

# The Death Anxiety of a Retired Teacher

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The consulting session began right after a 'Philosophy, Movie and Life' showing activity in which I was the facilitator. Mr. Chen who is a retired teacher and a member of this activity talked to me about his problem with death; by using the method of LBT, the consulting session is briefly recorded as follows.

I first let Mr Chen express his feelings toward Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, a movie we just watched. Particularly, I stressed that it is not his comment but his heartfelt feelings that I wanted to hear; similarly, I practised 'active listening' patiently, a lesson I learned in the LBT workshop.

It took quite a long time for him to articulate his feelings of 'uneasiness' and 'disturbance' concerning the death theme of the movie. I asked why he felt that way, and he further made clear what he had in mind.

'Human death is inevitable, and when it comes, it naturally brings everything's to an end.'

'As you say 'human death', I suppose you include yourself in the human species; am I right?'

'Sure, but it is just the thought which I find disturbing.'

'May I know more about this thought of yours? You just said death naturally brings everything's to an end as if you take it as a natural process.'

'It might be so, but I'm afraid that I am not the kind of person who can take it so lightly. In fact, when grave yard and coffin are in my sight, I feel very uncomfortable.'

Mr. Chen is more of a culturally-minded Chinese who professes no religious belief; nevertheless he still believes that *T'ien* (Heaven) mercilessly mandates the human death, and when death knocks on your door, it brings the ultimate ending of everything, including all its meaningfulness. With these expressions of his explicitly made, I began

to confirm his emotion by asking ‘death doesn’t immediately threaten you at this moment but I find you’re quite threatened by its possibility; am I right?’ Mr. Chen replied, ‘Death is terrifying just because it is a future state of affairs and yet will definitely befall us at any time.’

I showed and explained to him the following formulation of his emotion and he agreed:

$E$  (Anxiety) =  $O$  (my future death)+ $R$  (cancelling out of everything meaningful)

Rule 1: The worse thing in life is death; it cancels the meanings of everything.

Rule 2: If I die, then it is the worst thing in my life.

Report: I will surely die some day.

Emotion: Anxiety (worrying that death will inevitably bring to the final end everything in my life once meaningful)

My full explanations of why his anxiety is the consequence of fallacies are offered as follows. First, it is a fallacy of demanding perfection. In other words, it demands a world free of death and a world with ultimate questions satisfactorily answered. Second, it is a fallacy of catastrophic reasoning, arguing from bad to worse. Third, it is a fallacy of blaming. On the surface, it seems quite obvious that death is the worst possible thing in life, and therefore cannot easily be ‘refuted’. I won’t deny that the question of mortality is a universal concern that causes great human suffering, but we can nevertheless reframe the whole question and bring new light to it.

Is death really the worst thing? Exchanging one’s ‘soul’ for money, power and worldly pleasures is perhaps like being a dead person, like Faust. Similarly, living without hope or a sense of purpose and meaningfulness is another instance of the living dead. In this sense, is physical death really worse? Following this line of thought, I quoted one Chinese thinker Lu Xun: ‘A dead man is not really dead as long as he is still living in the hearts of the people.’ To achieve this, we should ask ourselves what would possibly be the memorable things worth leaving behind for others to remember when one is deceased? This is perhaps one of the best measures of the degree of badness of death. It echoes what Confucius says: “I am not concerned that I am not known, I seek what is worthy of me to be known.” This is the strategy of reframing the question I applied in the case of Mr. Chen: The worse thing in life is not death but leading a worthless life unknowingly or self-deceivingly. My client showed signs of capitulation in facing his own death, but the best thing he can do and should do is to confront this fallacy and

strive to live his conception of a worthy life, and when all is done, leaving this world un-regrettably.

This reframing strategy works for another similar fallacy too. I elaborated further that death does not cancel 'all' meanings; it is catastrophic reasoning. It mistakenly assumes that all meanings end with one's own personal death. Blaming the unspoken 'heaven' for mercilessly allowing death is doubly fallacious. It evades one's own responsibility in leading a worthy life as well as demands a perfect world where death does not exist. Moreover, we won't blame 'heaven' for permitting death because it is the natural law. It is a typical fallacy of double standards when we ask for an exemption for human beings for the simple reason that we too are subject to the law of nature.

Concerning guiding virtues and finding the philosophy for the guiding virtues, I have the following suggestions to the client. Firstly, the antidote to demanding perfection is metaphysical security, which in his case means accepting a world where death is a necessary part of it. We don't know for sure what human death means, but we should not lose hope. I recommended Albert Camus' *The Stranger* to my client because it is a novel about metaphysical insecurity, a reference for critical self scrutiny. For the virtue of hope, I asked him to study Camus' chapter on 'Hope and the absurd in the works of Franz Kafka'; it is the kind of philosophically sophisticated hope my client, Mr. Chen, would appreciate and be inspired. As for the virtue of respect (as an antidote to blaming), I introduced the thought of Taoism as a kind of philosophical discourse on the transcendence of life and death. Culturally speaking, it is written in his native language.

In the last step of applying the philosophy, my recommended action plan is two-fold. For a start, in order for him to know the question 'How should I live?' experientially, I asked him to visit every tomb in the cemetery, contemplating on how each of them, young or old, once lived their lives. Second, I asked him to meditate on sunrise and sunset, flower blooming and fading, the carousel of seasonal change from spring to winter and back again, the purpose being to gain the knowledge or wisdom of following and respecting nature, of which death is an essential part.

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### **What I Learned from this Experience**

In finding the philosophy for the guiding virtue for the counselee, it is best first to consider his world view, especially in this case concerning the question of mortality. On giving antidotes, whether the counselee believes in the immortality of the soul is a

crucial consideration. It happens that this particular counselee is an atheist, so I can then safely introduce Camus, Kafka and Taoism.

### **What I Will Do Differently Next Time**

Practically speaking, it will take more time to determine, with great accuracy, whether death anxiety is the fundamental emotional problem of the counselee or it is a manifestation or symptom of another more fundamental emotional problem. I would spend one or more sessions of consultation to attain greater clarification.

### **What the Counselee Learned**

According to my counselee, LBT is unique in having ways to refute his inner thoughts and emotions which he formerly found it hard to articulate. To him, the strategy of reframing the original question is powerful, and it enables him to see things from new perspectives.