

Irvin D. Yalom, *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 306 pp.

Clinical supervisors hardly need an introduction to Irvin Yalom. For many years, his classic *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (1970) has been an implicitly mandated text (along with Robert Wallerstein and Rudolf Ekstein's *The Teaching and Learning of Psychotherapy* (1963) for anyone who aspired to successfully navigate the certification process and become a supervisor. It certainly held a place of prominence on my bookshelf during the late 60s and early 70s when I went through the hoops. Almost twenty years later, when I came to Stanford Medical Center in 1988 to direct the Spiritual Care Service, one delightful bonus was to discover Irvin Yalom alive and well on the medical school faculty. A fringe benefit consisted of inviting him to present to a standing-room only seminar at the 1992 ACPE annual conference in Oakland.

Those familiar with Yalom know his classical training in Freudian psychotherapy and analysis evolved—primarily under the influence of his therapist, Rollo May—to his becoming a leading exponent of the theory and practice of existential psychotherapy. His *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) became a foundational text in the field. Not only did it demonstrate his continuing commitment to assessing the subtle interplay between theory and practice, but it set the stage for a series of books designed to foster a dialogue between professional colleagues as well as interested laypersons (e.g., *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*, 1989; *Everyday Gets a Little Closer: A Twice-Told Therapy*, 1990; and *Momma and the Meaning of Life: Tales of Psychotherapy*, 2000).

In recent years, Yalom's wide-ranging mind has become engaged with the interaction between philosophy and psychotherapy. Perhaps he tipped his hand in his marvelous potshot at classical psychoanalysis, *Lying on the Couch: A Novel* (1997) whose title alone should be nominated as the best double-entendre in psychiatric literature. Two of his engaging novels implicitly raise the question of what would have happened had psychotherapy developed more in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche (*When Nietzsche Wept: A Novel of Obsession*, 1993) or Arthur Schopenhauer (*The Schopenhauer Cure: A Novel*, 2006).

Now, in the early years of his seventh decade, Yalom, not surprisingly, sets his sights on the basic existential anxiety: death. What could be timelier for an aging population, frequently reminded that those of eighty plus years comprise the fastest growing segment of our society? On the surface we resonate with Woody Allen's quip, "I am not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens." In *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*, Yalom addresses the timeless therapeutic/existential challenge of how we move from death as a horrific immobilizer to a tolerable, life enhancing, anxiety. In his words, "Confronting death allows us, not to open some noisome Pandora's box, but to reenter life in a richer, more compassionate manner" (p. 9).

While he may quote Augustine and allude to St. Paul and Aquinas, religion does not play a significant role for Yalom as a resource for coping

with death. Describing himself as “not a lapsed anything,” he does, however, aver an intrinsic and significant relation between death and religion, as he declares, “Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which in one way or another, attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude” (p.5).

Not religion, but the psychoanalytic theory and existentialism which have served Yalom so well for so long have been increasingly augmented by philosophy and literature. He credits Rollo May for inspiring him, during his residency, to enroll in an undergraduate survey course in the history of Western philosophy, and “(ever) since, I have continued reading and auditing courses in philosophy and found there more wisdom and guidance in my work than in the professional literature of my field” (p. 173).

Yalom selects as his primary philosophical mentor on the subject of death the Greek philosopher Epicurus, a member of the Athens school circa 300 B.C.E. He readily identifies with Epicurus’ belief that the purpose of philosophy is to relieve human misery. As to the root cause of human misery, “Epicurus had no doubt about the answer to that question: it is our omnipresent fear of death” (p. 77). Those familiar with the work of this philosopher know that he equates the nature of what we will experience after our death with that which we experienced prior to our birth.

The rich and engaging theoretical section of *Staring at the Sun*—drawing on a host of philosophers and writers—is well complemented by several elegant and moving vignettes taken from Yalom’s practice as a psychiatrist. He notes that some therapists are uncomfortable dealing with the topic of death in therapy. As many have done with religion, they treat death as a symptom of “something deeper.” Yalom, by way of contrast, assists his patients in engaging death with a deep sense of caring enhanced by his transforming interventions. He readily honors and respects patients whose faith provides solace and strength in the face of death. When it appears appropriate and therapeutically useful, he will share with the patient his own vulnerabilities pertaining to death. I was particularly moved by the caring way in which he participated in the death of two of his well known mentors: Jerome Frank and Rollo May (his therapist who had also become a treasured friend).

A friend and colleague thought I might like *Staring at the Sun*, and I knew it had generated many speaking invitations from professional and lay groups. My friend was right, and I suspect you will find it personally and professionally engaging as well.

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