

PS5—Review of Momma And The Meaning of Life, Basic Books, 1999, by Irvin Yalom SNR

Those of us who have not undergone psychotherapy can only imagine what goes on behind the closed doors. Why on earth pay \$100-150 for a 50-minute hour to dredge up pain that we have spent a lifetime time avoiding? What actually goes on that could warrant that kind of expenditure, time, and emotional discomfort? We tend to have a few general ideas: that people in pain go to see psychologists to seek comfort. That there is a basic choice between "talk" therapy vs. the increasing reliance on Prozac and other medications. But, we wonder, which is preferable? What does psychotherapy *really* consist of? Can it *really* help us?

Dr. Irvin Yalom, a Stanford psychiatrist and author, has emerged as one of the more popular explicators of this still occult field. The detailed and well-written case-histories he presents in his surprise 1989 best-seller, Love's Executioner, and now in Momma and The Meaning of Life, tell us what occurs in the inner sanctum. Read this book and you will have a good idea of what talk therapy involves. It may less clear, however, how much it will help you.

The book begins with a moving, disturbing and clever surprise: a 13-page first-person meditation about his mother. At first we are troubled, as he writes: "Momma is six feet under ... What is left of her? Only bones, I guess. No doubt the microbes have polished off every scrap of flesh." But we are soon drawn in, as he dialogues with his hard-working, uneducated, immigrant mother. "I want you out of my dreams," he tells her. "That's the mistake, Oyvin," she responds. "That dream was *not* your dream, Sonny. It was *my* dream. Mothers get to have dreams too."

The point hits home. If even the great psychiatrist finds himself in his 60s still unable to fully separate from his mother - what about the rest of us? How many of us, too, still dream of our mothers, still live their dreams? And how can we be truly aware unless we are willing to explore and understand more about the meaning of our inner life?

Yalom then attempts to answer such questions with a series of case-histories. Roughly 25% of the book is concerned with Irene, a successful surgeon who needs therapy to overcome the loss of her husband Jack in his '40s. She was deeply unhappy, unable to form new relationships, obsessively devoted to maintaining his memory.

Yalom describes in great detail the course of their therapy: their dialogues, the insights she gave him, his contributions to her. His therapeutic style is explained: it focuses on what occurs between the two of them, "here and now" during the sessions; requires him to be honest, self-revealing, emotionally responsive, challenging; seeks to establish a feeling of equality and mutual respect; relies heavily on dream interpretation; and includes a frank discussion of existential realities including her feeling about her own death as well as her husband's.

In the end, has improved substantially. Her emotional distress has been largely alleviated. She is in a new relationship. And, oh yes. His therapy with Irene, which often included more than one session a week, took *five years*.

To his credit, Yalom includes not only such successful stories. Although the basic outlines of his therapy is the same, he fails to fully achieve his goals with other patients.

Reading these case-studies are fascinating and, on the whole, make a convincing case for the benefits of such therapy. Who could not profit from forming a deep, respectful, caring relationship with a thoughtful, honest, insightful, compassionate human being? We can clearly only benefit by understanding how our present relationships, work, or inner life is shaped by past events. And if we are in pain, this kind of therapy can only help to comfort us - and may just allow us to grow.

But still. While psychotherapy a la Yalom clearly offers benefits, are they worth the cost? What about the financial expense? What

about the time? What if our therapist is not as wise or honest or capable of forming deep relationships as is Yalom?

This book does really answer such questions and, more importantly, reveals why they may never be answered. As Yalom says, "the contemporary managed-care movement in health care poses a deadly threat to the field of psychotherapy." Its focus on limiting the time and cost of therapy is inexorably turning the field into "pharmatherapy", in which the therapist is under increasing pressure to dispense medication to make a living. There is insufficient time to form the relationships and conduct the deep explorations which Yalom believes are necessary for success.

As the 21st century dawns, the field of psychotherapy as practised by the Yaloms of the world is shrinking, increasingly available only to the rich. We are not exactly sure from reading this book how much to mourn this development. But we are left with the feeling that this question should be determined by someone other than the 20 and 30-year olds who run managed-care facilities. The richness and complexity of the interactions described in this book reveal something very beautiful about us humans: that we are willing to confront painful feelings in order to grow. It is certainly clear that something very valuable will be lost from our civilization if this kind of psychotherapy eventually disappears.