Life Against Death: The Depth Psychology of Heroism

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What is Depth Psychology?

• Language of the soul—study of the unconscious
  (psyche means soul/logos means language)
• Embraces the tension of opposites—Life and Death
• “rage against the dying of the light?”
• Value of going to the depths/being in the shadows
• Deep connection to nature/necessity of death
• Heraclitus 500 BC/Eugene Bleuler 1st coined the term
Depth Psychological Terms

- **Archetype**—universally understood pattern or symbol of behavior/show us consequences/help reflect on shadow/help shift experience of events beyond ego perspective

- **Hero**—how does one bear witness to his true beginnings

- **Death anxiety**—primal source of anxiety that is usually unconscious and always transformed into something less toxic

- **Individuation**—a process of psychological differentiation with goal of developing true individual personality distinct from mass-mindedness/vital relationship between ego and unconscious

- **Transference**—“transference occurs whenever an exaggerated sense of power is projected onto any object and then that object is used to cope with or calm an otherwise overwhelming sense of anxiety”

Depth Psychology

- **Joseph Campbell  1904-1987**
  - Hero With a Thousand Faces
  - Bill Moyer series --The Power of Myth

- **Carl Jung 1875-1961**
  - Swiss psychologist
  - Must have a mythology about death
  - Soul & myth more important than theory
Depth Psychological Theories

Ernest Becker 1924-1974
James Hillman 1926-2011

Denial of Death

• Ernest Becker—1924-1974 American cultural anthropologist
• Noted for his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*
• Exploration of human behaviors and motivations resulting in denial of one’s own mortality
• We strive to become heroic because that is the only acceptable response to our terror
Denial of Death

• Heavily influenced by Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank that showed him the fear of life and the fear of death are the mainsprings of human activity
• “How conscious is he of what he is doing to earn this feeling of heroism?”

Archetypal Psychology

• Hillman—archetypal psychology
• Need a reaffirming relationship with death, not one of horror and dread
• Need a soul perspective about what is motivating consciousness/(archetypes, imagery, feeling, dignity of emotion)
• “The soul is the phantom we can never catch . . . Then we go into the dark afraid of the dark, without soul of bulk or substance” (Hillman, 1975b, p. 210).
Archetypal Psychology

- Hillman (1964) asked the question in this way, “Could there be a root metaphor, an archetypal attitude, which shapes the physician’s perspective and guides his activity?” (p.119).
- Need to look at consequences of shadow behavior or repressed anxiety
- Hillman (1975b) put it, “We act in order not to see,” and this acting out avoids a deeper psychological reflection (p. 116).

Terror Management Theory

- Solomon et al. (1991), contemporary followers of Becker’s work
- We are motivated by the fear of death, so our life accomplishments are undertaken mostly to manage this anxiety.
- Becker believed “cultures do this by creating the illusion that each of us is a valuable member of society, and through the psychological mechanism of self-esteem, death is conveniently, if only temporarily denied”
Terror Management Theory

- Death Anxiety
- How we keep it at bay
- Actually causes more evil, destruction
- Not that we deny death but how we deny it

Mortality Salience

- awareness of one’s eventual death
- although people may seem relatively unaware of, or seem to deny their concern with death, the evidence from studies suggests that it is precisely when people are unaware of this fear that it has the strongest impact on behavior
• “yet those who are most realistic and unpressed, people for whom this awareness is right on the surface, are those least able to act. Likewise, those who are the most able to act with equanimity and ease are those who are the most repressed and oblivious to this basic reality” ~Liechty

Transference/Countertransference

• Coined by Freud
• Unconscious redirection of feelings or desires repressed in childhood towards another person
• The more aware of this dynamic the more therapeutic or healing presence one can have
• Physician is ideal transference object
Research Question

• From the perspective of depth psychology, particularly archetypal psychology and Becker’s philosophy on how we deny death, who is the oncologist as hero and how do those expectations transfer to patient care?

• How does the hero perceive his own death?

Title of Dissertation

• Oncologists and Death: From a Heroic Angle of Repose
Angle of Repose

- Engineering term/geometry
- Bridging science, philosophy, and death together
- The maximum angle on which an object can rest without sliding down
- The angle at which a man or woman finally lies down

Physician’s Reactions to Research(er)

- How do you know they will let you interview them?
- How do you know they will be truthful?
- Advice on who I should interview
- You can’t fix everything
Methodology

• Qualitative—IPA (interpretive phenomenological analysis/exploration)

• Allows a type of questioning leading to a beginning understanding (hermeneutics) where researcher “may well ask questions and posit readings which the participants would be unlikely, unable, or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves” (Smith, 2004, p. 46)

Methodology

• Heuristic component—incorporates the researcher’s personal experience

• Experience the most credible of all

• All objectivity starts out as a subjective idea
Participant Characteristics

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Emergent Themes/Analysis

- Finding one’s own sense of heroism: The angle of repose
- Discerning medical tenants and overall survival: The sobering facts
- Confessing death anxiety: A hovering awareness
- Bearing the ultimate responsibility: Physician assisted suicide
- Coping with grief: Keeping it in perspective
Determining the Angle

• The Oncologist as Hero

• Call to the profession

• 2 main reasons
  – Science
  – Relationships with patients

Determining the Angle

• Can you briefly describe what motivated you to pursue a career in oncology?

• None of them described themselves as heroes but were passionate about their careers and saving lives
Measuring the Angle

• The dilemma between availability of latest technology vs. Hippocratic Oath or medical tenants
• This discussion is best described as measuring the angle and how we do this to keep our death terror at bay

Measuring the Angle

• What are your impressions about overall survival statistics and the way we use them in conversations with patients?
• What is the hardest thing about working with so much death and dying?
Exploring the Vertex

• How much of your life is lived against death?
• The most tension/the corner load or wt that gets pushed into the tightest corner
• Need to open up the angle and expose the larger angle of anxiety, the larger shadow or angle that gets repressed
• Angle that must be included/masterly determines the full load

Exploring the Vertex

• How do you want to die?

• Do you have any recurring dreams about death?
Widening the Angle

• This perspective asks for an certain vulnerability and poses additional challenge to the considerable weight of responsibilities.
• The option of physician-assisted suicide widens the angle from an Apollonian world towards a Dionysian freedom from the bondage of suffering.

Widening the Angle

• What are your thoughts or concerns about the Washington State Death with Dignity Act?
Protecting the Angle

• Way of coping with the potential overwhelming emotions.

• There is plenty of research that suggests that doctors do not grief or they do not often cultivate a way to feel this grief.

• Mentioned their own denial or distancing but did not translate into inability to grieve.

• Humor.

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Protecting the Angle

• Can you describe any rituals or practices you have found helpful when grieving over a death?

• How do you want to die? What will happen to you physically/emotions?
What is a Hero?

- Top Doctor on Magazine Covers
- Million Dollar Sports Hero?
- Nurse with the highest paid job; most acronyms behind his/her name?
- The fiercest warrior against disease?
- Survivor who fights the hardest?
- The doctor with the best overall survival statistics?

Feats of Heroism

- As Becker lay dying from cancer, he referred to Otto Rank, who summarized it this way: “The dynamic of evil is the attempt to make the world other than it is, to make it what it cannot be, a place free from accident, a place free from impurity, a place free from death” (2005, p. 220)

- “By defining death only as the result of errors, we erase the face of our patients and insert our own fiercely optimistic version of immortality” (Chen, 2007, p. 30).

- “Surviving the illnesses and deaths of others creates the kind of illusory immortality that leads not only to professional arrogance but also to those selfless feats of medical heroism” (Chen, p. 195).
A New Heroism

- Must acknowledge grief—a reaction to our own impending death
- How do we deny death?
- Epic of Gilgamesh
- *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*, Steven Cave (2012)
  - less self-absorption and more connection with others
  - mindfulness based on the Buddhist philosophy
  - more gratitude
  - begin to recognize soul’s calling/a deep longing to be here
- Death Cafe

- “The hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror; the first condition is reconciliation with the grave” (Campbell, 1968, p. 356).