



**A**ll of us will one day die. It has taken me a long time to come to terms with this fact.

As a psychotherapist, I know that anything we avoid reduces our capacity to live. And I'm interested in living. When I say living, I mean being a vibrant member of this world we inhabit for such a short time. As Mary Oliver writes in her poem 'When Death Comes':<sup>1</sup>

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom taking the world  
into my arms.*

In this article, I want to explore our aversion to death and, in particular, how reconnecting with nature can help us welcome death and, in the process, bring a much-needed sense of vitality and immediacy to life.

I was brought up in rural Northern Ireland in the 1960s, where death was never hidden away. If a family member, neighbour or friend died, everyone who knew them would go to the wake, which was usually held in the deceased person's home. The coffin would be left open, and everyone attending would file into the room, stand by the corpse for a few minutes and say a few prayers, and it was normal to reach out and touch the dead person's hand or forehead. Even young children went to the wake. Death was there to be seen by everyone.

I grew up on a farm, where death was also a normal part of daily life. Animals were fattened and sent to the abattoir. Once a year, a neighbour came and slaughtered a pig on the farm, which was for family consumption. My mother used to kill chickens for Sunday dinner. The crops grew and were harvested. The grass grew in spring and summer and

died off in autumn and winter. Life was forever on the move.

I also experienced death through growing up during the Troubles, when premature and violent death was so common as to be normal. And, at a more historic level, my ancestors lived through the famine in the 1840s, when one million people died from starvation. This societal trauma is embedded in my genetic memory.

So, at many levels, death has been part of my life. Yet, even though we were open to death, none of us would ever mention our own death. It seems this was a step too far. Bringing it back to me, to my own death, is the biggest challenge of all.

### Disconnecting from death

In the western world, if we acknowledge death at all, we typically see it as the enemy. We fight to keep it at bay; we have nips and tucks to make us look younger; some people even have their bodies frozen when they die, in the hope that they can be brought back to life when the technology is available. Others turn to religion for reassurance that death is not the end. Yet, the reality is we will all die.

This process of separation from death has been aided by the medical profession. Gawande writes: 'Scientific advances have turned the processes of ageing and dying into medical experiences, matters to be managed by health care professionals.'<sup>2</sup> Deaths in the home fell from 40% to 18% in England and Wales between 1963 and 2006. The numbers dying at home pre-NHS will have been much higher still.

For me, this societal disconnection from death is, at least in part, connected to our separation from nature, from the soil, from the cycle of the seasons. When we separated from

what I consider our ground, when we took on board the biblical prescription that 'We will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground',<sup>3</sup> when we started to believe that body and mind, head and heart were separate, we started to lose the sense of ourselves as finite beings. Yet, as novelist Paul Kingsnorth puts it: 'The nature of nature has always been change, which means that death and rebirth will always be with us.'<sup>4</sup>

This separation from death is also reinforced by our current lifestyles. Increasingly, we live and work in insulated, centrally heated homes and offices, so the cold doesn't affect us to the degree it did our ancestors. Many of us work in air-conditioned buildings where you can't open the windows, so we don't even breathe fresh air. Many of us rarely, if ever, see open fields and hedgerows. The production of food is now so geographically far from its consumption that many people - city-dwelling children in particular - don't know where it comes from. We don't see the animals that are slaughtered in their thousands to satisfy our appetites; we see only lumps of flesh encased in sanitised, plastic wrappings.

Surely, if we can invent electronic devices that connect us with people on the other side of the globe, if we can travel in space, if we can travel in cars that drive themselves, we can overcome death? Living in this world where we are encouraged to believe we can control all of life, it's a shock to discover that we can't find a way to control death.

Pagans and indigenous cultures see the earth as a living being in which all life is connected. The trees, rivers, mountains and rocks are all imbued with consciousness, ►

# In morte sumus

**Neil Jordan** urges therapists to embrace death in the counselling room

and they relate to them as living beings. By allowing themselves to be connected to this bigger sense of community, pagans are never alone. They are born into community, they continue to live in community, and, when they die, they are still part of community. And, because they are part of this cycle of birth, growth, death, decay and rebirth, they also feel connected with those who have gone before and those who are yet to come.

Yet, in current 'civilised' western society, many of us have lost all sense of belonging to a community. Many don't even know their next-door neighbour. The capitalist system encourages us to look out for ourselves at all costs, and we see the consequences of this worldwide, where the lion's share of wealth is increasingly going into the hands of a tiny minority, while the majority are struggling to get by. And, because we are disconnected from the natural world, we are able to plunder the earth's finite resources without any sense of loss or regret. Unfortunately, this way of living comes at a cost in terms of facing death - we feel alone, disconnected from those around us and from nature. So, when we die, we die alone. And this is indeed a frightening place from which to face death. No wonder we avoid it.

Connecting with nature is a wonderful way of opening up to death, since death is ever-present in the natural world. Death and nature are inseparable. However, it's important that we connect with nature through what has been described as the 'ecological self' - not in a purely utilitarian way, seeing nature as just there for our use

As a psychotherapist, I have worked with people who speak of their fear of death, their inability to contemplate the world continuing without them being part of it. Most tell me they have been unable to speak to anyone about their fear of their own demise. Or, if they have plucked up the courage to do so, others have just closed down or quickly changed the conversation. It's a no-go area.

When we deny any unavoidable aspect of life, we narrow our capacity for experiencing, for truly living. If I shut off from my grief or anger, my capacity to live is reduced. If I don't let myself deepen into relationship, I become less than I could be. The process of opening up to more of who we are fits with Carl Rogers' description of the therapeutic process, in which we move from fixed to fluid, from closed to open, from rigid to flowing and from stasis to process.<sup>5</sup> If we deny any aspect of our living experience, we become more rigid, more static. So it is with death. Cut off from it, our lives become smaller.

### Reconnecting with death

I am struck by the story of the re-introduction of wolves into the Yellowstone National Park, and its massive, cascading effect on the whole ecosystem. When the wolves were wiped out early in the 20th century, the elk population ate more of the willows on which the beavers relied, thereby reducing the beaver population to near extinction. The reintroduction of just a few wolves brought the ecosystem back into balance. The presence of the wolves forced the elk to move around more, so the willows recovered, and the beaver population returned to a healthy level. This, in turn, restored a habitat for many other species that need the dams built by the beavers in order to thrive.

Thus death, in this case in the form of the wolf, is a necessary part of maintaining a balance in any ecosystem. And, of course, as any gardener or farmer knows, the processes of death and decay are what sustain the fertility of the soil. Ultimately, all growth comes from death.

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And we can all see the impact of our society's ongoing utilitarian relationship with nature.

Our ecological self is the part of us that is indelibly connected with nature. Through this ecological self, we identify with all living beings. The ecological self transcends the individual ego. This sense of connection is captured beautifully by David Whyte in his poem 'Revelation must be terrible':<sup>7</sup>

*'... and the world could  
neither speak nor hear the fullness of  
its own bitter and beautiful cry  
without the deep well  
of your body resonating in the echo.'*

This process of connecting with nature through the ecological self needs to take place through the body. In the western world, we have come to see the body as the enemy, with its sensuousness, its eroticism, its beastliness. We have separated from our animal instincts. Yet, the only way to a felt relationship with the earth is through the body. If I walk the hills near my home, I feel those hills in my body; I feel their shape, their texture, their depth. I reach for my inner wildness, my inner chaos and my madness through my body. This is where we tap into our vital energy. The body is where the self and world meet. It is through being tuned into our bodily experience that we make full sense of our world.

One way of deepening our connection with the body is through the practice of focusing, which helps us get a single, diffuse feel for the whole mass of meanings that are present in relation to any particular situation.<sup>8</sup>

By being embodied, we experience more fully the ageing process; we notice how we are constantly moving towards our own death. It is only by being in our body that we can face death in its entirety. Paradoxically, by being embodied, we feel the fullness of the fear of death, yet this same embodiment is what helps us contain these feelings. By opening up to how we feel about death we are also opening up to the pleasure of being.

Another way forward in our connection with death is to find people to talk to who are willing to speak of death. This can be an enormous relief for those who have dealt with the fear of death on their own. Check out the Death Cafe movement, which has groups throughout the country that gather to talk about death (see [www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)).

Of course, life experiences, especially the death of a close family member, can bring

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us face to face with our own mortality. My mother died when I was in my early 40s, and I recall how, in the days that followed, I couldn't get this thought out of my head: 'There's no one ahead of me now.' My mother had been a buffer against my accepting my mortality. Her death (my father had died many years before) confronted me with the precariousness of my own existence. No one now stood between me and the grave.

### Therapeutic issues

Irvin Yalom points out that, by grasping 'our brief time in the light', we will come 'to savour the preciousness of each moment and the sheer pleasure of being'.<sup>9</sup> Facing death sharpens our senses. And it's a two-way process - if we open up to death, we engage more fully with life; by living our lives more fully, we are also more likely to approach death with a greater sense of openness. Life and death feed off each other.

Given the importance of mortality in our lives, we psychotherapists and counsellors need to have a firm understanding of our own 'brief time in the light'. If we are to effectively support clients to explore their mortality, we need to be open to engaging with the finite nature of our own existence. The best place from which to sustain ourselves in accompanying our clients on their often

arduous and frightening journeys is from a sense of our embeddedness in life's cyclical nature. Nature's cycles are a constant reminder of the cycle of life and death of which we're all a part.

If our clients are to move into a place of emotional and psychological fluidity, they too have to face the reality of their own death, their mortality. As therapists, we try to help clients achieve more of their potential, and how can death not be part of this? The one inevitable outcome of living is dying.

Surely, we, as therapists, have a responsibility to support our clients in exploring their mortality. In fact, in how many ways might our clients be indirectly alluding to their mortality when they have therapy? Might clients presenting with issues such as anxiety, depression, or fear of change, the ageing process, retirement, the loss of a home/job/intimate relationship/sibling/parent be alluding to their fear of dying?

When dealing with any bereavement in counselling/psychotherapy, the client's own mortality must be in the mix. Perhaps, as therapists, we have a responsibility to name this in our client work. Yet, we may well be reluctant to support our clients in exploring their mortality if we haven't gone there ourselves.

How many of us in our own training as counsellors or psychotherapists have been supported to explore our thoughts and feelings about our mortality? I would suggest very few. But surely the most inevitable outcome of being alive needs to be explored in our training?

I have been in psychotherapy for many years, and feel I have grown to the point where I can hold the wounds that were at one time raw and overwhelming, even though I still get buffeted by the storms that often rage inside me. I have a bigger, wider, stronger, deeper sense of myself that includes my embodied self, my ecological self, my spiritual self, and a wider sense of myself as an emotional man. This integrated sense of self can hold so much more than the old self that I was all those years ago. It also holds my fear of death. I am part of nature, part of life itself, and death is part of that. By expanding our sense of self to assimilate death, we become more vibrant human beings, and in doing so we become part of the ongoing cycle of birth, growth, death, decay and rebirth that has perpetuated life over the aeons. ■

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