

D7-- GIFTS OF DEATH AWARENESS – OUTLINE, A TALK BY FRED BRANFMAN, THE PSYCHIATRIC UNIT GRAND ROUNDS, SANTA BARBARA COTTAGE HOSPITAL, JANUARY 24, 2001, ORGANIZED BY: CARLOS SLUZKI, MD, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR PSYCHIATRY AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE

Note: The following is an outline of the thoughts that sparked a talk given at Cottage Hospital, not an actual transcript of the talk itself. A video of this talk is available. The material below roughly follows its trajectory.

The talk was given to health professionals, and meant primarily to present the intellectual case for cultivating a life-affirming death awareness. Talks to other audiences tend to include more practical exercises and experiences. A longer talk includes an exercise where the audience is encouraged to feel feelings about their mortality, and to begin to develop life-strategies based upon them.

I. INTRODUCTION

-- I feel a deep connection with each of you today, because I am focusing on the sad destiny that we all have in common - rather than the differences in appearance, age, race, gender, profession that might normally come to mind. When I feel this way, I feel happier - softer, kinder, more open, more alive. It is an example of what I will call "gifts of death awareness". The theme of this talk is that realizing such gifts of death awareness can not only improve but transform our lives.

-- I give these talks partly because I have found that I feel more alive - experiencing feelings ranging from deep anguish to great joy and inner peace - when I can feel my feelings about my eventual death rather than denying them. Talking with you today is an opportunity for me to cultivate what I call a "life-affirming death awareness". This is an awareness of my mortality that helps me appreciate the deep preciousness of life, rather than taking it for granted as I so often do, when I repress my feelings about my death.

-- My own experience has been paralleled by hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of others who have been forced to face death because of illness, accident, combat or considering suicide. It is amazing, for example, how many people with a terminal diagnosis find that being forced to face their feelings about their own death has transformed their lives. And it raises a basic question for those of us still in the prime of life. Do we need to wait for a terminal diagnosis to find out whether facing death can transform our lives? Or can we explore this question now, and possibly discover ways in which our lives can be transformed now, so that we can live fully for decades rather than just the last few years of our lives?

-- Let us begin with a demonstration. The Buddha was once asked by a follower "will I be reborn?". He did not answer with words in this case, but rather as follows. (Holds up two candles, lights one, lights the second with the first, and then blows out the first.)

-- To me this story means that the question of what will happen to us after our death is a mystery. I have had deep experiences that indicate that my consciousness will survive my creature-death. I had deep experiences that indicate it will not. I guess I will only know if my consciousness survives my death after I die. It is not an issue I will address today.

-- Nor will we be addressing today the domain of "death and dying", the movement that was thankfully initiated by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Although we can learn much from people who are facing death, as we shall see in a moment, our concern in this talk will be primarily how people in the prime of life can benefit from feeling their feelings today about their eventual death tomorrow.

-- The flame of the candle illustrates our theme. If we turn our attention to it now, we note that it is very attractive. Candles can be beautiful in the light of day. (Turns off the light, room is in total darkness.) But, of course, the flame is far more beautiful in the darkness. We can say it reaches its full "candleflamehood" in the darkness -it is far richer, deeper, intense in the darkness. If we draw close to it we can lose ourselves in its dance. It is no coincidence that

we use such candle flames to illuminate many of our most intimate and sacred rituals - the Sabbath, a romantic dinner, memorial services.

-- I would suggest that the candle flame symbolizes our lives not only as a metaphor for their fragility and preciousness, but because we are most alive when we can experience our life in the context of its opposite. We can choose to live our life with the lights on, and most of us do, most of the time. But we may find that living life with an ongoing, day- by-day, hour-by-hour awareness of our death can transform our lives. (Turns the lights back on.)

-- Our focus today is on cultivating our feelings about our death in a way that affirms life. We all know intellectually that we will one day die. But we tend to deny or repress our feelings about this knowledge. And, we will suggest, it may not be useful to deny these feelings for two reasons. (1) Repression does us far more harm than we realize. It is not helpful to deny any set of feelings, let alone feelings as powerful as those aroused by the idea of our death. and (2) It can do us much good to learn to work with these feelings, transforming our lives in ways we may not presently be able to imagine.

-- We do not mean to suggest that it is automatically useful to feel our feelings about our death. Many people, of course, can go into deep depressions and worse when they try to deal with the feelings aroused by the idea of their death. But we will maintain today that it is both desirable and possible to feel painful feelings about our mortality in a way that affirms our life, to cultivate what we will call a life-affirming death awareness.

-- It is interesting to note how little this subject is discussed in our society. Although there has been increase in discussion about death and dying, we have barely begun as a society to look at how best to face death-feelings while still in the prime of life.

-- This is a near-universal phenomenon as the Indian epic, the Mahabarata, noted seven hundred years ago. The hero Yudishtara is told by the God of Death that he will die unless he can answer all his questions. The final is the most difficult. "What is the single most

wondrous, unusual, strange thing about human beings?" Yudishtara answers: "that all human beings see death all around them, but think that they will live forever". Third World societies in general and India in particular, with its burning corpses by the Ganges River, deal far more openly with the phenomenon of dying itself. But there are few societies - with such exceptions as Native Americans and their concern for living for seven generations to come, and the Tibetans - in which people in the prime of life consciously cultivate an awareness of death in a way that affirms their lives.

-- It may seem strange to suggest that a society as saturated with death as our own is in denial of death. You cannot turn on the evening news, guided by the dictum "if it bleeds it leads", without seeing stories of death. And of course our TV programs, movies, fiction and non-fiction may depict more murder and mayhem than any mass culture in human history.

-- But this illustrates another key point. We are not talking today about "death", but rather "MY death." We deny our feelings about our OWN death far more than that of someone else - particularly someone we don't know. Psychologists like Dr. Robert Firestone and Irvin Yalom have even noted that in a perverse way the death of someone else can feed our unconscious feeling that we will not die. They call this the "defense of specialness", the feeling noted by the Mahabharata many centuries ago that we will somehow be spared everyone else's fate. It is only when we are willing to face our feelings about our OWN death that we can realize the gifts of death awareness.

-- I came to this realization myself one night, at three in the morning, in August 1990, at a time when I was running a modestly successful economic policy think tank in Washington, D.C. I was 48 and if you had asked me how I felt about my death at that point, I would have answered like most people, that "I'll worry about it when it happens, there's no point in thinking about it now." But I awakened this one night in 1990, my defenses down, and suddenly noticed a fear of death arising, and that I automatically and instinctively pushed it away. Something inside me said "you've been doing this your whole life. Don't do it this time. LET IT COME!"

-- This thought was followed by the most agonizing experience of my life. I felt like I was burning alive, then suffocating. I wanted to scream the top of my lungs, but couldn't because I was paralyzed. And, then, this experience was followed by one of ecstasy. I felt alive as I'd never felt before, as if every cell of my body was alive.

-- I attribute this experience to what happened next. I decided to close down my think tank and begin a spiritual and psychological journey. Experiencing my feelings about my death in this way transformed my life. I could not bear the thought that I would spend the time between that moment and when I would actually die only knowing about politics. And, more immediately, I felt I had to understand what this unique experience was about.

-- In a way, I've been investigating this experience ever since. Three things most struck me about it: (1) I never had even imagined that I was carrying around this amount of death terror/aliveness within myself; (2) nothing I had ever read nor anyone I had ever talked to had prepared me for this experience; (3) my new awareness of how deep my feelings were about my death meant that I had to live my life in a way that honored these feelings. Going back into the world of politics, ego, media, money was no longer an option. There had to be something more.

-- As I began to investigate this experience, I was amazed to discover that it was in no way unique. I discovered that there were tens of thousands of other recorded PERSONAL stories of people who had similar experiences to my own. The list of people who have had their lives transformed by facing their feelings about their own death include: countless people who have faced a terminal diagnosis or illness; people who have survived a suicide attempt; survivors of serious accidents; combat veterans; young Buddhist monks; those who have lived through the death of a loved one, and many others.

-- In general, one can divide these people into two categories: (1) those who involuntarily discovered life-affirming death-awareness, like accident survivors; and (2) those who voluntarily discovered it, like

Buddhist monks who meditate at charnel grounds and cemeteries to increase their commitment to living their faith more fully, or the countless artists, poets and philosophers over the centuries who have, like Socrates, urged us to "think death". Perhaps you will find the experience of those who have voluntarily explored their death awareness most relevant to your own experience.

-- I was also amazed to discover there was a coherent theory that could explain my experience, particularly Ernest Becker's Denial of Death, and the work of Dr. Robert Firestone and Irvin Yalom. We shall discuss their theories a bit in a moment. But I want to stress that that whatever you may think about their theories, the key to investigating the gifts of death awareness is not theory but your own actual experience. You might totally disagree with these thinkers that your fear of death is determining much of how you live, but still find in practice that consciously facing your feelings about your own death enlivens your life. Conversely, you could totally agree with them that it is harmful to deny your feelings about your death but still be unable to surface them.

-- I can sum up the fundamental lesson I've learned in trying to understand this death-experience thusly. There is something even worse than dying, and that is this: not to live as fully as I could prior to dying.

I had to admit to myself that until I had this experience in 1990, I had been dying before I had to die. And, I am happy to report, as a result of that experience I have begun to experience a few gifts of this death awareness, and as a result begun to learn a bit about how to live. Now, let us turn to some 5 minutes of video which will help illustrate our basic theme that you have available to you gifts of death awareness that can not only improve but transform your life.

II. VIDEOS

-- Showing of first video excerpt, about 1 minute, of (1) the actor Christopher Reeves discussing how two encounters with death transformed his experience of life; (2) terminal cancer patient Jackie

McEntee discussing how her life had been transformed by her illness, and how she prefers to have lived a few years in this new way than many years as she had been living before. This excerpt ends with Jackie's looking into the camera and saying she hopes that the audience can discover this transformed way of living without having to face a terminal illness.

III. THE CASE FOR LIFE-AFFIRMING DEATH AWARENESS

-- These videos dramatically illustrate how facing our feelings about our own death can transform our life for the better.

-- To understand why, we may discuss a few of the ideas of Ernest Becker, Robert Firestone, Irvin Yalom, and other existential thinkers.

-- Human beings face a tragic contradiction. On the one hand we are programmed by evolution itself to want to live. On the other we learn at a far earlier age than most of us can remember, usually between the ages of 3 and 8, that we will die. This early realization that we are going to die overwhelms us. There is no way we can deal with it emotionally. So we come to deny or repress our feelings about our own mortality.

-- We also develop a need for what Becker calls "immortality projects". One of our principal immortality projects is having children. To whatever degree we are capable of loving them, we are also - often on a largely unconscious level - looking to them to fulfill our desire to transcend our creature-deaths. We have a wide range of other "immortality projects", such as religion, work, identification with a political party, cause, tribe, ethnic group or nation, which attract us in part because they are vehicles for finding greater transcendent meaning than just our own individual identities.

-- What this means for us as adults today is that we are dealing with the death issue as we did as children: by denying the feelings it arises, however much we may be aware of it intellectually. Few of us as adults ever sit down and make a conscious choice: "how do I choose now to deal with the feelings that the idea of my death evokes?"

-- The purpose of today's talk is basically twofold: (1) to suggest that you do make a conscious choice; (2) to present some reasons why you might consider choosing to work with your death-feelings in a way that affirms life rather than denying or repressing them.

-- One key point: we don't really have a choice as to whether we will have feelings about our death. Our only choice is whether to engage and work with these feelings, or whether we wish to continue to repress and deny them as we did when we were children.

-- So the question for each of us becomes "should I continue to deny my FEELINGS about my death?" I would like to suggest that we should not do so, that denial of death-feelings harms us far more than we realize, and that engaging these feelings can benefit us enormously. In suggesting that we engage rather than deny our death-feelings, however, I am not calling for removing all barriers to our feelings about death. Doing so is not necessarily possible or desirable. Ernest Becker somewhere suggests that if we could feel ALL our feelings related to our death we would be reduced to animals howling in the wind.

-- What we are discussing today is a relative or selective lessening in our denial of death-feelings, and a partial increase in our ability to feel them. I have found that even when I can feel even a few of my deepest feelings about my death, I become far more alive, energized and connected to my fellow human beings. I also find that I cannot feel them very long. Almost all of the thousands of cases I've researched report the same phenomenon. I suppose this is true for most of us. So with the understanding that we are talking about selective non-denial", let us turn to the question of why denial of death-feelings harms us.

-- We can begin by remembering one of the few basic tenets that almost all of the hundreds of schools of modern-day psychology can agree on: it is better to appropriately release deeply painful feelings than to repress them and then unconsciously act them out. We apply this principle to dealing with effects of childhood sexual abuse in adult

life. And we apply it to problems ranging from addiction to depression, to violence to suicide. We encourage people who are feeling suicidal to understand these feelings and release them rather than "act them out" by taking their own life. And if it is true for those painful feelings, why would the same principle of non-repression apply to our feelings about our own death? Clearly, if it is harmful to me to repress painful feelings about childhood abuse, it is also painful to repress all my feelings about my death.

-- Repressing our feelings about our own death can do us great harm. On an individual level, we often do not realize how much energy it takes to deny our death-feelings. We pay the price in decreased energy, decreased aliveness, emotional deadness. Dr. Firestone and others suggest that denying our feelings about our death is a key cause in relationship problems, as we find it difficult to invest in and feel really close to our partner because of an unconscious fear of losing them. We pay a price in how we raise our children, as we partly see them as "immortality projects" and are threatened when they are different from us. We pay a price in health. Energy that could be going into life is held back, we lose our vitality, we grow old faster than we must.

-- And, as suggested above, we pay the biggest price of all by not fully living or investing in life itself, because on an unconscious level doing so raises the most painful feelings about our own mortality. We cannot deny our feelings about our death without denying a whole range of other feelings, such as deep sadness, joy, love and ecstasy. We restrict our aliveness. We die before we must.

-- We also pay a societal price. If Becker, Firestone, Yalom and many other existential thinkers are right, our fear of death is a root-cause of much division and even violence. Other ethnic groups, nations, and religions pose a fundamental threat to our own immortality projects. If they are right, we are wrong and will not survive our creature-deaths. It also makes people more susceptible to totalitarian thinking and ideologies that promise immortality in return for relinquishing individual freedoms. Our denial of our death, and therefore of fully living, is a root-cause of the harm we do the biosphere, and our

disconnection from future generations, as we continue to pose the single greatest threat facing them.

-- But just as denying death harms us both as individuals and social beings, the opposite can also be true: facing our feelings about our own death in a life-affirming way can transform our lives in ways we never thought possible. Let me list just a few of what we call "the gifts of death awareness", or benefits that we can enjoy by cultivating what we call a "life-affirming death awareness." And let me stress again that these gifts are based not only on my personal experience, but the reports of tens of thousands of people over the centuries who have been forced, or chosen, to face their feelings about their deaths in a life-affirming manner.

-- Overall, the most important gift of death awareness is an increased aliveness deriving from an increased appreciation for the preciousness of life, a respect and love of life that both enlivens us personally and makes it far less likely that we will choose to commit emotional or physical violence against other human beings or the biosphere upon which their life depends. Just as the candle flame is most fully only in the darkness, we are most alive only when we can feel our life in the context of its eventual death.

-- People, like Christopher Reeves, also report that they feel a tremendously increased commitment to their life-purpose. They report an increased feelings of energy and aliveness across the board, as they no longer put as much energy into repressing painful death-feelings. They report a far greater feelingfulness. Having been willing to feel sad and painful feelings, they find themselves experiencing far deeper feelings of joy and ecstasy.

-- They feel far more compassion for people in their lives and humanity in general, as they bring to the foreground the sad fate they share with all other mortal beings - just as most of us experience a great upsurge in love or compassion at a dying person's bedside. Their relationships with their partners can improve. As they are consciously willing to feel their pain at the prospect of losing their partners, they find themselves feeling a greatly increased love for them as well. They find themselves

more willing to relate to their children as beings separate from them, and find as a result that both they and their children are far happier.

-- Particularly interesting is the fact that an increased willingness to face death often leads to tremendous spiritual openings. Most great religious leaders, perhaps most notably the Buddha, began their spiritual journeys as a result of facing their death-feelings. In many cases, these "spiritual" openings have involved some perception of our consciousness transcending our bodies, or some form of continued consciousness after death. In other cases, increased spirituality has taken the form of feelings of love and openness on this plane that are so deep and profound as to feel almost other-worldly.

-- At its best, a willingness to feel our feelings about our own death has not only enhanced or affirmed life, but transformed it to a degree that people feel they had never really lived before. There are many people like Jackie McEntee, who report that their life was so different after facing death-feelings that they would prefer to have lived a few years in their transformed state than decades more as they had been living before.

-- And such reports raise perhaps the most challenging question any of us will ever have to face: do we need to wait for a terminal illness to investigate whether facing our death-feelings can transform our lives? Or might we be better off by launching this exploration now, while we are still in the prime of life?

-- I can think of few experiences more painful than realizing at the end of life that had we faced our death-feelings earlier, we could have enjoyed decades of transformed life. The time to investigate facing your death-feelings, I would respectfully suggest, is now. You may decide you do not want to. That, of course, is fine. Or you may decide you want to. But, at the very least, it would seem critical to make our decision conscious - rather than to continue behaving as we did when we were children, without even examining whether this is really in our interest as an adult.

-- A key point made by Dr. Firestone is that feelings that were unbearable to us as children are bearable when we become adults. We are not forced to continue repressing them. Is this true for you or me? We can only know if we investigate its truth for ourselves.

IV. CULTIVATING A LIFE-AFFIRMING DEATH AWARENESS

-- I would now like to discuss how we might seek to cultivate a life-affirming death awareness.

-- The key word here is "awareness". We are not using the term in the colloquial understanding of "knowing", such as when we say "I am aware of my death." Rather we are using it as the Buddhists do, to describe a state of consciousness in which I am the observer, relating to my feelings rather than from them. I am not distancing from my feelings, refusing to feel my horror or sadness at the prospect of my death. But neither am I becoming these feelings and being overwhelmed by them. Rather I am observing them as they arise, feeling them fully, and then watching as they transform into a new set of feelings. And I am working to transform my pain or sadness at my death into an increased appreciation for the preciousness of life, and to whatever other feelings arise from this increased sense of aliveness.

-- When we are aware of our death-feelings in this way, we find that there is inevitably a great deal of pain associated with the thought of our death. This is clearly true for those of us who are not convinced of life after death. The thought of losing everyone and everything we love, of facing oblivion for all eternity, inevitably triggers feelings of deep sadness or even anguish.

-- But even if we firmly believe in life after death, there are inevitably sad feelings that arise at the prospect of never seeing our present loved ones again, or learning or experiencing all that we might have learned or experienced this time around.

-- There are two basic ways to cultivate a life-affirming death awareness that transforms pain into aliveness. One is to simply feel

one's death-feelings as they naturally arise in the course of living fully, the other to directly cultivate a life-affirming death awareness.

-- Dr. Firestone recommends the first course. He encourages people to pursue an active, involved, life, in which they seek satisfaction in reality rather than fantasy, and by investing in people and life-goals rather than remaining inward. If one pursues life in that way, he suggests, strong feelings of pain about one's death, at never seeing those one has invested love in, will inevitably arise.

-- When they do, he recommends feeling them as much as one can, and not denying or repressing them. Although this brings an initial increase in anxiety, it will also lead to a great increase in love, feeling and increased appreciation of life. Firestone feels strongly that the more we live and love our life, the more anguish we will feel about losing it. He disagrees with those who suggest that living a full life makes it easier to die. We thus cannot truly live without a distaste for death naturally arising. When it does, he recommends, feel it fully.

-- I personally have benefited a great deal from this approach, and strongly recommend it. And I have also benefited by more directly seeking to evoke my feelings about my own death, as I described above. I find that my natural tendency is to avoid my death-feelings. I thus try to consciously break through this denial, to summon up my feelings about my mortality. When I can do so I experience an initial increase in pain, but also far greater aliveness.

-- Whatever course one follows, however, the key act we can take is to consciously seek to transform painful feelings about our death into an increased appreciation of life. Let me give a personal example. I have recently been experiencing a greatly increased anguish about my own death, particularly late at night. When it arises I consciously seek to think about how much I love my wife. I will reach over and hold her tightly, and think about the preciousness of the time we have left, how unimportant the things we argue about are, and how much I want to make count our remaining time together. There is no question that this experience have greatly improved our relationship.

-- Three basic suggestions can be made on how to develop a life-affirming death awareness, based upon both such personal experiences and the vast amount of literature on this subject:

(1) pay attention to your feelings. Be aware when sad feelings about your death arise. When they do, don't push them away, feel them deeply and see where they take you;

(2) when feeling the sadness and anguish, make a conscious effort to transform it into an experience that affirms your life. Transform the pain into an appreciation of the preciousness of your life;

(3) when death naturally arises in life, for example due to the impending death of a loved one or even just being exposed to it through the media or a book, see the experience partly as an opportunity to experience anew the preciousness of life.

V. CONCLUSION: AN EXERCISE IN CULTIVATING LIFE-AFFIRMING DEATH AWARENESS

-- When you leave this talk today, I suggest you consider the following exercise. From now until the end of the day look a bit more deeply than you normally do into the eyes of everyone you meet, and focus in on the fact that each person you meet today wishes to live but has known from an early age that they will die, and will in fact die. See the hooded or hurt or guarded looks that may appear in their eyes, and reflect on the possibility that this may derive from the sadness they repress at the prospect of their death. And, when you arrive home, go to a mirror, and look for a while into your own eyes and see if you notice some of that same sadness, hurt or guardedness.

-- Notice the feelings that arise from doing this exercise - whether you feel more compassion, or love or concern for them. Notice whether you feel more compassion, love or concern for yourself.

-- And, if you do find yourself feeling more pain or sadness or hurt from doing this exercise, see if you can transform this painful feeling into one of increased appreciation and even awe for the preciousness of

life, and the incredible fact that you have been given the opportunity to experience it. Notice if you can transform your pain at the thought of losing a loved one into increased love for them and yourself.

-- And if you do this exercise between now and when you sleep, and it does lead to increased feelings of love or compassion, you may ask yourself tomorrow when you awake an obvious question: "why don't I do this exercise today?" And if it works tomorrow, perhaps you might try it the next day, and the next day after that.