose mother was a professor at

JCSU. We had unbelievably good seats in the third row from the front. There are moments in life when you know, even as they are happening, that your life will be forever changed. This was such a moment. Dr. King looked directly at Leigh and me and asked in his very strong, clear voice, "What are you doing with your life?" I thought to myself, "I am making good grades in college. Am I supposed to be doing something else?" And again he looked straight at us and asked, "What are you doing with your life?" His talk went on about the precious gift of life and using your limited time well. Then I remembered what Grannie said when I was younger: life doesn't go on forever.

Dr. King talked openly about the fact he would most likely be killed, and said he was willing to die for his commitment to the integration of African American people. My thoughts went a lot deeper to his question, what was I doing with my life? This question became my mantra for many months after that event. I started looking at endings, not beginnings. College would be over soon and what was I going to do? A privileged life of traveling and drinking after college made no sense when I dared to contemplate my own death. Meeting Dr. King woke me up to the importance of using time with intention and commitment.

Two years later when I learned of Dr. King's death, I wept. I marched, sat in the back of public buses, wrote letters, and protested the injustices suffered by African American people in the South. I started living from the inside out, not from the outside in. I began following a much larger guidance from inside with commitment to my living with intention and commitment.

I had spent enough time in the South to know I did not belong there. I needed to find my people, my tribe. Eventually I left the South and found my people in northern California, where many doors opened for me.

The Shoe Fits

Existential-humanistic psychotherapy has been the perfect fit with my roots in taking responsibility for my life and my passion for social justice. I was drawn to a psychotherapy career with curiosity and love of listening to people with troubles very early in my life.

I studied many models of psychotherapy in graduate schools, and my resonance came with Carl Rogers's person-centered humanistic work (Rogers, 1965). This model gave me a language for what I had experienced in my childhood: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. I had the honor of meeting Rogers at a meditation gathering and witnessed him walking his talk with everyone, including me.

I admired his congruence and knew that, if I too wanted to walk my talk, I would need to experience psychotherapy as a client. I entered psychotherapy with a humanistic psychologist, Eleanor Hamilton, Ph.D. Those years of inner exploration with Eleanor were transformative and would take a very long chapter to share. Individual psychotherapy is essential to becoming a therapist. Who wants to take a car to mechanics who wouldn't work on their own vehicles?

The combining of humanism with existential practice happened at the doctoral level of my studies, under the unexpected supervision of Jim Bugental, Ph.D. The first time I met Jim Bugental was in his small office in Santa Rosa, California, in the early 1980s. I had no idea who this man was, but my friend and colleague, Ann Dreyfus, who had introduced me to Carl Rogers, said Jim was "the best." Jim was very willing to meet with me when I told

him I had not read anything he had written. Of course, I remembered his name from textbooks in relation to existential-humanistic psychology, but at that point in my career, I was more interested in how far I had to drive for another leg of supervision for both clients and my doctoral dissertation. Santa Rosa was close to home.

We met, and I promised not to read anything Jim had written for one year while he supervised my cases. He wanted to train someone to follow the subjective life of the client without the use of theory. I liked the idea of no reading very much and was full of curiosity about how Jim followed a client's subjective world. Toward the end of the interview, Jim asked if I had any questions. I had been drawn to a photo of a man with a wonderful smile on the wall behind Jim. So I went for what was "real" for me, which I quickly learned was of great value to Jim.

"Who is the man in the picture?", I asked. Jim reached back to the photo, picked it up, and tears began to moisten his cheeks. "This is Al Lasko, my best friend. He died recently." Jim looked up from the photo and looked into my eyes with a presence rich with the truth of what truly matters in being human—human relationships. I was experiencing authenticity in the moment. This is how he followed everyone's subjective world. He lived it fully with vulnerability and honesty.

Jim taught me through tears, humor, storytelling, silence, intellectual discussions, disagreements, writings, walks, lunches, and any opportunity he could take to question, to explore, and to follow his insatiable curiosity about the subjective world in the actual moment. Case consultation was not "about" the client but rather the lived moment of consultation. Essential to my consultations was what happened inside of me when I brought the client into discussion. For example, Jim invited me to

pace in his office when I shared that my client often paced during sessions. This client had been labeled schizophrenic for many years. As I paced in Jim's office, I felt the isolation and fear of this label and tears streamed down my face. Words were not needed.

I returned to seeing this client with a depth of presence to her emotional pain that was what Jim called my *pou sto* for our long work together. *Pou sto*, a Greek term meaning a place to stand, in psychotherapy is a steady inner stand with the client while exploring the struggles of being human.

This experience of walking in another's shoes happened in so many different forms with Jim. After group consultations we would often go to lunch. Jim liked a certain restaurant that employed a waitress he nicknamed "Giggle Box." She had an infectious laugh and no matter how many struggles we had listened to that morning in consultation, listening to Giggle Box was just as important to us. Balance was always important.

In his later years Jim lost a lot of his memory, but took the loss as an opportunity to live fully what he had valued so deeply all of his life—the actual moment. His last years were spent mostly with his amazing wife Elizabeth, enjoying the beautiful blue heron in their backyard, softly petting his beloved dog, Dickens, and sharing so many other wonderful moments of love and joy.

I struck a deal with Jim toward the end of his life. If there was a life after death, he would send me a message that I could not mistake. About a week after he died, I was waiting in my office for a client when a framed picture suddenly fell off the wall and landed at my feet. It was a poster from an International Transpersonal conference

with the words “Individual Choice and Universal Responsibility.” I found tears welling up in my eyes. I was not sure, but it seemed to be the promised message. Being a stubborn student, I had to get one more message. Later that day, there was a letter in my mailbox from a local mortuary with the following message: “You too will die one day! Today and only today you can purchase your cremation for 50 percent off.”

Okay, I got it. These words reminded me of one of Jim’s frequent phrases, “pointing with your elbow,” which he used to emphasize the necessity, yet limitation, of words in attempting to describe one’s subjective experience. Thank you, Jim, for gently and humorously “pointing with your elbow” to the truth. Jim’s teachings are alive in me, and I dearly miss calling him to hear, “Hi, just a minute, let me turn the music down.” (Heery, 2011)

The Written Word

It was very important to Jim to get the written word published about existential-humanistic psychotherapy. On that topic, I and many of his other students published frequently. To motivate me to write and publish, he worked avidly with my writing and encouraged me to read a variety of literature about the existential, including classics by formative thinkers such as Frankl, May, Tillich, and Yalom (see reference list). I encourage and often require my students to read and absorb these invaluable resources.

Jim’s encouragement included asking me to critique his last book, *Psychotherapy Isn’t What You Think* (1999) prior to publication. He fine-tuned my writing by co-authoring three articles with me, starting in 1999 with “Unearthing the Moment,” then “Listening to the Listener: An Existential-Humanistic Approach to Psychotherapy with Psychotherapists,” and “Meaning and Transformation” in 2005.

In the meantime, I published on my own and with other colleagues. I took on a deeper responsibility in 2013 when I started my own publishing company, Tonglen Press. I have published three books and more than 10 articles and chapters in psychology text books with other publishers. And adding spice to my menu, I have interviewed Albert Ellis on his method of cognitive behavior therapy, bringing to light similarities and differences with the existential-humanistic model (Heery, 2000).

To support my lifelong commitment to social justice, in 2002 I founded a non-profit organization, the International Institute for Humanistic Studies (IIHS). The Institute offers trainings for students, interns, and professionals in existential-humanistic psychotherapy. IIHS also provides scholarships for minority students who are and will be serving underprivileged populations after they complete the trainings. The seven-year-old Myrtle who answered the Judge's phone and heard frightening stories, created, as an adult, a means to help address the darkness by empowering minorities to help minorities.

A book grew out of the trainings with a collection of writings from a number of students applying the existential-humanistic model to a variety of populations (Heery, 2014). I carried on Jim's passion for writing and publishing with my own students, using the Tonglen Press platform. The publishing work progressed further when I compiled *Awakening to Aging* with my neuropsychologist colleague Gregg Richardson, Ph.D.— first in 2009 and a second edition in 2015. Both editions reached many readers on the challenges of aging—exploring death and dying and making meaning from loss and grief (Heery, 2014 & 2015). The subject that called to me as a child at my Grannie's feet follows me to this day.

In 2017, I followed in Jim's footsteps and was honored as the first woman to receive the Rollo May Award for Independent and Outstanding Pursuit of New Frontiers in

Humanistic Psychology—given by Division 32 of the American Psychological Association. My nomination for this award was submitted by my former student and now colleague, Louis Hoffman, Ph.D. The rippling out of work inspired by Jim continues with great authenticity as we serve those in need with compassion, courage, hope, resilience, and tolerance.

Authenticity Remembered

As I look over my shoulder at my international teaching experiences, I see faces, stories, tears, laughter, and so much more all weaving together the givens of the human condition. I feel humbled by the depth of each individual's story, by their reaching deep inside themselves in front of primarily strangers to make meaning of their lives.

I remember a tall, well-dressed Russian woman who attended a training I led in Russia. The suit she wore every day was the same and in perfect order. I noticed her physical appearance each day and wondered about her. I recall her certainty and her quiet manner. I trusted she would speak in time, which she did, and there was the surprise.

On the second day of the training, I had begun speaking to the given of finitude and how each of us carry the fact of our death. She raised her hand and said with certainty that she had cancer and might be dead in a few months. She continued to share that she was making the best of each moment, which included looking her best and being as honest as possible in all relationships. She actually felt grateful to her cancer for her present depth of appreciation in living each moment.

I shared through my translator how deeply moved I was by her honesty and courage. Since I do not speak Russian, I relied on my intuitive sense to connect with her and the participants at this vulnerable moment. I was sensitive to the depth of her

sharing, looking closely into her eyes and gently moving my eyes to each participant. The caring from participants was palpable in the room. Some eyes were moistened and all were obviously moved.

I invited the participants to share their feelings with her if they felt moved to do so. One of the participants who knew her and her health crisis spoke with great depth of appreciation. First, she thanked her for her honesty with the group about her health. Then with great emotion she shared how important she was to her in deciding to stop complaining about her life and begin appreciating her life. By watching her friend face her cancer with dignity, she had gained a new life. Others followed with stories that were moving, and the group drew closer.

The experience of sharing a life-threatening illness with a group is powerful no matter what country or circumstance. In this teaching situation, the students immediately experienced the connection of sharing the possibility of an individual death. In teaching there is “talk about” a subject and a “lived experience” of a teaching. This experience took place many years ago, and I do not know if this participant lived or died. I do know that her vulnerability brought the group into an immediate depth of authenticity that I had seen in many other groups in many other locations. The fact of her possible death and what she chose in facing her death was a huge piece of global authenticity. The possibility of her death brought us each into the reality of death. Even now, eight years later, I can still see her in my mind and hold this experience close to my being. The courage to share her confrontation with her own death with me, whom she did not know, and with others who were mostly strangers to her, has been engraved on my heart.

Teaching in different countries can be enriched by being a part of different students' and therapists' journeys in learning. When I complete a training and wave good-bye to my colleagues at the airport, I turn to myself. I am surrounded by other travelers, but I sit alone. I look out the airplane window remembering all the shared moments of honesty, vulnerability, and courage. I may or may not ever see these individuals again. There is a sharp aloneness to these moments, which I recognize.

I, along with everyone else, ultimately arrive in this world alone and leave alone. Life is with others, yet each of us is ultimately alone. This paradox of being *a part of* and *apart from* follows each of us no matter where we live (Heery, 2001).

Humpty Dumpty and Time Out

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
 All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Couldn't put Humpty together again. (classic nursery rhyme)

Mother Nature has given the world COVID-19 and put us in time-out through required social distancing. Isolation and loneliness are rampant. In this process we are seeing many Humpty Dumpties falling off walls with no king or king's horses or king's men putting Humpty together again.

We are seeing countless physical and financial deaths. The world is in an existential crisis with the main resource for help being ourselves. There is no need to turn to a king anywhere, but rather to ourselves to search closely the behaviors that impact the lives of others. By choosing to wear a mask, we can actually protect someone from possible death.

How amazing to know we can do this! Perhaps the broken Humpty Dumpty can be put back together by our conscious caring.

Many years ago in my private practice, I saw a mother whose daughter had been murdered. What can any therapist say or do in such a tragedy? I gave her my heart full of care, compassion and love. Yes, I say love in psychotherapy. The love I had for this woman's suffering infused her with hope. Once she asked me:

"Do you have a child?"

"Yes, I do."

"I could feel you did by the way you look at me with, what shall I say, love?"

"Yes, it is love."

"I hope this never happens to you."

"If it does, I will come see you."

Tears moved slowly down our cheeks as we gazed with love deep into each other's motherly eyes.

Tomorrow is Mother's Day 2020. I will remember this mother and how much our loving, therapeutic relationship supported her in becoming more than she or I ever expected. She later started a non-profit for children from the inner city and organized many acts of service. Humpty Dumpty did get broken, but the parts were put back together through acts of service and kindness to others.

I say to present and becoming existential-humanistic therapists, do not underestimate the healing power of love and compassion.

And to Mother Nature I say, I am listening with my heart. I will come out of this sheltering to a new normal, knowing my actions remain true to the complete wellness of the earth and all beings who dwell upon it.

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