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Learning to Live through Death

David F. Carreño[1]

Abstract

The present paper addresses two aims. Firstly, it provides an approach to the psychological process of dying and how to live meaningfully through the last moments of life. Dying is framed from an existential positive perspective based on Frankl's and Wong's theories of meaning in life. These theories propose self-transcendence as the central element of meaning in life. Therefore, the cultivation of self-transcendence when facing death is presented as the best psychological tool against death anxiety. Secondly, the paper focuses on the utility of death awareness to live meaningfully even when we are not dying. A combination of evidence and personal examples are provided to support this approach. Finally, our existential positive research project with cancer patients and undergraduates at the University of Almeria (Spain) is introduced.

Keywords: dying, death awareness, meaning in life, existential positive psychology, self-transcendence

Death is one of the biggest taboos in our culture. Everyone agrees that they are going to die one day, but only a few feel comfortable to talk about their own death. Although it is one of the only certainties that human beings have, western cultures normally avoid thinking about mortality. Generally, it is a topic shunned by society, especially hidden from children. For example, when my little brother was four years old, he revealed to me that he had realised that one day he would die as his grandparents died. His logic was simple: "If older people die and I will get older, I will die too." My natural response to him was, "Yes, you and I will die one day." But, he wanted to hear a different response. He broke into tears, saying that he did not want to die. While I was trying to normalise his emotions, my aunt heard my brother crying and came to see what was going on. "David told me that one day I am going to die," my brother complained. My aunt looked at me as if I was mad and called me stupid in front of my brother. Immediately, my father joined my aunt to console my brother by telling him that he would never die. So far, several years later, he has avoided speaking about death again.

Why do we hide death from our children? Is death essentially something bad? Are we teaching people in our culture how to face their own death? Is there any worthy lesson in death to be learned? In comparison to many death-affirming eastern societies (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; Rinpoche, 1992), why is death a taboo in western culture? The title of this article—"Learning to Live through Death"—has a dual meaning that will be addressed throughout the text. Firstly, the article introduces the psychological experience of dying and how to live meaningfully through the last moments of one's own life. Secondly, it discusses how useful death awareness may be to live meaningfully at all life stages.

[1] University of Almería

The Psychological Experience of Dying

Dying might be one of the most difficult experiences in life. The feeling of physical incapacity, pain, and anxiety are common challenges people pass through. Dying can also be considered for many people to be the end of one's existence, at least physically and consciously. It is letting go of important things and loved ones forever. Worries about the unknown afterlife are also common. Besides, end-of-life is a stage of making a final judgement about one's life as a whole.

In a self-centered society like the west, dying can be interpreted as the end of everything. Nowadays, the major difficulty in dying for many people is accepting the end of their self. If the individual, the self, is the major focus in life, then death will be more likely considered to be the end of the world, a chaotic border that produces panic. According to Wong (2014), dying will probably be experienced as meaningless and worthless if the focus of one's life has been inward, only towards personal happiness and individual success. This meaningless of death has been evidenced in terminal cancer patients. According to several studies, many terminally ill cancer patients suffer from a loss of dignity and meaning in life, which results in the desire for a faster death. For instance, about 17% of cancer patients report a strong desire to terminate their lives due to depression, hopelessness, and loss of meaning rather than pain (Breitbart et al., 2000). Similarly, Chochinov et al. (2002) observed that 47% of patients in their last months of life reported a loss of a sense of dignity.

However, is death the end of everything? Should our meaning in life be so self-focused? Human beings are, by nature, spiritual (Frankl, 1984; Wong, 2014). Spirituality is expressed as the human propensity toward self-transcendence (Wong, 2014). The only way of becoming fully human is to redirect focus from self-interest to something bigger and beyond ourselves, towards others (Wong, 2014). Frankl understood that the question about meaning in life and self-transcendence is intrinsically the same. When we globally speak of one's meaning in life, we refer to what is the mission, the function, of the whole of one's life in a bigger social context, how to contribute to others (family, community, society).

In his older years, Abraham Maslow incorporated self-transcendence at the top of the hierarchy of human needs, above self-actualization. What is more, self-actualization can be considered as a by-product of self-transcendence. Self-actualization is not possible without transcending the self for a greater cause than oneself (Frankl, 1969/1981; Wong, 2014). From this perspective, death is not the end of everything, but rather it is the last step in one's life to serve a higher purpose. In other words, death may be the most authentic expression of self-transcendence. It is for that reason that spiritual care and meaning have been considered to be essential in palliative end-of-life care (Breitbart & Applebaum, 2011; Chochinov, 2006; Ellershaw & Ward, 2003).

Positive Dying is to Cultivate Self-Transcendence

A Buddhist maxim is that the best way to have a good death is by having had a good life, having learned how to transcend the ego and accept the impermanence of things (Rinpoche, 1992). A life dedicated to following personal values, serving others, and contributing to society and humanity can facilitate a meaningful death. From this view, dying is a final worthy step towards complete self-transcendence.

Nevertheless, not everyone has lived a meaningful life. Ware (2011) found that the top five regrets of people in their last days were (1) not having the courage to live a life true to themselves, (2) working too hard, (3) not having the courage to express their feelings, (4) staying

distant from loved ones, and (5) not letting themselves to be happier. Those who live an egotistical life and ignore the consequences of their actions on others more likely will die alone without social support, suffering from meaningless death. The question here then is, "How can we have a meaningful death even if we have not lived a meaningful life?" The answer is: there is still time to be true to oneself and cultivate self-transcendence. The search for meaning is an ongoing unending process (Wong, 2014). Meaning and purpose can be discovered in one's life, regardless of one's circumstances and health conditions (Frankl, 1984).

Based on Frankl's Meaning-Seeking Theory, Wong (2014) recognises that the search for meaning and self-transcendence has three levels: ultimate meaning, situational meaning, and life review. These three levels of meaning can also be found during end-of-life, of course, in the cases in which death is a non-accidental, conscious process.

Ultimate Meaning

Ultimate meaning is based on the belief that life has intrinsic meaning and value regardless of circumstances. During the last days of life, ultimate meaning can be built on the belief that one's existence has had an intrinsic purpose and value. When dying, a clarifying question that one could ask oneself is: "Am I the most important thing in this world, or am I a part of something bigger and worthier?" To cultivate ultimate meaning in the face of death is to keep faith and to accept that one is an expression of something bigger like family, society, humanity, God, nature, or the universe. To find ultimate meaning in death is also to keep the faith that things are going to be all right after one dies, that one's death is only one more step towards that higher value.

Situational Meaning

Situational meaning is based on the belief that each moment has potential emotional, relational, and moral significance. Situational meaning can be found in the courage and acceptance we adopt towards suffering and death. Dying can be considered to be the final challenge in one's life. In Meaning Management Theory, Wong (2007) maintains that the most effective way to protect oneself against death anxiety is to focus on living a vibrant, meaningful life. The last moments in life can be used as an opportunity to teach loved ones about one's learning in life, to leave one's legacy in others' hands, to say goodbye and express love, and to achieve fusion in a peaceful connection with the rest of the universe. For example, in Buddhism, death is interpreted as an opportunity for a final meditation through which to achieve fusion with the rest of things and the final teaching in this life (Rinpoche, 1992). Many people show an exemplar courage and meaning cultivation when dying to such an extent that they enhance their legacy through their attitude towards death.

Life Review

Life review consists of assessing the meaning contents of our life as a whole, considering personal growth until death. When dying, one might remember one's achievements and failures, the positive impact on others, the courage maintained under challenging situations, among other significant life events. This life review can be shared with loved ones to leave a legacy. If someone realises on his deathbed that he has made many mistakes and harmed others during his lifetime, there is still the last opportunity to apologize and help others not to make the same mistakes. As they say, a good way to honour our ancestors is at least not to make the same

mistakes that they did. It could also be that someone realises on her deathbed that she has not been true to herself during her life. In this case, she can try to live the death process as a real encounter with herself. For example, she could express for the first time her deepest feelings to others, behave authentically, and accept herself by understanding her life circumstances. Self-transcendence is intrinsically relational (Wong, 2016a); therefore, having others present to express one's final message, leaving one's legacy, behaving in front of loved ones as a model of positive dying, is the best way to self-transcend (see Chochinov et al., 2011).

An Example of Positive Dying: My Grandfather

My grandfather was a man dedicated to his family and his community throughout his entire life. He has been a role model in my maternal family: a good person, cultivated, and a promoter of social values. I had the luck of living with him during my childhood since both of my parents used to work for long hours. The motivation towards my studies and profession comes from the enthusiasm of my grandfather for teaching me about his endless anecdotes full of intelligence and worth. He passed away seven years ago, at the age of 85. His last years and his death were a great example of courage and self-transcendence.

A few years before dying, when he started to feel that his energy was already lacking, he wrote his first book. He spent around two years collecting memories about the family history (starting from his grandparents until his grandchildren), dedicating a book chapter for each of his relatives, and the significant events that had occurred in the family within the last century. He could even remember everything that his grandparents had told him when he was a child, such a prodigious memory. The reason behind writing this book was to leave his legacy before dying in order to make the family aware of where we came from, of our values and traditions. His ultimate purpose was to maintain the union and prosperity of all of us. He did not want to keep any drop of value and knowledge for the great beyond without it being shared with us. Writing the book was actually a way of creating his great beyond. Actually, each member of the family has a copy of the book. When any of us experiences an existential crisis, reading my grandfather's book helps us to find meaning in life again. It is impossible to forget my grandfather; in fact, I visit his grave each time when there is a very happy or very dark event in my life.

In his last days, he showed huge courage and calm towards death. He never showed any sign of fear or worries about death in front of the family. Although he was aware that death was knocking on the door, he always said that everything was okay. He wanted to be a role model until the end. I remember the last one-on-one conversation I had with him. Taking into account the difficulties that he suffered during the Spanish post-war in order to study and dedicate himself to his favorite job, I asked him which profession he would have chosen given optimal conditions, what he was best at, and what his biggest passion was. After a period of silence, he answered, "Police inspector," with a huge smile on his face. Surprised at his response, I asked him why. His second reply was, "Son, I'm very good at understanding how people are, at analyzing their behavior, I have a good eye for people." The last words I said to my grandfather in life were, "You know, Grandpa, that is what I dedicate myself to." At that moment, his eyes shrank, looking at me with such beautiful tears.

This is what we refer to when we speak of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is to lose yourself in others, in loved ones, for a greater value. I can affirm that I am the extension of my grandfather, and each person that carries my grandfather's values is a part of him. At his

funeral, hundreds of people went to accompany him for the last time. He is the best example of self-transcendence and positive dying that I have ever known.

Awareness of Death to Live Meaningfully

After reflecting on the psychological experience of dying and how to live meaningfully and courageously in the last moments of life, we still have a remaining question to answer: Is death awareness essentially bad? Should we avoid thinking about our own mortality? I will start with my personal experience.

Since I was a child, I have been interested in death. Questions such as, "What is the afterlife like? Do ghosts exist? How old will I be when I die?" were frequent during my childhood. I remember that I used to frighten my friends and family, talking about death and dead people. It was fascinating to see the intense emotional impact that this topic used to cause. I have always wondered, "Why do people avoid awareness of something that is so real and so human?" In my case, the normalization of death has given me a different life perspective. Death has acted as a mirror in which I could see the person I want to become. The awareness of my own mortality has clarified what is essential for me in life, how I want to contribute to society, and how to self-transcend. Before making important decisions, I have always imagined myself on my deathbed and asked myself if making that decision would make me feel proud of myself in that scenario. The answer used to immediately appear.

There is evidence showing that people who reject thinking about their own mortality, without a spiritual perspective, typically live a more superficial life, act more irresponsibly, are more disconnected from personal values, and generally are less happy and less resilient (e.g., Hoelterhoff & Chung, 2017; Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010; Long, 2012; Purdy, 2004; Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2011; Wong, 2000). On the other hand, the literature about posttraumatic growth and near-death experiences provides findings about the positive transformation that many people experience because of death reminders. For instance, in a review of the posttraumatic growth and illness-related trauma (mainly in cancer) literature, Hefferon, Grealy, and Mutrie (2009) found that many patients, after their diagnosis, experienced a reappraisal of life and personal priorities, a stronger sense of themselves, and a new awareness of their own body. Other quantitative studies have also shown that a significant number of survivors of a life-threatening illness, survivors of natural disasters, war veterans, and bereaved spouses and parents reported a positive change in their personal strength, an opening of new possibilities in their lives, a greater connection with other people, more appreciation of life, and a spiritual change after such events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Edward M. Forster (1910/2002) wrote: "Death destroys a man, but the idea of Death saves him" (p. 171). In death, there seems to be a valuable lesson about life, and vice versa. We cannot learn it if we turn our face away.

Research Project at the University of Almeria

During the last couple of years, we have carried out a research project in this existential positive line at the University of Almeria in Spain. The project is linked to my doctoral dissertation. The aim of this research is to produce new empirical evidence and to fill some gaps in the literature of mortality awareness, posttraumatic growth, and meaning in life. Overall, we want to study the role of prosociality and death awareness on meaning in life and personal flourishing empirically. The investigation is directed towards cancer patients and university students, using both

qualitative and quantitative methodology. Here we only present the three studies included in our research proposal and some preliminary findings. We expect to publish the results in 2020.

Impact of Cancer on Personal Values

There is evidence showing that a large amount of cancer survivors perceive a posttraumatic growth related to increased personal strength, new possibilities, more positive relationships to others, a reappraisal of life priorities, and a positive spiritual change, among others (e.g., Cordova et al., 2007; Thornton, 2002). However, a common limitation of these studies has been the positive bias of the instruments, mainly that of the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This instrument only collects items with positive sentences about the trauma. This sentence format can induce patients to ignore the negative aspects of their illness and respond only under a positive frame. Besides this limitation, there is still a lack of quantitative studies that show the in-depth impact of cancer on one's system of personal values. Specific studies focused on personal values in cancer survivors could help to understand which specific life areas become a priority for this population, how relationships change specifically after diagnosis, as well as to explore potential additional values that can be affected by cancer (e.g., entertainment, community, physical care, social status, benevolence). This understanding could be used to enhance current psychological treatments for cancer patients.

After an exhaustive search of the literature, we only found one preliminary quantitative study by Grezsta and Sieminska (2011) aimed to analyse the perceived change in personal values in cancer patients. This study served as an opening for future quantitative research on value change, with results in line to those found in previous qualitative studies of cancer patients. However, the limitations of this study included that the design was cross-sectional, used a limited retrospective instrument to assess values, did not compare values with other variables (like meaning in life, psychological well-being, or quality of life), used a very small sample, and did not include a control group.

Two years ago, we started a quantitative study to fill this gap in the literature. We have been collecting data related to personal values, meaning in life, quality of life, and mindfulness from a sample of 200 cancer patients in the main local public hospital. The sample included terminal, non-terminal, and survivor patients with the aim of exploring differences of value change depending on the proximity of death. We used several less biased instruments to analyse in-depth the shift in the system of values after cancer and the relationship of this change with mindfulness levels and quality of life. These data have been compared with a healthy group.

Our first hypothesis is that the majority of cancer patients experience a shift in several of their personal values that is related to an increase of values-based actions in their lives. Based on the literature and our previous experience with this population, we quantitatively explore which values and sources of meaning are affected after the diagnosis of cancer. We are also interested in the demographic and clinical factors that influence this phenomenon. The second hypothesis to test is whether this existential awakening is beneficial and is related to a higher quality of life and mindfulness levels.

Teaching the Lesson of Cancer Patients to University Students

The decision to do this second study included two reasons. Firstly, the studies about posttraumatic growth and change in personal values with cancer patients are cross-sectional and retrospective. Because of the ethical and resource limitations, it is very difficult to assess values

in patients before the cancer is diagnosed. Longitudinal and experimental studies are necessary to provide more reliable causal evidence about the psychological impact of cancer. The easiest thing for us was to simulate a cancer diagnosis experimentally in university students. The second reason to carry out this study is that we find it important to communicate and teach to our psychology students the positive aspects of passing through a cancer diagnosis in terms of existential awareness, prosociality, meaning in life, and authentic living.

Because of these two reasons, with all ethical restrictions and prudence, we designed a group focusing exercise with undergraduates in order to mentally induce them to imagine their own cancer diagnosis and to see the impact on their values and actions. Pre/post qualitative and quantitative assessments during three weeks were applied and compared with a control group. We also used this experience in the class of psychotherapy for teaching students the importance of mortality awareness, prosocial behaviors and values, and their role in meaning in life. Preliminarily, we have observed a short-term phenomenon similar to the one lived by cancer patients. Our students seem to increase in values-based actions, particularly in areas related to close relationships and family.

An Existential Positive Intervention in Undergraduates

The third study proposed is an existential positive 5-session group intervention in university students. In line with our previous studies, this study aims to explore the role of self-transcendence and prosociality in meaning in life and psychological well-being. We have created a novel intervention to promote self-transcendence and prosociality directly. The aim is to evaluate quantitatively and qualitatively whether students benefit from higher levels of meaning in life and psychological well-being after the intervention. It is also interesting to see whether participants experience a reduction of psychological distress because of the intervention. The protocol includes a psycho-educational session introducing the theories of Wong and Frankl about meaning in life, a group exercise to imagine a cancer diagnosis, open existential questions applied in individual sessions to induce self-transcendence, and group dynamics promoting intimacy and prosocial behaviors among the undergraduates. Existential questions and group dynamics have been inspired in the meaning-centered positive group intervention by Wong (2016b) and the questions to generate interpersonal closeness by Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator (1997). Results will be compared with a waiting-list group. We have found no controlled intervention aimed to promote meaning in life, specifically through death awareness and prosociality in intimate relationships. Our results could be revealing of the important role of these components of meaning in life.

Conclusions

The present article provides an overview of the crucial role of self-transcendence to live and die meaningfully. We started by discussing the psychological difficulties encountered among people in western societies to cope with death. Death is a taboo in our culture, and it typically produces panic. The underlying problem is that if we both promote an egotistical life and avoid mortality awareness, death is more likely considered as the end of everything, something chaotic, and very difficult to accept. However, human beings are spiritual by nature (Frankl, 1984; Wong, 2014). Spirituality is based on the notion of self-transcendence, the striving for a higher purpose beyond oneself. The cultivation of self-transcendence is fundamental to experience a positive dying. The best way to have a meaningful death is to have lived a meaningful life. However, the search for

meaning is an ongoing, unending process (Wong, 2014). Meaning can be discovered in one's life, regardless of one's circumstances and health conditions (Frankl, 1984). Based on this perspective, different examples were used to explain how the three levels of meaning proposed by Frankl (ultimate meaning, situational meaning, and life review) can be cultivated in the last moments of life.

In the second part of the article, we argued that death awareness is a potent tool to live meaningfully (see also Wong, 2009). The literature provides evidence that mortality awareness and spirituality is positively related to a higher meaning in life, authentic living, happiness, and resilience (Hoelterhoff & Chung, 2017; Holder et al., 2010; Long, 2012; Purdy, 2004; Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2011; Wong, 2000). Besides, people who have suffered traumas and near-death experiences, such as survivors of a life-threatening illness, survivors of natural disasters, war veterans, and bereaved spouses and parents, often report experiencing posttraumatic growth. This growth consists of a stronger appreciation of life, a shift in life priorities, greater connectedness with others, a stronger sense of self, new awareness of the body, and a positive spiritual change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Hefferon et al., 2009).

Finally, the proposal for our research project from the University of Almeria in Spain was presented. Three different studies with cancer survivors and university students are proposed to provide new evidence in the literature about the central role of death awareness and self-transcendence (or prosociality) in meaning in life and psychological well-being. This project is the first one of its kind in our department and one of the few in Spain in the area. We hope that our investigation serves as a call for future studies in this line of research both in Spain and worldwide. The results are promising.

A combination of experimental psychology with existential humanistic psychology, including qualitative and quantitative methodology, can help to bring existential humanistic psychology to a more privileged place in science. Modern psychology is so focused on studying areas such as the brain, cognition, emotions, and behavior that it is easy to forget what it means to be human from a holistic perspective. We often forget that humans are spiritual and social by nature. These two human aspects should play a more central role in positive research and interventions than they currently do.

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