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Review Article

A Threshold to Transformation or the End to All Potential?

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Abstract

Buddhists believe that the death of the ego represents a major step, in a succession of steps, along the path to enlightenment. Jung (1989, CW 14, para. 778), similarly, viewed that "the experience of the Self is always a defeat of the ego". Christ, a major symbol of wholeness for over two thousand years, sacrificed his 33-year-old human life to demonstrate that death did not simply represent an endpoint, but could result in a resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, and the salvation of the immortal soul.

Like nature's eternal rotating path, spring follows winter, summer follows spring, fall follows summer, winter follows fall, and then once again spring follows winter.

Upon closer review, however, not all deaths, of the ego or otherwise, guarantee rebirth, transformation, or progress toward Jung's concept of individuation. Some deaths, instead, represent an end point that can seduce us away from the potential designs of the Self and encapsulates us in a frozen state of psychological stagnation.

This paper explores the bipolar nature of death by contrasting its natural positive cycle of birth, development, death, and transformation with its more negative shadowy underside that hinders the individuation process and undermines all further growth possibilities.

I will begin with a poem:

The Leaden-Eyed

Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.
Not that they starve; but starve so dreamlessly,
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,
Not that they serve, but that they have no gods to serve,
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.
(Vachel Lindsay, from the Congo, 1915, page 65)

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Introduction

It has been said that we die twice. Our first death occurs at the moment of our actual death and the second occurs when our name and deeds are forgotten, never to be mentioned again. The first of our deaths appears final but the second death can be a long time in coming. A friend of mine recently sent me an email stating that today was the month and day on which Carl Jung died. I immediately wrote back to him and stated that that was his first death and that if Jung continues to influence psychological thought, he will be still alive in a very real sense for years to come.

It has also been said that the importance of a life cannot be measured in the quantity of years that one lives, but more so on the quality and the aliveness of the life that is lived. In Lisa Genova's fictional book (2014) Still Alice, for example, a. world-renowned expert in linguistics is struck down in the prime of her life with early onset Alzheimer's disease. A debilitating illness and premature death, especially occurring in a person's prime, are usually considered to be lamentable. But is that always the case? Might illness and early death also offer an unseen path to transformation in some salient way that may at first seem far-fetched, especially to a frightened ego? Does such an occurrence always have to be viewed as tragic? I believe, as lawyers are wanting to say, that it depends.

While reminiscing, the main character in Genova's book, Alice, remembers being six or seven and crying over the fate of the butterflies in her yard after she has learned that they will live for only a few days. For Alice, this amount of time seems entirely too short for a life span, especially for such beautiful creatures. Her mother comforts her, telling her not to be sad for the butterflies - that "just because their lives were short didn't mean that they were tragic (p. 110)." The butterflies, in some heretofore-unknown way, will be a symbolic precursor to Alice's own life, one that will indeed be cut short by a debilitating, progressive disease process. But like the butterflies Alice's life doesn't end in the anticipated heartbreak. Instead, when Alice's overly intellectual and career driven persona begins to atrophy because of the disease process, other inchoate and fallow parts of Alice that have existed only in potential, find space to sprout. In Shakespeare's (1980) "Othello", when Iago states that "there are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered" (p.884), he understood that things existing in potential remain inert until such time when conditions compel them or invite them into the birthing canal. But like numerous eggs waiting inside of each woman, birth is never guaranteed. The right conditions are required and so, the love between Alice and her daughter, which had been blocked to this point by a combination of will, intellect, stubbornness, ego, and defensiveness, is

now allowed to be fertilized through vulnerabilities born of a deteriorating mind and perhaps, with some reframe, a slow merciful demise. As Alice's competency in the outer world diminishes, so does her ego's overarching need to dominate. She becomes less judgmental and controlling and these prominent sources of egoistic power are gradually attenuated and replaced by a simple need and growing ability to connect relationally to the other, namely her daughter. Alice's bond with her daughter is therefore strengthened in a fresh way and this helps to restore peace and contentment to her suffering soul, as the needs and striving of the ego are rendered less and less important. Love, being the greatest of life's gifts, heretofore blocked by ego defenses and acquired complexes, is restored to its central place thus allowing a new balance to set in that invites wholeness. Achieving wholeness is not based so much on time, or the amount of time we have, as it is on the necessary conditions that are required and how we make use of such conditions, either consciously or unconsciously.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are taught, "to everything there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die- a time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted" (Bible, p. 377).

And so, it came to pass at the funeral of a respected scholar. The leader of the Monastery exclaimed when he was asked why he was not demonstrating more grief over he loss of one of the elders. " The master came because it was his time. When it was time for him to leave, he left. If we ourselves are also content to follow the natural flow there would be no room for grief." No room for grief. Can that possibly be the natural flow? I believe it can be.

In his book, the Denial of Death, Earnest Becker (1973) believed that all anxiety is at heart 'the fear of death'. He believed that this same primal fear shapes and influences our behavior and decisions. One way to assure oneself that you would do the right thing in the face of fear (or death) is to not fear death in the first place - to not let death marginalize your options. The idea here is that something might prove to be more important, such as love, a sacred value, or a promise kept, rather than the mere desire to continue your life, a life that is finite to begin with. For whether it be the few days that a butterfly lives or the potential multiple decades of human life, what is it that increases the likelihood of maintaining one's sense of Self, purpose, integrity, and dignity in the here and now, as opposed to just prolonging existence? While life may indeed be the most precious of one's many possessions, depending on the circumstances, priorities and prospective can change.

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In conversations with those much older than myself I have often heard the lament that 'I have lived too long'. They have apparently accomplished what they had set out to do in this life and wonder why they are still existing. They would welcome a peaceful death. Others fear death as an unknown. A patient of mine told me the following story:

My father was a very strong and very tough guy. He was a military policeman in the army, and he guarded German POW's. He was originally rejected for military service because he had a hernia. But he really wanted to serve- so he had hernia repair surgery and then the army took him. And yet he was admittedly afraid of death. So, I said to him, "Tell me why you're afraid of death." He said It's the unknown." I said, "No it isn't. Tell me how you felt in 1920. He said I was born in 1922. I then said that "the way you felt in 1920 is how you will feel after you die. You've already experienced it. He said, "Nobody ever told me that." He told me that it made him feel better.

Transformative moments:

A biblical verse that states, "no greater love is there than the love that one would lay down his life…" This is exemplified by the young soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save the lives of his fellow companions. But was this simply an impulsive action? Might it not demonstrate an action of unselfishness – a gesture of pure love as noted in the bible verse? Presented with such an opportunity might the Self, big S, respond to achieve a transformational moment into wholeness? Perhaps, in this instant, the ego, as the center of consciousness, is not the key factor in the decision to act. The Self, on the other hand, as the center of the psyche, acts instead in an integrated action comprised of both conscious and unconscious considerations. It hears the clarion call as an opportunity that might never present itself again. By such selfless action, this soldier accomplishes what many of us will never accomplish in a whole lifetime, namely the transformation into a fully developed whole human being. While our ego may view this as a tragedy the Self could view it as miraculous, and of the highest order. Death, in this case, represents transformation and serves both the individual and the collective. In a similar way when a parent loses a child to a tragic action like gang violence, school shootings, or a preventable death caused by a drunk driver, the parent may dedicate his or her life to assuring that such an event doesn't befall another parent. In this reconfiguration the grieving parent's child's death becomes transformational and meaningful instead of tragically senseless. It also becomes a galvanizing energy that is useful to the human collective. Its tragic elements are

alchemically transformed into something useful. Similarly, in today's world, the many valiant. Ukrainians that are currently fighting for the autonomy and sanctity of their beloved country and who may give their own their lives for something bigger than their own ego, are also an example of transforming the lesser coniunctio, that is, a life of normal aspiration, and perhaps heroic talk into the greater coniunctio – a life with a higher purpose that includes heroic action.

Maslow (1943)

In a Maslowian way, to simply breathe and to survive is not the same thing as achieving actualization. Maslow, you may remember, was the guy with the pyramid. He suggested that most of our energies are geared toward simple survival and that the "humanistic" idea of actualization may, in many cases, never be realized. Jung (in von Franz's book The Way of the Dream, p.77) felt this to be the case when he stated, "Laziness is the greatest passion of mankind, even greater than power, sex, or anything." To be lazy is to take the easy way out, to follow the path of least resistance. It is the opposite of being heroic. Heroic action may be a contra naturum, an act against nature. In the same vein Joseph Campbell (1991) stated, "People say that what we're all seeking is the meaning of life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive" (p.5).

To expand this discourse, simple survival represents what Jung referred to as succeeding at one-sidedness – while failing to utilize the gifts of the whole. When such a state continues unabated, survival can become a dead end unto itself. The individual may have reached his or her stated objectives with nothing else to follow. But of course, the key drawback of one sided-ness is a failure to utilize the gifts of the whole. Failure to use something fortunately provides, in potential, its own built-in solution. If we care to pay closer attention the Self will communicate with us through dreams, mishaps, and other harbingers, subtle and not so subtle, which work to attract our attention. The Self will suggest that the condition can be remedied by utilizing something heretofore unused and underappreciated. As an illustration, let us reflect upon the 1921 movie "The Phantom Carriage," a Faustian tale about an alcoholic named David Holm. In this movie the director Victor Sjostrom, puts forth as his major premise the following exhortation spoken by the film's protagonist in his moment of great peril: "Dear God, please let my soul be fully mature before it is harvested." This idea, I believe, is at the heart of what Jung called the individuation process and speaks

directly to our current exploration. Jung (1944) stated, "In the last analysis every life is the realization of the whole. (…) and realization of (this) alone makes sense of life" (para. 330). Jung, in fact, believed that you could not truly judge a person's life until it was over because the unexpected and the miraculous could change the whole storyline, sometimes at the very end of a person's life. In Sjostrom story, Holm, at the moment of his death, finally awakens to the error of his ways. He has been heretofore psychologically asleep, hiding behind the effects of multiple defensive projections, a constant alcohol stupor, and the interference of various competing complexes. But in this moment, finally awake, Holm begs for more time from the collector of Souls. He importunes not for himself, however, but to save other innocents who have suffered because of his self -indulgent dissent into self -pity and ill-conceived revenge. In this selfless, Bodhisattva moment, Holm acts with a newfound humility and experiences a genuine spiritual and psychological awakening.

Thus, he is granted redemption, and a state of wholeness, not unlike Sydney Carton at the end of Charles Dickens' (1981) 'A Tale of Two Cities'. Carton, you may recall, substitutes his life, a form of suicide, in the prison cell of the Bastille in order to free Darnay whose life is yet to be lived into the future. You may recall the lines "tis a far better thing that I do than I have ever done…" But contrasted to Javier's suicide at the end of Hugo's Les Miserables, Holm does not fall victim to the harsh negative father archetype that has heretofore usurped his ability to listen to the promptings of the Self deep within. Instead, his ego is humbled, and a path forward is opened for further development. While death could have provided a way to end his personal misery, which is the route employed by Javier in Hugo's story, and Judas after his betrayal of Christ in the New Testament, it, without his sacrifice to save Darnay, would have prevented Holm's transformation by leaving him frozen in his one sidedness. He would have died without experiencing his soul in full bloom. Both Javier's and Judas' death, through suicide, represents the end of all-potential.

For some of us the death that prevents or stands in the way of our transformation occurs long before we take our final breath. And perhaps the saddest part is that we may not be consciously aware of this, either out of ignorance, arrogance, entrenched complexes, and/or other archaic psychological defenses.

Recall the poem by Vachel Lindsay, "The Leaden-Eyed," with which I open this paper. Unawareness can occlude our ability to see the whole picture. Equally disturbing is the thought that we could wake up at some point, like Hugo's Javier, and realize that we have squandered our vital years and are left only with a sense of crippling shame, self-hatred, or other hatred with no apparent road out of the predicament or the strength to entertain hope. In such situations how do we stave off the fraudulent inclination to die as one way to end

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our suffering (sometimes killing others along with ourselves) when there is some potential, though undetected, yet to be realized? Why, we may ask, are some people infused with "grace" at such moments while others succumb to dark forebodings? For certain, there are many factors that help or hinder the process. In the case of John Val Jon, in Hugo's Les Miserables, it was the bishop's leniency after his theft of the candlesticks that awakens the consciousness of the thief to see the power of mercy and love – commodities that had been far removed from John Val Jon's felt existence for many years. Similarly, it is the felt love of the Salvation Army Volunteer that eventually draws Holm to his own awakening. Similarly with Faust, it was his felt agony and resounding guilt over Margarete's diabolically unfair fate brought on solely by his selfish and self-centered actions leading to her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and her brother's death at his hands.

Jung himself, after his heart attack in 1944, was called to the other side by seductive images emanating from his unconscious. He recalled that these images placed him "high up in space. Far below I saw the globe of the earth, bathed in a glorious blue light (MDR, p.289)". This out of body experience caused Jung to resist coming back to reality. From this vantage point, he preferred to stay in this unconscious state. But Jung then stated that "Dr. H. had been delegated by the earth to deliver a message to me, to tell me that there was a protest against my going. I had no right to leave the earth and must return. The moment I heard that, the vision ceased" (MDR, page 292), Despite the siren's call Jung was spared death. He returned to life, like Holm above, to complete some unfinished business. His time to die had not arrived.

Another such story as the one about Jung just mentioned occurs in the movie "Gravity". In a moment of despair, when all hope seems to be out of reach, Sandra Bullock's character decides to shut down her life support and to just fade into oblivion from lack of oxygen. While she is fading off, George Clooney's character, who had died a short time previously, resurrects himself in Bullock's unconscious and serves as a major cheerleader, like Jung's Dr. H., to arose Bullock out of her wish to succumb to the peacefulness offered by the unconscious and death. She is fortunately awakened back into life. Her time to die had not yet arrived. There was still more to her, in potential, still waiting to bloom. Like Sandra Bullock's character mentioned above, in the Hans Christian Andersen's (2007) story of "the Little Match Girl," she is cold and alone. She has been sent out by an abusive father to earn what pittance she may from the sale of matches. Each sale will reinforce her connection to the cruel world of reality. But there are no sales and the little match girl lights one of the matches to feel its warmth. In the process she also imagines lovely scenes from her past where she had felt a sense of security and love from her grandmother and this, contrasted to the real

life she lives, is too seductive to ignore. In fact, given the cold, loneliness, and the lack of caring of real figures, she is almost compelled to enter this inner world of memory and fantasy. She does not have a George Clooney to pull her away from these dark seductions and thus succumbs to their destructive and non-transformative powers. She dies twice that day. The question here is, as always, why do some folks find help and support while others fall victim to despair? Is it simply Fate or a matter of Luck? Here I will only express the opinion, like what Victor Frankl espoused in his book Man's Search for Meaning, that if there is a reason 'why' then an individual can usually find the 'how' to continue to live. I believe this reason why is connected to Sjostrom's idea of being fully mature before being harvested.

If there is unspent potential within us there seems to be an 11th commandment, which states: Fulfill your entire destiny. Anything less leaves a life incomplete and your gifts unused, gifts that are sorely needed in this troubled world. Thank you for your attention.

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