

BOOK REVIEWS

In this issue we continue a venture which met with some critical success that we began in EA 18.2, that is to have more than one person review the same book. Irvin Yalom is a hugely influential writer in the modern Existential tradition and he is equally at ease writing in the academic style as he is as a novelist. The book we have reviewed by two different people is his latest book Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death which as can be seen from the reviews is something of a hybrid. We hope that this reinforces the spirit of pluralism and debate that characterises the editorial policy of Existential Analysis.

Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Dread of Death

Irvin D. Yalom (2008) Piatkus £14.99

My first encounter with existential thought came through the existential-humanistic tradition of Rollo May and JFT Bugental, whose writings I devoured in the 'seventies. For the last quarter of a century the books of Irvin Yalom, whom I consider to be part of this tradition, have been my companions in my professional life as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist.

When I did my first psychotherapeutic training in the early 'eighties, his book on group therapy was my guide to this subject. As soon as I got my hands on a copy of *Existential Therapy*, I devoured it in a few sessions, and the section of this book on my ultimate concern of death later became one of the sources of impetus for my own research into death awareness and personal change. In *Love's Executioner* I marvelled at Yalom's courage in writing about therapeutic relationships which had not been a great success and also at his skill in bringing these encounters to life. And *The Gift of Therapy* I value as a wise and generous offering to the next generation of therapists of his way of working and of the benefit of his therapeutic experience over several decades.

In the preface to his most recent work written in his mid-seventies, Yalom describes *Staring at the Sun* as '*a deeply personal book stemming from my personal confrontation with death... These pages contain what I have learnt about overcoming the terror of death.*' (p. ix)

Yalom writes always with great facility and immediacy and in this case, I experienced reading the first hundred pages or so as like eating a delectable dessert, which melts in the mouth and requires no chewing. Doubts began to rise in my mind: is this just a potboiler in which Yalom is recycling old material, specifically from the section on death in *Existential Psychotherapy* and the wisdom and advice already offered in *The Gift of*

Therapy. However, as I read on - and re-read the entire book - I came to see that what Yalom has offered us here is both generous and substantial.

First of all, Yalom is surely right that the issue of recognising and facing death anxiety is profoundly important and something that most people will be faced with at some point in their lives. Moreover, I think he is also right in suggesting that is equally an issue which most people shy away from still.

This is a deeply personal book in which Yalom not only shows through many clinical vignettes how he helps his patients to recognize and explore their death terror, but he also offers a detailed account of his own encounters with death and the philosophical ideas which have helped him face his own mortality. One of the ideas he presents which most appeals to me is that which he calls '*rippling*'.

Rippling refers to the fact that each of us creates - often without our conscious intent or knowledge - concentric circles of influence that may effect others for years, even for generations. That is, the effect we have on other people is in turn passed on to others, much as the ripples on a pond go on and on until they are no longer visible but continuing at a nano level. The idea that we can leave something of ourselves, even beyond our knowing, offers a potent answer to those who claim that meaninglessness inevitably flows from one's finiteness and transiency.

(p 83)

As Yalom points out, this is why he is still writing and working as a therapist at the age of 75. Although his many clinical vignettes are primarily there to illustrate working with death anxiety, they also illuminate many other aspects of clinical practice. On almost every page, I found some small observation which sparked off a thought relating to a recent session with one of my own clients. Some of these observations are very practical: for example he notes the significance of how near to this office or how far away his patients park when they attend a session - a matter I've found illuminating when I've inquired into it with my own clients.

Yalom is a great teacher and a wonderful writer and in my opinion no therapist, however experienced, would fail to profit from reading this book.

Nick Kirkland-Handley