

Searching for meaning on the beaches of Elba

A family vacation reveals expectations, disagreements, questions and existential reflections

Like many, I have the frequent experience of being asked about or called upon the existential part of my title by clients or people interested in therapy. It has been very useful to think afresh about the question, what is it that I am doing as an existentially ‘graduated’ psychotherapist?

I must admit, over the years I have had the feeling at times of having deserted my existential home, but equally I keep having the experience of a coming back home, appreciating mainly its expansiveness.

Seaside exploration

I had a chance last summer to explore this question while on a family vacation around Elba, known for its 100-plus stunning beaches. The trip started to lose its appeal after about a week: relentless daily visits to searing hot beaches chimed with a somewhat uprooted feeling and utter exhaustion after moving to a new house.

We made it a mission to visit and rate as many beaches as we could. We visited twelve beaches in total. No. 13 got the lowest rating, we were all in a bad mood that day and the beach was littered with seaweed, which didn’t conform to our idea of a stunning sandy beach (that’s how ratings get influenced by mood and context).

The highest rating was beach No. 45, Stecchi. Even though we struggled to access the beach, getting hot and bothered as we edged closer to midday, we were rewarded with a quiet, turquoise beauty that had an old stick bridge structure from which you could plunge into the sumptuous clear water, swimming alongside millions of fishes. Beauty won over discomfort, hands down.

Among my travel companions was *Dialogues On*

the Search for Meaning in Existential Therapy between Ernesto Spinelli and Gianfranco Buffardi (published by the SEA). It was reassuring to find that, after years of practising, they still ask questions about the existential, about therapy.

It was on beach No. 20 I think, Topinetti, where I completed the read of this little book. Of course, the number 20 in itself is meaningless, just as meaningless perhaps as that day was, another ordinary day in the life of a family with two teenagers and a nine-year-old where disagreements abound.

The holiday was desperately existential – read difficult (the right interpretation of existential?) – as it was a continual movement between the lost and found of meaning and meaninglessness, and profound guilt too for not feeling or doing this or that in any given moment, or for certain things just simply not being possible.

During the holiday lots of questions emerged. Why do we have so many expectations? What is fun? Am I hiding behind these existential reflections to get away from my family (particularly at beach no. 13, Nesportino)? Yes.

Is that OK? Who takes decisions and why? What is the meaning of feeling like a child and yet being utterly responsible for the well-being of five people when navigating curvy roads in a ridiculously small Fiat?

What are the parents to do with the terror of jellyfish that on this holiday assumed off-the-scale proportions for the children? It really ruined our enjoyment of a supposedly most beautiful beach (no. 22) that we had finally reached after a most difficult climb and descent.

What about that snooze I had on a rock with the



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← tiniest of shade, not particularly comfortable, but essential, whilst my husband loved yet another swim in the searing heat (no. 68)? Half asleep I was still plagued by guilt whether I ought to be in the water and enjoy the turquoise sea for the very last time.

Fear of death seemed to crop up often: “What’s the tallest jellyfish in the world mum and do they exist here in Italy? Do they kill you?” “They can be gigantic but not in Italy. I suppose they could kill you.” “But what if?” and so on, for days.

Death seemed most ‘tangible’ at an old mining lake next to the sea (no. 23); Terranera was studded with signs shouting, ‘Do not swim, danger of death’, presumably because of its unfathomable depth and the sulphur it contained (we never found out) but, ah, swimming in it was absolutely delicious.

Dilemmas

Questions about the search for meaning in existential therapy are perpetually intertwined with the question about the search for meaning in life. What is a good life? A series of fleeting joys? Or the ability to let go and flow? Or full of dilemmas and suffering? Or more ordinary than exciting? And if so, how do we navigate the mundaneness of it all?

On one level it seems to me I suffered a great deal on that holiday – I grappled with not recognising myself anymore. I felt that I had lost my ground and I felt disjointed.

Above all there was a gaping sense of isolation. I did not feel I recognised my husband anymore either, or it felt like in turn he did not recognise me. That felt dangerous, and untenable, and painfully and profoundly like a loss from which I feared I, or we, would never recover.

This feeling continued for a good while upon our return back to London – I was wondering whether I/we needed help, what sort of help, I didn’t know, I felt rotten. I think what I grappled with is what I feel Spinelli and Buffardi, as I understand it, grappled with: is it to be with a dilemma or to work with a dilemma?

Spinelli makes a distinction between practising

existential therapy as a way of being (with no aim) and existentially attuned psychotherapy, a way of being OK with, or moving along towards change with some loose (potentially unexamined) aim, mainly to do with reducing suffering.

I considered going to see my ‘therapist-in-wait in case of need’ but my husband felt that was a bad idea. He feared I might (he might?) get trapped in a problem fixing narrative.

It is true, when I feel desperate I want answers. Probably like most of my clients, I want to change something or someone, I want to feel better! So, wanting existentially-attuned psychotherapy perhaps. But in the long run I keep remembering the comforting leveller of an existential-philosophical-phenomenological atmosphere, existential therapy as it were, which at the end gives me the gift of simply feeling human; a basic feeling that I am ok.

Spinelli says that he does not view one better than the other, but I feel that one is better than the other! Hence the guilt – or rather, I grapple with this personally as well as professionally often; trying to work out the unsolvable puzzle or complexity of self/

other as subject, self/other as object.

Do I offer a pure way of being to myself (and others) and my clients, which means being with, being present to whatever is without judgment or manipulation of variables, or do I succumb to my human need for safety/certainty, by moving myself, the client subtly/or not so subtly along a path that I feel would be better, because it means less suffering, more functionality, is more acceptable? Or simply feels more at peace...

In reality I feel it is a mixture of a scintillating palette of many possible colours.

Being with pain

It takes courage to be with pain. It takes courage to be with what is in the therapeutic space. And ‘being with’ is clearly very important, and very powerful too. It’s the most single, most freeing and grounding component of therapy I feel exists.

And yet, sometimes the suffering is so big that it,

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or I, or the client, or we together are feeling drawn to the Doing, when the suffering feels intolerable or too close to the abyss.

Perhaps then, the most responsible thing is to offer some form of alleviation. There are many ways of doing that: the most controversial perhaps for some is the route to psychiatry. The more benign, maybe, is the decision to take some form of medication, or reach for CBT techniques, which some find helpful.

I tend to pay attention to the body and breath, or engage in visualisations or chair work, or facilitate an opening up of the possibility of embodied practices or somatic experiencing in the therapeutic space, or drawing, handling and placing objects/images, or bouncing a ball, alone or together, or standing on one leg and hop, push against the wall, or letting the sound of a singing bowl or drum give way for something else to emerge.

And then...I return to 'being with'. I give space to silence and stillness too, where the echo of what just happened can take shape.

The underworld

Perhaps self/other as subject/object in all its manifestations and relationships finds a framework in the four basic dimensions of human existence that have been proposed (Binswanger/Van Deurzen): *Umwelt*, *Mitwelt*, *Eigenwelt*, and *Uberwelt*. And yet I perceive those four dimensions as restrictive. I would want to add a fifth dimension that I would call *Untervelt* (Underworld)

In *Untervelt*, German has multiple connotations from shady characters and gangs, to mythical creatures and myths from various cultures going back to ancient times. For me it also denotes the underbelly of the world where fairies, angels, earth and other creatures reside, very much part of the world, in albeit different guises.

Heidegger's 'uncanny' comes close to this realm, perhaps? A possibility of something happening, the 'unconcealment' of world. There can be fear and terror associated with this unconcealment, as we lose a sense of reference and control, entering a 'wild' irrational space that bears little resemblance to 'civilised' life.

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This is also a domain encountered in shamanic practices where altered states of consciousness are intentionally travelled to, in order to find healing and guidance for ill-health, dilemmas of life, or loss of power.

Multidimensionality

Moving on from four, potentially five, dimensions perhaps it is more useful to think about multidimensionality instead. As citizens of the 'modern' world I feel many dimensions come into play, can be explored, juxtaposed even, or indeed become so dominant they need counterbalancing with other dimensions.

For example, I experience the Intellectual/Academic in our parts of the world as a prevalent dimension of human existence, which offers fascinating insights but can also come with its own restrictive, sometimes unreflected, culture and rules, feeling in its extremes disembodied and too certain.

In contrast, an Existential-Phenomenological dimension, perhaps a counterculture to the Intellectual/Academic, allows for the peeling of layers in relation to questions, comfortable with the unknown aspects of the core that can never be reached.

I experience strongly an Otherworldly dimension, whose realm is extraordinary and fantastical, almost psychedelic in quality, whose soaring heights can't be easily grasped and continues to unfold *ad infinitum*. This is closely connected for me to the Creative dimension where the experience of a life force is like a well that keeps giving, playing a vital role in well being.

Then there is the Technological dimension with its tremendous ability of connectivity as well as isolation spanning the globe and many different tribes, and the Ecological dimension where an earth consciousness is emerging, where trees and plants can be communicated with.

Then there is the Social dimension where power structures are being questioned and overhauled (or not). There is also my and your subjective Physical dimension of experiencing, moving and connecting



← to our embodied existence (or not), and the objective Biological dimension of how our bodies work and grow, the knowledge of neuroscience and at a more experiential level Cellular Awareness, mediated by the Psychological Dimension of the mind that is capable of holding together (or not) all that is possible to hold and more.

The Cultural dimension can supersede social and physical dimensions where I can examine what particular landscapes and practices, context if you like, have influenced me both on a micro and macro level. And sometimes, sadly, assumptions, social dynamics, prejudice, labels, the medical model, the tyranny of rationality break in, make us tremble and shrink our worlds. This is perhaps the Oppressive dimension. Then we have no choice but to be with that too, having to work out what feels/is best within that particular dynamic at this point in time.

The sensing of self in relation to the other is at the centre of all of this, the quality of connection in particular, and if felt, able to give way to a tremendous experience of love that is all pervasive.

With the phenomenological lens, I feel I am best equipped to be present to what is and what is emerging, giving me the framework to experience whatever is presenting itself to me. And I can also expand my ability to notice. All the dimensions can be explored, examined, amplified, brought into sharp focus, transformed, new ones added.

Surfing the moment

Wisdom reminds me that it is a dance of fore- and background of subject/object, structure/chaos, pain/bliss, elation/flat emptiness, polarities and things in between, where the art is to navigate these different ways, to surf them, and not negate the one from the other. To carefully come to a point,

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a narrative, a moment, an extended period of time that feels right to the client, or me, or us, with an acceptance that the moment passes and something else emerges that can be equally right or true.

It is a matter of balance and context; a holding and a letting go, lightly, of what the 'truth' may be at any given moment. Much like a movie that can run at full speed, be paused to reveal a still shot, or sped up to a series of impressions.

In their dialogue, Spinelli and Buffardi muse about the arts, as a way of understanding, as a way of being with life, in therapy, which I agree with and like to call the poetry of existence. From a young age I connected to this poetic sensibility; a reliable, comforting and expansive way of being in and seeing the world. It has come to my rescue yet again, faithfully, in some of those challenging moments on the Elba holiday.

Whether it was singing along in unison to Stormzy on those curvy roads, or finding a moment of dropping into the green coolness of the old wash house, or taking in the scent of the millions of wild fennel flowers on the mountain trail and chewing their seeds with delight, taking a picture of loved ones feeling happy right there and then, or simply melting into the view ahead and down. . . all captured with a minute and detailed gaze through the lens of my fantastic phone camera.

Momentarily, there was beauty, and truth, and all was well. Compare and contrast this usage of the creative tool of technology to that of teenagers, and yet other dimensions open up with a million more possibilities and questions.

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An existential-phenomenological way of seeing and being with self/client/world, manages to capture this complexity and the contradictory nature of life rather well. Reading this little blue book of dialogue was a good reminder of the possibility of possibilities and made a useful accompaniment to my holiday; it helped me to stay with my experiences, whilst allowing things to be questioned, as well as navigate tentative understandings, and at the same time knowing that there is no definitive answer.

That's the power I feel of a *commitment* to the search for meaning, which is central to existential therapy. It offers the client, me the therapist, us humans, the freedom to choose, the freedom to create and extract meaning, over and over again. ■

