

International Institute for Humanistic Studies

Reflections on Life, Teaching & the Existential Humanistic Perspective

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Through my engagement with the existential humanistic paradigm of psychology, I have come into contact with a pedagogy that directly informs the way I am in the world. Through readings, group encounters, and specifically the *Unearthing Group* via the International Institute of Humanistic Studies (I.I.H.S.), I have experienced a particular approach to the therapeutic encounter that continually influences my life and work. Within this writing, I detail some essential facets of the existential-humanistic perspective, particularly the essential tenet of the acknowledgement of death and the finitude of life. I reflect upon these facets in relation to my personal experience, and to my experience as a teacher, and discuss ways in which my teaching is enriched by this practical theoretical paradigm.

A Paradigm of Essential Human Experience

The existential humanistic paradigm pays particular attention to the essential factors of human existence, such as the facts (and often concerns) of death, freedom, choice, responsibility, finitude, and meaning (Yalom, 1980). As per the humanistic tradition, there is great focus upon the here-and-now, or *the actual* of what is being experienced by an individual in a given moment (Bugental, 1999). There is emphasis here on the subjective realm of experience, the inner experience of an individual that is

impacted by grappling with issues of life, death, meaning, and finitude, and on how these issues are affecting the individual's life in the present moment.

Existential humanistic psychology has no qualms about being up front with the less than subtle fact of life, which is the inevitability of death of each human being. Much has been written attending to the anxiety, fear, and variety of responses that arise from this fact of life (Yalom, 1980). Becker (1973/1997) writes extensively on the topic, and discusses the heroism employed by human beings in effort to symbolically avert this inevitable fate. People seek to make meaning, to leave legacies, to have an impact upon the world in a manner as to not be forgotten, so that their lives perhaps had purpose and stature (p. 5). Becker refers to this "existential paradox" (p. 26) as "the condition of *individuality within finitude* [italics in original]" (p. 26). He discusses at length the dual reality of a human being, "Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is...a creature with a name, a life history....Yet, at the same time...man is a worm and food for worms" (p. 26). The knowledge and active awareness of this paradox is a predicament that, certainly scholars of this perspective would agree, informs all aspects of an individual's life.

It has been my experience that the topic of death is one that is often eagerly avoided for reasons that may include fear, anxiety, and even perhaps etiquette. The acknowledgment of death is often reserved for those who are directly facing the inevitable experience. I certainly have been accomplice to this denial, and even now, writing about it, I feel some awkwardness and morbidity. I am not asserting that one must pontificate on death for hours in order to have a meaningful life. I do, however, feel that allowing the acknowledgement into awareness in a respectful, reflective, supported

fashion may bear meaningful effects upon one's life and experience. Bringing this awareness into conscious awareness influences my approach to life, the choices I make, and reminds me that it is my responsibility to create the meaning I desire in my life. I seek to work hard and enter into many different activities in my life with a desire to have a positive impact. This awareness also connects me with strong yet peaceful feelings of humanity, which inform not only my life and relationships, but in my work as a teacher.

The Value of the Group Experience

Some of the most valuable moments I have encountered with this paradigm have been through the venue of the group experience. Group interaction provides many opportunities for growth through the challenge of insight, confronting stagnant patterns of being, and through experiencing a microcosm of a larger experience. Inherent to this venue is the possibility to see oneself as reflected through the perspective of the other members of the group (Yalom, 1995, p. 8). To receive feedback on the ways in which one is experienced is to receive very valuable input that may then be tested against one's internal self-perception. In a state of mind open to change, this may provide the opportunity to change inner beliefs that are stifling, as well as to bring forward social manners that others found to be lacking.

In addition, there are a myriad of personality dynamics that may be expressed within a group. Many ways of being may be presented to an individual, and one may come to confront basic concepts of self and others as they experience individuals in roles such as an authority figure, a scapegoat, a passive, talkative, or humorous individual. The ways in which these roles are perceived may come to awareness. I have found that in the safety of the group experience, I am able to explore a new way of being, trying on a less

developed attribute of personality and receive feedback and support from the group community on the receipt and experience this expression (Yalom, 1995, pp. 17-24). As I can easily find myself getting stuck in a particular way of being, and to be able to stretch in the development of new attributes is a powerful personal experience. I may feel clumsy and vulnerable, but this is a potent learning all in its own.

The dynamics inherent to exploring interpersonal relationships bring me to experience the deep beliefs I hold about myself and the push and pull to be *a part of* or *a part from* a group. This dynamic is discussed by many (Becker, 1973/1997; Bugental, 1999; Yalom, 1980) and is referred to by Yalom (1980) as “[t]he human being’s basic interpersonal task” (p. 362). Many powerful feelings, memories, and life experiences rise to the surface in the context of group interactions. I am quickly presented with my desire to connect with others, combined with my desire to be solitary. In the trusted group environment, I often experience the release of intense emotions, *catharsis*, as I reflect and integrate feelings, memories, and present experiences (Yalom, 1995, pp. 27-28).

The Impact of the Current Group Experience

Bugental (1999) has written that “[i]ncreased awareness of ourselves in the living moment means increased effectiveness of self-direction and increased satisfaction in living [italics in original]” (p. 24). Being a member of this Unearthing group gives me a fresh and current perspective upon my personal development and the evolving roles that I identify with in my family, the group, and in the relationships and experiences of my daily life. It allows me a voyeuristic view into my life while providing the feedback of others and the space for deep personal reflection. This encounter informs who I am in the present moment and where I may be mired or inhibited in my development.

This group experience does not allow me to immediately transcend these developmental cul-de-sacs, but it does provide the distinct and poignant awareness that creates an essential shift in my being. Beyond this, it reminds me that this may be a truth in the moment, but that the future is evolving faster than my burgeoning awareness, and that subtle breaths of change live in each moment. The awareness of my fallibility, my humanness, my finiteness, and the choice, responsibility, and frightening freedom and anxiety that accompanies such freedom informs my life and my personal search for meaning.

My experience in the unearthing group provides me the gift of renewed respect, humility, and compassion for the human experience. I am reminded of the pain, awkwardness, and confusion often encountered while also being privy to witness the beauty of vulnerability and openness. These are feelings that I can revive readily with increasing facility long after I leave the group environment and re-enter my daily life. Bearing a greater sensitivity and awareness of the fears and realities that influence human life informs my personal life experiences as well as my work as a teacher of psychology. The deeper my awareness of myself as an individual in this world, the more fully I feel I can provide a rich, empowering environment for my students to learn, and the more I am able to connect with students in a direct, empathic, and uniquely human fashion.

Exploring a Culture of Education

May (1991) reports that as “Joseph Campbell and other observers of the social and anthropological scene has suggested, our culture has lost the mythic road map which helps locate a person in a larger context” (p. 23). May discusses literature that continues to influence western culture such as the mythology of the Lone Ranger and of Gatsby in

his “complete faith in his capacity to change his accent, his name, indeed to *invent* himself [italics in original]” (p. 102). The mythology displays a sense of “rugged individualism” (p. 109) and a societal myth of the individual who is saluted for climbing the mountains of life alone, and seeming to succeed without the assistance of others.

Another prevailing myth is that of productivity. American culture places strong focus upon “getting things done” (p. 123), and as Yalom (1980) writes, “is an extreme ‘doing culture’” (p. 123). I believe that in many school settings, the current focus of education reflects these mythologies, and the teaching environment reflects this in a focus upon competition in individual achievement and the goal of financial striving.

This position has been expressed by many scholars over time, such as Veblen (1899/2001), who has expressed an argument about the educational system being “totally subservient to business interests” (p. vii). In this manner, the focus of the educational system is not upon inspiring individuals to seek authentic development in conjunction with intellectual growth. In an exclusion of balance in personal development, this educational system may facilitate the construction of a self that will comply with the cultural milieu, rather than to share and explore a unique development of authentic being.

Education in the Moment: The Human Paradox Alive in the Classroom

Whatever an education is, it should make you a unique individual, not a conformist; it should furnish you with an original spirit with which to tackle the big challenges; it should allow you to find values which will be your road map through life; it should make you spiritually rich, a person who loves whatever you are doing, wherever you are, whomever you are with; it should teach you what is important, how to live and how to die. (Taylor-Gatto, 2002)

I believe this statement, made by an award-winning New York educator, represents potential that is attainable and that is inherent to true, impassioned education. Throughout my educational journey, I have been touched by aspects of this magic. As I

teach, I seek to produce an environment that is equally heartfelt and engaged. The awareness of my own development and of the essential facets of the human condition has guided me deeply in this endeavor.

I currently teach psychology at the Community College level. No matter what age, many of the students that I have encountered are grappling with a variety of intense personal experiences and life questions. Many are searching for their place in this world, and are experiencing the anxiety of not knowing, heightened by the pressure of needing to be, to do, to become, as quickly and as productively as possible, as following the American culture of action (Yalom, 1980, p. 123). In my students, I have encountered many personal stories of depression, anxiety, panic, conflict, change, and at times, deep despair. I have been present to the experience of many of my students as they express feelings of great uncertainty and pain as they traverse their lives during times of turmoil as well as times of success. I have been present with compassion, empathy, and presence.

bell hooks (1994) has written that “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (p. 8). It is essential to me as a teacher, to honor the actual life experience of students and create a community of learning rather than following a strictly “assembly-line” (hooks, 1994, p. 13) methodology. To honor the individual voices, and to include my own in an appropriate manner, creates an atmosphere of respect, community, and sets us on a path of engagement with one another as we traverse the pedagogical material. hooks (1994) refers to this, in essence, as a manner of teaching that “respects and cares for the souls of students” (p. 13). I believe that the acknowledgment of the experience of the student

allows the student the opportunity to be seen, valued, and respected; I believe this directly relates to the student's ability to engage more deeply with the material being studied.

Parker Palmer (1998) states, "we teach who we are" (p. 2). He reflects that "knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject" (p. 2). Thus, the teacher's identity and development, personally, intellectually, spiritually (p. 4), may be seen as a critical component to making lasting connections with students. Such a teacher will likely be open and impassioned in subject matter, and foster an environment reflective of this spirit. A teacher may then facilitate an atmosphere that is open for the student to locate a personal connection to the material, and explore varying levels of development within the learning process. I seek to create such an environment, and through continuing in my personal awareness and development, I hope to foster my ability to connect meaningfully with others inside and outside of the classroom.

Bugental (1999) writes, "Without awareness, we are not truly alive" (p. 257). The awareness facilitated by the group experience and my interaction with the existential-humanistic perspective has informed my pedagogical stance. I feel enlivened by the awareness, and attuned to the experience of my students as human beings in relationship to the material I am teaching. Informed by this perspective, teaching becomes a balance of bringing information into people's lives--the objective *about*--in a meaningful manner, to be integrated with the *actual* present, subjective moment of the student's experience. I seek to present information in a manner that each student may forge a personal connection to the material and become active participants in their learning.

In Summary

Yalom (1980) has written that “Life just happens to be, and we just happen to be thrown into it” (p. 470). He further elucidates the poignant reality that “the existential nature of human reality makes brothers and sisters of us all” (p. 148). I live with the knowledge that I am a finite being in a world that I do not fully understand. I do not truly know why I am here or what will become of me. This provocative bit of information has been (and will continue to be) a startling piece of reality in my life. Yet, in a group experience with others who are seeking a deep level of personal and collective communication and awareness, I am awakened by a sense of peace in our common humanity. I feel a connection with others and a relief from the fear of isolation and meaninglessness, while remaining separate in my own individual struggle.

Yalom (1980) writes,

We are all lonely ships on a dark sea. We see the lights of other ships—ships that we cannot reach but whose presence and similar situation affords us much solace. We are aware of our utter loneliness and helplessness. But if we can break out of our windowless monad, we become aware of the others who face the same lonely dread. Our sense of isolation gives way to a compassion for the others, and we are no longer quite so frightened. (p. 398)

Through my engagement with the existential humanistic perspective, related group process, and teaching experiences, I have the deep awareness that many people are searching for peace, refuge, and for meaning among the chaos of life. I am comforted with the reality that though my life is lived by me alone, I am in the company of others who share essential aspects of my experience. I respect this awareness, and I am grateful.

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