

## **When the Therapist Falls. By Christine Dukes.**

“The fading of the past is a vivid reminder of the relentless rush of time. As the past disappears, so does the coil of the future shorten”

(Yalom,1980, p.46)

### **Living through an Existential Fall and the Concept of Groundlessness**

This paper explores how the trauma of bereavement can significantly disrupt and destabilise us to a point where there is a loss of coherence of self and instability of the ground. As therapists, we deal with our client’s existential realities and terror often. However, it is not a case of ‘us and them’, and although we live on the other side of the boundary most of the time, we are all vulnerable, as our own gestalt field can quickly become destabilised.

As a therapist, encountering my own existential anxiety following multiple family bereavements promoted terror, a feeling of groundlessness and a sensation of physically falling into a void. Irvin Yalom (1989, p.4) describes how, when we face any of the four ultimate concerns of life ‘freedom/ responsibility, death/striving for life, meaning/meaninglessness, isolation/desire for connection’ existential anxiety occurs.

I have always been interested in existentialism and its parallels to gestalt. My personal experiences however led me to a dark place where I found myself facing all four existential concerns simultaneously. This proved destabilising and left me questioning the meaning of life when everything felt meaningless. I lost all sense of cohesion and who I was in the world. This lived experience left me wanting to understand my process and make sense of it theoretically. I kept a diary during this time. This paper describes my experience as I explore the concept of existential falling and how this translates into gestalt and existential theory.

Drawing on Perl’s (1969) ‘Five layer’ model of personality’ and Denham-Vaughn’s (2010) writings and workshop on the ‘Liminal Space’ (2014), I describe my experience of physically stepping into an anxiety-filled impasse. I explore how, with the use of self and environmental support, co-created lived gestalt experimentation and a belief that our experience is always rooted in the present moment, I reach the peak of a phenomenological transition and transformation to a more grounded and emergent sense of self. I go on to reflect on my

reviewed understanding of grief, how it is a non-linear process and that we are all deeply interconnected and grief is a phenomenon of the field.

## **Death Comes**

Part of writing this paper is a belief that I can do it, that I have something to say, rather than hiding in the shadows, frightened to put myself out there or reach any growth-full potential. This is a metaphor of how I was living my life, afraid to explore, experiment, push myself to an edge or let go of control. It is, at times hard to imagine that I have trained as a gestalt psychotherapist, where the emphasis is so much on living in the moment, being present, experimentation and exploring growing edges at the contact boundary. Instead I seemed to be stuck in a quagmire of death and dying that severely interrupted my life force and transformed my energies into a depressed place of grief and loss, rather than vibrant aliveness. I felt stuck in a groundhog day and couldn't find a way out.

This begun in 2008 with the death of my brother, followed closely by my father in 2009, and more recently my mother's death in 2014. It felt like a part of me had died with them, my body felt rigid and my feelings dulled and numb, as I experienced my life's vitality slipping further into a void of nothingness, as I struggled to cope with the meaning of the losses and fundamentally the meaning of life, my life.

I believed somehow as a therapist I should be able to cope with my suffering and as a result withdrew increasingly into a place of isolation and existence. In the 'Myth of the Untroubled Therapist', Adams (2014, p. 8) describes how no-one is immune from the vagaries of life. In her experience and research, she illustrates that many therapists often experience shame and hide their vulnerabilities, finding it hard to reach out in times of personal struggle. My feelings of grief, isolation and general low mood certainly made it hard to reach out or seek support. There is an alleviation of shame in choosing to write about it, and an acceptance that as therapists we can all be vulnerable and none of us are infallible.

In 2008, my only brother, Christopher, was diagnosed and died within eight weeks from a terminal cancer. During those last eight weeks, I went to live with him and stayed by his side throughout. This was a difficult and challenging time for me, but in retrospect I'm glad I could be there with him. He demonstrated to me how to have a good death; in other words, he

lived his life to the full. He was alive, truly alive. More alive than I had ever seen him, living moment by moment with a vibrancy I had never witnessed before.

Yalom (1980, p.161)describes how:

“Many patients with cancer report that they live more fully in the present. They no longer postpone living until sometime in the future, the present not the future is the eternal tense”.

This was certainly true in my brother’s case. He saw his friends, ate his favourite foods, watched films, gave presents and above said the things he wanted before he finally departed this world. Feared introjects dissipated and there seemed little evidence of stifling retroflection going on. He was very present and alive.

During this time, I experienced moments of deep connection with Christopher, what Buber (1958) would describe as true authentic “I-thou meeting”. No holds were barred. There was no waiting until tomorrow. Conversations needed to happen now, and they did; something that probably would never have been risked if we thought time was on our side. We had courageous dialogue. Staying present for me was challenging, painful, raw, but above all I felt alive and am grateful to have been there with him, moment by moment. I am reminded of Martin Buber’s words (1958, p.31), “In the beginning is relation’ and in that moment, nothing else mattered.”

“All real living is meeting”

(Buber,1958, p.26)

### **Meaning and Meaninglessness**

The shock, however, that Christopher’s life ended at the age of fifty-two still resonates hard in me and brings tears for the sadness that it was somehow cut short. ‘Cut short’! what does that mean? It is as if I believed that we had some right to expect something different!

How so? As death is inextricably a part of life: “life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct” (Yalom, 1980, p.29).

There is still a discomfort in thinking this way for me. Somehow, death is something out there, to come, but not yet here. Time is on my side. Time to plan and discuss what I want for my own death. I believe this is a desensitisation that prevails in many of us, a deflective process that wards off our death anxiety. People don't generally like to talk about death and certainly not their own. It is usually something that happens to someone else.

Yalom considers death and life as interdependent and says the concept of death plays a crucial role in psychotherapy because it is paramount in the life experience of each of us. He was influenced by existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962), who conceptualised that although the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us. Yalom (1980, p.40) explains the meaning behind Heidegger's theory, saying that one's recognition and acceptance of death can contribute a sense of poignancy to life and provide a radical shift of life perspective. Moreover, such a realisation can “transport one from a mode of living characterised by diversions, tranquillisation, and petty anxieties to a more authentic mode.”

I believe this has been true in my case and has shifted my capacity to live more authentically. Following my brother's death, I was certainly left with the question, what gives meaning to life or is it all in fact meaningless? Frankl (1977, p.141), writes how “such lack of meaning creates the paramount existential stress- an existential sickness: as to the feeling of meaningless, per se, it is an existential despair and a spiritual distress rather than an emotional disease or a mental illness.”

## **Death and Gestalt**

In Gestalt theory death forms part of the gestalt cycle of formation and destruction. As we travel through the gestalt contact cycle, there is an arriving at the final gestalt, our final contact into the unknown, a resting place in the fertile void forever. Trauma, loss and grief probably make up a large proportion of the personal experiences of our clients and there is no doubt it is hard for us all to dodge the bullet of human suffering impacting on our lives at some point. Birth and death after all are the only two true certainties we have.

Surprisingly when researching the subject of death and dying in Gestalt literature I initially could find only a limited amount written on it. Ken Evans writes moving autobiographical notes on the death of his wife (Evans, 2000). It is with sadness that Ken has since also departed this earth, but not without leaving his mark on it. Stephanie Sabar's (2000) paper in the Gestalt Review on 'Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning' also gave me some good leads and helped me to formulate some of my thinking. Melnick and Roos' (2007, p. 90-107), 'The Myth of Closure' was written following the tragic events of September 9/11, 2001. The authors describe an emerging non-linear paradigm for grief and loss, and emphasise an evolving gestalt perspective. Their writing supported me in better understanding my own grief process and took away a lot of preconceptions of what grief should be. There is a clear model for Gestalt and the grieving process written by Carmen Vázquez Bandin (2012), and Leanne O'Shea (2005) gives an overview of grief work from a gestalt perspective. Other gestaltists have also written about the subject of death and grief throughout more general Gestalt writings.

In Kepner's 'Body Process' (1993), he describes the interruptions to disengaging from contact. Melnick and Nevis (1997) describe stages of grief as the demobilization phase. Polster (1995), in 'A Population of Selves,' speaks of the loss of a sense of self after a death. However, it is mainly the work of the existential writers Yalom (1980) and Van Deurzen-Smith (1997), and the "death Layer" described by Perls (1969) in his five- layers model of neurosis, that has supported me in understanding my own process. It has also been through my lived experiences of grief and work completed on 'The liminal Space' workshop run by Sally Denham-Vaughan in 2014, and the use of experimentation, presence, and support so fundamental in Gestalt therapy which has enabled me to process, creatively adjust, and assimilate my experiences of loss and move through the impasse I found myself stuck in.

### **Perls' Five- Layers Model**

In the 1960s Perls described "the layers of the neurotic personality," a phenomenological description of the experience and behaviours of people who have substituted a more rigid 'character' in place of the fluid self. In his five- layer model, he saw character as being a product of, and adaptation to the requirements of the external field or environment. These adaptations eventually become frozen, forming a fixed self concept (Perls,1969). In existential terms, we are living habitually or inauthentically.

I have chosen this model as a way of working through and understanding my own process and the defence layers that had formed over my own authentic functioning. I will demonstrate this more later in the text, but believe it is a model that fits well with the existentialism inherent with the gestalt approach of experiment. Referred to as the ‘peeling the onion’ metaphor, he connects the implosion layer with death or the fear of death, and the expression of grief with the explosion layer as described by Perls (1969, p.56).

I have borrowed from Peter Philippon’s (2002) description of Perls’ five- layer model and abridged it slightly for this paper.

The layers are as follows:

- Cliché layer: Social chat, avoiding what is significant
- Role-playing layer: An adopted, superficial and fixed position the individual plays an habitual and polarised role, limited self-description and range of ways of being in the world
- Impasse/phobic layer: The Individual has adopted a fixed role a defensive manoeuvre to avoid risking or entering unpredictability. The individual becomes phobic, usually tries to sidestep into something more known. Place of stuckness.
- Implosion/death layer: Themes of paralysis and death arise. The ‘vertigo of possibility’. The individual is called on to choose a way forward that is her own, something she has avoided doing. It is the tension of being caught between many possible actions
- Explosion: Not strictly a layer, but the release of energy in action and emotion as the individual makes her own authentic choice of path. The task of the therapist is to witness, acknowledge and engage in the choosing

In Perls’ model, each layer acts as a defense against moving to the next. The layers are consecutive and need to be worked through to move away from anxiety. It is a specific structural model that works well with neurotic processes and the moving away from our ‘existential anxiety.’ For me, structure is the way I keep myself safe, a defence mechanism,

but also a way in which I support myself. It is how I organismically self-regulate and manipulate my environment to act in certain ways towards me. This is how I creatively adjust in response to the demands of my environment. From this perspective, neurosis is predictability, and gestalt therapy aims to facilitate unpredictability and support us to move out of the safety of knowing into one of being. This is often done using experimentation and trying something different. What is known in Gestalt therapy as the 'safe emergency' (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994/1951), is where the therapist works with the client at the impasse on how much support and challenge the client can usefully face without becoming overwhelmed or being tipped into a place of panic or hyperarousal. As gestaltists, we focus very much on living in the here and now, moment by moment. But how many of us are truly living, risking, experimenting, living out our lives authentically for fear of falling or staring into the void?

### **Death/striving for life**

Over the years, I have trodden a close path alongside death. It is not something that I am unfamiliar with or shy away from. As a general and psychiatric nurse, I have been at the bedside of the sick and dying and witnessed and held the hand of a dying person on numerous occasions, young and old. No two deaths are the same. Some are sudden, some are planned, and some linger for weeks, months, even years. Some deaths are serene and peaceful, some are agonising to watch. I have witnessed the desperate scars and overdosed faces of those who have had failed suicide attempts and sadly on occasion those who have succeeded. I have lost close friends and witnessed the early days of HIV and Aids in the 1980's.

Knowing all this I thought I would be ok when my mother died; there was almost a sense of blaséness about me. This was the last of my family bereavements which came in January 2014. Watching the death of my mother after having witnessed years of her slow decline into Parkinson's disease came with a sense of relief that she would finally be released from her suffering and I guess I would be relieved of my caring duties. I'm not sure which was the most painful, my brother's death as he was taken down from being a six foot plus, sturdy and fit man, to becoming a yellow bloated cancer victim or my mother who over the course of twelve years was increasingly more locked inside her own body, losing co-ordination, frustrated by cogwheel rigidity, as a progressive parkinsonian dementia set in fragmenting her once complete and very sharp mind.

Following my mother's death, I believed I had gone through all I needed to go through for a while. There was no one left to die, except me of course, and the last seven years had consisted of planning funerals, writing obituaries, sorting out wills, probate and gradually coming to terms with my various losses. This is how it had been for both my brother and my father's death, so nothing quite prepared me for what happened after my mother died. I can only describe it as an existential crisis.

***Diary Entry.** Existential anxiety hits me unexpectedly, it comes from nowhere, it has no form, no object, it is about no-thing. It is unsettling me, terrifying, especially as I don't know what I'm afraid of. Fear is not even the correct term to use, as there is no distinctive object, or concrete enemy to fight back or to fly away from. This Existential anxiety is about being, it is warning me somehow, that I'm failing myself, or falling short of my potentiality in the world.*

The stark realisation that I had spent the last twelve years caring directly and indirectly for all my family members suddenly hit me. The truth was, I had lamely hidden behind all these expectations as a defence against my own fear of living. This was my prize deflection and a wakeup call that things were about to change. It's easier to be a carer, sacrifice my own life in the service of others. It is what gave me meaning, defined me and gave meaning to my world. Now nothing, a nothingness, a meaningless. In fact, everything felt meaningless. I was adrift, I had lost my role.

Hiding and deflection had been the name of the game and suddenly all my powerful introjects, retroflected desires and stifled passion for life were being lifted into a sharp awareness where ground became figure with a Belisha beacon ferociously illuminating it. Balfour Mount's description of the existential moment could apply equally to the groundlessness that comes with being shaken to the core:

“A crack appears in our carefully crafted concept of reality... The very nature of reality is experienced in a new way. We are sucked into the startling realisation that the rules of the game are not what we had imagined”.

Mount (2003, p. 40-42)

## **The Fall Comes**

“He who jumps into the void owes no explanation to those who stand and watch.”

Jean-Luc Godard (2017)

Over the following weeks I began to experience myself as though free- falling, a terrifying sensation of physically falling through the air, no ground, just a vast gaping hole where the ground once stood, trapped, peering into a hole of infinity, black, dark endless infinity, feeling myself falling faster and faster into this void, nothing to grab hold of, anchor to, sheer panic stricken falling.

The notion in gestalt of remaining present, staying in the moment the here and now clearly applies here. I often sit with clients who are in a state of panic and fear, encouraging them to breathe and stay in contact, ground themselves using their feet on the floor or feeling the support of the chair underneath them. Believe me, it isn't so easy when there is no floor, no ground, just a black hole of nothing. These feelings could quite literally come on at any time. I remember walking my dog in the park and needing to hold my back up against a tree as a means of supporting myself. I learnt to breathe more and, above all not look down. If I didn't look down, I eventually could manage to calm myself, but I often felt out of control in a place of raw fear and falling.

Gestalt describes the fundamental and specific characteristics of a panic attack as the ground becomes figure because of its collapse. Francesetti (2007, p.74), describes how “the ground, against which a figure is being created, suddenly appears highly problematic and precarious, about to shatter and collapse”. If the ground collapses, we become groundless, and if we are groundless, there is nothing supporting us, and we fall. Encountering this nothingness at my core caused existential anxiety, a feeling of groundlessness, emptiness, spinning. Typically, we experience this existential anxiety when we become fully aware of any of the four ultimate concerns of life, which are expressed as paradoxes: Freedom/ responsibility, death/striving for life, meaning/meaninglessness, isolation/desire for connection.

For most of us, existential anxiety is an intolerable feeling, and we use a variety of resistances to avoid experiencing it. When this happens, our healthy existential anxiety evolves into unhealthy neurotic anxiety.

Melnick and Roos (2007, p.104) describe how

“Life is a continuous process of holding on and letting go. Most of the time, the process occurs gracefully, with little awareness. However, grief often triggers a premature rupture. We are forced to end a relationship long before we are ready. As a result, we are thrown out of our rhythm. We are forced to deal with constructing a new sense of order in a revised world, and a new balance.”

I was out of rhythm; my whole being was thrown into disarray.

### **Field Conditions**

To begin to make sense of all of this it is important that I introduce you more to something of my own historic field conditions and family of origin. I can now see why I was so deeply impacted by their deaths.

I would certainly describe my personality style as that of a more dependent nature. Having come from a closely-knit family unit who probably fostered a style of co-dependency rather than individualisation, I had grown up feeling shy and frightened of the world. My parents were also afraid of life, focusing more on catastrophe rather than experimentation. My father had Victorian values and projected his fears of difference and prejudices onto my brother and myself. Nothing was ever right or good enough, and my creative adjustments at that time were to develop a false self as a way of coping with what was, by then, deeply held introjected fears often based on guilt and shame. It was safer for me to be a dutiful daughter, often retroflecting my own needs rather than face up to a barrage of hypocrisy and projected insecurities. To survive, I learned early on to split off aspects of myself by living different compartmentalised lives. This way of being became very fixed, as I polarised parts of self.

Perls would describe this as the ‘cliché’ and ‘role playing’ layers in his five -layer Model (Perls,1969).

My early life field conditions had clearly laid down some deeply seated shame binds which I frequently battled with throughout my therapy training. I don't think I had fully realised just

how rigid this split was until my mother's death and the sudden liberation of not needing to live like this anymore, liberating and terrifying at the same time and what precipitated the fall. As such, Yalom describes how freedom in this sense has terrifying implications. It means that beneath us there is no ground-nothing, a void, and an abyss. A key existential dynamic then, is the clash between our confrontation with groundlessness and our wish to ground and structure according to Yalom (1980, p. 9).

I was identifying with a limited self-description or personality function and a limited range of ways of being in the world. For years I had remained stuck and continued to deflect away by hiding in my dutiful daughter role with no available energy for an explosion of authentic functioning in the world. To move beyond this role meant stepping from the impasse/phobic layer(my adopted fixed role, a defensive manoeuvre to avoid risk) and, with sufficient support entering the unpredictability of the Implosion/death layer.

The fall would happen each time I got close to moving away from the impasse, as there was insufficient self or environmental support to move beyond it. This anxiety was terrifying to the point where I believed that I might not be able to survive. Consequently, each time the whirl started, fear and panic began to overwhelm me. I felt desperate and confused, terrified in fact to the point my whole body went into shock or paralysis. Joyce and Sills (2014, p. 125) describe this place of impasse as “She is blocked by fear or the sense of danger as if his very life was threatened. To explore further seems unsafe or impossible. The fear can often be a nameless void, like standing at the edge of an abyss.” Perls, Hefferline & Goodman (1951/1994) identified that this place of impasse is often the place of most potential change and growth.

## **Moving into the liminal Space and healing**

### **Isolation/desire for connection**

Shortly after my mother's death I attended the third of three workshops entitled the ‘Liminal Space, Integration and Transformation’ (2014), run by Sally Denham-Vaughan. For me it is never coincidental that the right workshop comes along at the right time. Call it serendipity if you like, but the field always seems to provide. Arthur Roberts (1999, p. 35-36), describes it

as “The field talks back” where there is an organising force at work prior to our own constructions and ideas and that there is a trustworthy order in nature.

What is a Liminal Space? Denham-Vaughan (2010) describes the liminal space in the ‘Marianne Fry lecture’ (2010), as standing on a threshold, anticipating moving forward into something new, a threshold of change, where life has opened in front of us with a call we hadn't anticipated or known. I am using this model as I believe there are parallels to what Perls describes in his impasse and implosive or death layer.’ In trauma, we are often in a state of overwhelm as there is insufficient support to stay with any one figure formation long enough for it to develop. This occurs often between mobilisation and action on the gestalt contact cycle, figure formation is happening too quickly, which leads to a state of hyper-arousal what Denham -Vaughan describes as the 'liminoid' where the individual feels overwhelmed. At the other end of the polarity is a place of hypo-arousal, vagueness, dissociation or a withdrawal away from the contact boundary into a depressed place of low energy where clear figure formation can't occur, called ‘limbo’(hypo-arousal), feeling frozen or paralysed. Similar to Siegel's (1999) ‘Window of tolerance model’, Denham Vaughan links the liminal space to gestalt theory as a way of illustrating the oscillation of energy that occurs between hypo and hyper arousal at the contact boundary. The trick is to learn to stay in the liminal space long enough, with sufficient self and environmental support for clear figures to be able to form.

To illustrate this more clearly the liminal space to me is a place of potential for transition and transformation, similar here to Perls' implosive or death layer.’ However, I was either stuck in a lost, confused, and withdrawn place (limbo) or otherwise wobbling on a precarious edge, trapped in a state where it felt dangerous to stand still, in hyper-arousal, (liminoid). There was insufficient support for me to form clear figures; instead, I was overwhelmed, feeling pushed forward faster than I was ready to. As a result, each time the ground would collapse, and I would experience the sensation of falling. The experience was visceral, a sensation of my body being pulled forwards into a void, like I was falling to my own death.

To be able to stay in the liminal space long enough for transformational process to happen, I needed support. And in my state of panic, I needed the ground to be sufficiently supported for the contact sequence to be completed. When a person is in blind panic the ground shatters and the figure disintegrates. As identified by Melnick and Roos (2007, p. 99) “In grief, most

experiences of stuckness consist of a split between the strong desire to hold onto a significant relationship, the status quo, specific interconnectivity, a certain sense of self, and a wish or need to let go and move on.” This is what causes the stuckness and for me is the painful, raw, and conflicting dilemma of the trauma of grief.

*Diary entry. Days have passed, I enter the liminal space workshop, I am panting to get there, to explode my stuff amidst generous supportive others who will not run from the ugliness of the dying, the ones who will sit with me in this place of existential angst, hold the line, chafe their hands till the blood runs raw along the slipping rope down into the crater of the inevitable. Who will walk with me on this death line, hold my hand tightly as I gape into the basis of solitude, the place of no return, the place I can only go to and must do so alone. And here I am stood there wobbling on the edge, staring down into the beyond, the dark black hole of nothingness. I feel cold, Icy cold like a dead person, shivering I grab a blanket and wrap it around myself. This is the death walk but not mine, I am carrying the existential terror, the ancestral lineage. The choice of falling into death or holding the line. Falling through the void and out through the other side, back into life, the light, the energy, the fractals of a multitude of possibilities.*

## **Learning to Fall**

“New life springs from the collapse of the status quo”.

Goodman, (1968), cited in Francesetti (2007, p.109).

## **Freedom/Responsibility**

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb states (2017, p.33)

“There are times when therapist and client do something together which loosens a fixed gestalt by addressing a third element, which allows them to get out of an impasse. It is a courageous step to take, to be focused on something else which attracts them both and creates something that transcends them. This step is what we call an experiment: an attempt to include something novel in the field to expand contact possibilities and awareness”.

For me the ground was ready. The environmental support of the field was in place. Sally has known me as a colleague for several years and those who attended the liminal space workshop were also experienced gestalt therapists, some whom I knew well and trusted. With their support, the movement could begin. In gestalt psychotherapy, each intervention is founded on the analysis of the contact sequence and it is the contact at the boundary of the therapeutic relationship that provides the ground and support so vital in overcoming fear and isolation. I knew I could walk up to the void with Sally's support. I sensed her presence and resonance as I faced my fear and steadied myself with my breathing. Having the support of another in this terrifying place, someone to walk with me, someone to walk alongside me, someone to support my back made it possible for me to move beyond the impasse.

The cycle of awareness describes the flow of energy, how it is blocked, how it is managed, and how to hold or increase energy and excitement at certain points. So, working slowly, with gentle words of encouragement, we together in a co-created movement could take bold steps. On this occasion as I looked down into the void, I was physically shaking, but very present and able to stay in the moment. Somehow, I was no longer afraid. Gazing into the void on that that day with the clear instruction that I could consider it, but that I didn't have to fall into it was the key. A moment where my fears of the future alone without my family starkly hit me, but also that I was alive, my future and how I wanted to live from now on was mine and mine alone. This experience felt beyond empathy. It was more a movement away from and towards a more felt sense of self and connection again with the world. That I had the capacity to change and transform my life and take risks with a new-found sense of agency. I was no longer stuck; I had choices and was alive. I had reached my moment of explosion. The unbearable vertigo dissipated, and I sensed a renewed energy return.

Attending this workshop, I believe, saved me. A place where the use of experiment, presence, contact and the support of another cannot be underestimated in that moment. Jacobs (2006, p.11), describes "support as contextually emergent", wherein she defines therapeutic support as "that which enables a client. . . to do (or experience) something; . . . to acquire an until-now lacking ability . . . the accessibility of which has been blocked by fears; [or that] makes it possible for a client to take the respective next step that is necessary to acquire an until-now lacking ability [or] . . . experience."

To quote Laura Perls (1992, p.122)

“Real creativeness, in my experience is inextricably linked with the awareness of mortality. The sharper this awareness, the greater the urge to bring forth something new, to participate in the infinitely continuing creativeness in nature. This is what makes out of sex, love; out of the herd, society; out of corn and fruit, bread and wine; out of sound, music. This is what makes life livable and -incidentally-therapy possible.”

For me it is what makes death into life and turned my darkness into light.

## **In Conclusion**

### **Re-contacting my vitality.**

My sense of equilibrium and energy has returned. I am also contacting a more growthful and ongoing emergent part of self. In writing this paper I have also reflected on the concept of grieving and what that means and certainly in psychotherapy when working with clients. During the early months following my mother's death I had entered back into personal therapy with an existential psychotherapist believing I needed to grieve and go through a process of coming to terms with what had happened in my life. My thoughts were around a linear process of closure involving denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Such linear models, I believe have instilled an expectation for resolution and closure.

Nothing could be further from the truth and, although I can resonate with some of the words of The Kubler-Ross (1969) model, commonly known as the ‘five stages of grief,’ my phenomenological experiences of loss have been very different. My realisation is that there is no closure, just a different way of being in the world and that my family were all dead and weren't coming back. Finding Melnick's and Roos' paper on closure greatly supported my thinking and provided confirmation about my whole sense of being in relation to my losses.

“During a lifespan, important losses become vibrant markers in the “history of the field.” These markers heighten our consciousness of how our continuing attachments to those we have lost shape our identities and influence existential struggles that are

developmental, and how they support us as resources in reconstructing meaning in the aftermath of loss.”

Melnick and Roos (2007, p. 101)

My identity is deeply embedded in my history and relationships with my family; my capacity to maintain a dialogic connection through representations and memories of them supports and maintains a greater sense of continuity of self. ‘Belonging is a significant element of the ground in which the individual puts down his or her roots, which provides sustenance and security at the most basic, fundamental level’ as described by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, (1951/1994), Francesetti, (2007, p.101). My life now is very different. I experience a sense of sadness often and miss my family deeply. Their deaths have exposed me to a solitude and vulnerability. But I remain a part of them and they remain always a part of me in the world as I continue to emerge and evolve.

I notice I work harder at sustaining my relationships and value more the importance of others in my life. It is only in relationship and connection that my life has true meaning. When death is excluded, life becomes impoverished. It is the only real certainty we have. Death is the condition that has enabled me to live life in a more authentic way, moment by moment, here and now.

My experiences of grief have given freedom. This can be daunting and precarious, but also brings vibrancy, a new-found energy and a sense of there is no time to waste, the time is now. At the heart of Yalom’s dictum is the theory that as human beings we all face the four ultimate concerns of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

“They are particularly relevant to psychotherapy: the inevitability of death for each of us and those we love; the freedom to make our lives as we will; our ultimate aloneness; and finally, the absence of any meaning or sense to our life. However grim these givens may seem they contain the seeds of wisdom and redemption”.

Yalom (1989, p. 4)

“It is only when we face up to it squarely can we take our time on this earth seriously and make the most of it”, as posited by Van Deurzen-Smith, (1997, p.111). I have learnt this and writing this paper although it is not the most joyous of subjects, has supported my grieving

process by bringing it into the narrative. It is my truth and has enabled a catharsis and a sense of connection by sharing my experience with you.

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