

Hello there. I haven't given a talk in a long, long time. I hope it all comes together & sounds reasoned, intelligent, cogent. Is this my last hurrah? I don't know. But here it begins.

EXISTENTIALISM

12/06/2021

HOW WE DENY REALITY AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

“If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.”

Aldous Huxley

Aldous Huxley was an English writer and philosopher who won the Nobel Peace Prize seven times.

Existentialists provide a view of the world that is uncommon. However, to a humanist, breaking from the common mold is judged as immensely sensible and reasonable. And most humanists believe that the truth cannot be found in common ideas. For those of you who know something about philosophy, think of Plato and Friedrich Nietzsche and John Stuart Mill and Albert Camus. They all thought way outside the box.

Psychologists have credible evidence that we deny facts that we don't want to believe and, in many important areas, create an unreal world. This fits with existentialists theories. The vast majority of humanity denies what it does not want to believe.

Existentialists also honor individual freedom of both thought and action. So, they differ from one another. They believe in diversity. Ideas and behavior.

Let us begin with five assertions from my own existentialist playbook: This is not a summary of typical views. These are my own beliefs.

1. Life is short.
2. People deny facts about themselves because they cannot admit their finiteness and unimportance. So, people deny and deny.
3. There are no absolute values. No, moral imperatives, no set of rules that say this is how we all should live.
4. Nevertheless, we search for meaning to understand how we fit in, how we can contribute or just what it's all about.
5. And that search leads me to consider the absurd.

So, to begin with number one: life is short. Life is fragile. Often life quickly and tragically changes. A heart attack or cancer or a traffic accident. Unexpected things happen. But even if one is fortunate and lives a long life, it eventually ends at 80 or 90 or 100 years old. Your life is an example of the irreversibility of time.

Time is a continuum. There was an eternity of time before any of us were born. Our life is just a very minor blip on the continuum and then we die. Repeat The world continues to spin and there will be an eternity of time after us. As far as anyone can tell, time will go on forever.

So, our planet spins. And for a very, very, very, very short time our days come and go. That's you and me. But to the universe, we are less than a grain of sand.

And now here comes my second major point. We may have a short life but humans have a strong and irrepressible penchant to ignore and deny what we do not wish to believe. We want to not only ignore but in fact deny our own finiteness, our insignificance and especially our own death. We even vaguely believe our species will go on and on forever. If we all believed that our species would not exist 50 or 100 years from now, would our thinking change?

Reality is harsh. So humans live with hundreds of illusions; we must have them. Illusions are "facts" and beliefs that are untrue. Many of our opinions are based on inaccurate information. Our judgement is often compromised.

Credible research suggests we regularly think we are more intelligent, more liked, better looking and even better auto drivers than we really are. This means you and me. Why do we overestimate our virtues, you may ask?

But perhaps more important is our penchant to deny to ourselves many thoughts and feelings that we do have.

Sigmund Freud is often thought of as The Father of Psychology. He provided evidence of why and how we live with illusions: All of us have sexual thoughts about both our parents, throughout childhood, on into adult life. These feelings are part of our nature. However, through our parents and others, our society presses us

to not bring up such topics. In fact, such ideas are considered to be so abhorrent that we learn early on, to refuse to even think about them. That means they are repressed. They remain in our mind but undercover, very difficult to see clearly. They show up in dreams, in a disguised way. They influence our view of others who remind us of one of our parents. In fact, we often mate and marry someone who is like one of our parents. That's something to think about.

Let's look for a moment at our fear of death? The movie or tv hero who escapes death over and over and over, hits our unconscious mind. We want to believe the illusion that we will, we can, live through illness, accidents, wars, floods and all the unpleasant threats in life.

The tv hero makes us think that somehow, we could be as strong or clear sighted or just lucky and prevail also. Prevail even in cheating death.

I have been talking about illusions regarding sexuality and death. Illusions are false ideas.

Here is another area in which our fear of death produces mass delusions.

The bedrock problem for mankind is the irreversibility of time. Yes, the irreversibility of time. The future is a tunnel and there is no light at the end, only death. Depressing right, but reality.

Well many say maybe not reality.

Enter religion. Most major current faiths tell us that we can cheat our insignificance and even our death. ---- In some mystical way, a god or god's love can protect each and every one of us We will be

magically transformed into another infinite existence. Infinite, forever. Remember his eye is on the sparrow and that means you.

As absurd as it sounds, perhaps none of us here think this but many people somehow believe that after we die, we will still be thinking, feeling and conscious of it all. We should be able to meet our loved ones who have died, be close to them, communicate. Of course, we must continue to show obedience and respect for the mystical, unseen entity. Do a majority of people believe the ancient myths?

I think I could and would believe in a God if there were some clear evidence. For instance, a God could present itself and perform several miracles. Say before a crowd. Perhaps even interrupt programming of all stations and appear on TV screens. Then, I would begin to wonder if I have been wrong all these years.

Or better yet, suddenly cause all hospitalized people, world-wide, to appear out on the street, dressed and cured.

An additional idea would be to advertise that He/She/It would bring back to life a thousand people who had died two years before and were missed by loved ones. And they all returned, alive and healthy and told us what the afterlife was like. All possible to a God that had transcendent powers.

Look God, if you have too many things to do today or just need to take a break from work, tomorrow would be OK with me.

But to my brand of existentialism, the god beliefs are hogwash. There is no empirical or scientific evidence of either a god that performs miracles or an afterlife. None. Nada. No believable evidence, so no belief.

But let us turn to other aspects of the human condition. Our species has evolved with strong predispositions to be alert to dangers. We do not have huge jaws or claws to protect ourselves. Instead, we became hyperalert and lived with small groups of our kind, groups that could band together. A large predator might have second thoughts if faced with two dozen people who had spears and rocks, and the defenseless ones behind them. Both of these. Being hyperalert and banding as a group helped us to survive in a world that was full of wild creatures much larger and stronger than we were and who saw us as tasty victims.

We are physiologically wired to look and expect dangers. Our frontal lobes, our amygdala, and our hippocampus in our brain and in our adrenal system, influencing our bloodstream are all interconnected and alert to dangers from any and all directions. We are an anxious species, worry at the back of the mind. We wait and watch. And sometimes we create illusions to deal with our worries and fears.

You see, except in very unusual circumstances, we no longer experience extreme adversities. Our physiology has adapted over eons to be very alert to dangers and to flee or fight when dangers appear. But such drastic instances are very rare today.

So how does this influence us in everyday life?

Well, if a company wants you to buy something, the social media know how to get your attention. Focus on possible threats, no matter how remote the probability. Illness (you need this drug), an accident (you need this safer car and this insurance). And then blasted on the evening news are pressing and potent issues such as global warming, seas rising and flooding (you need to stay tuned to this station and also buy the products they sell.) Perhaps

eventually a war with Russia, China, North Korea or Iran. It is not that these are impossible threats. But an attack by bombs or shells that could end our life seems exceeding unlikely.

And at a less critical threat level, at this instant or even this month or this year, the probability of some event that will force you or me to not have access to sufficient food or water or warm housing is very remote. Of course, one could point to the recent violent winds and storms in Texas. Considering the total population of the United States, not a great number were inconvenienced for more than a day or so.

With our evolution and heredity in the big picture, and then our early treatment by parents or caretakers, we can understand the profound effects on what we think and feel. We are social creatures who stay with our parents for our most formative years. They teach us many things. First, how to do hundreds of thousands of tasks. But also to feel safe or unsafe. To expect kindness or anger and punishment.

Another side to the human condition is that we must find and maintain perceptions of our lives as meaningful. We want lives that matter, that make sense. Marriage or partnering is a really big one. Kids of course and we stay involved with them way past adolescence. The work we do is important also, especially if is a “career” that has status and results in high wages. Or a job that helps people who are suffering or old and lonely, such as an aid in a nursing home for seniors.

But is that all there is?

Existentialism is one version, one interpretation of what a meaningful life may be. It is my version. Paradoxically, while

existentialism is my way of making sense of it all ---- My beliefs tell me that what I see is a meaningless universe.

I know that many people don't think that way. Instead, they inflate their ego by believing they are so important that a god will pity them and help them to defeat their finiteness, their smallness, and even their death.

In one sense, the quest for eternal life appears to be an unwillingness on the part of all humans to imagine the world without themselves in it. Let's repeat that. Many of us have an unwillingness to imagine a world without us in it. Intellectually we know but emotionally we want to deny. How very human.

But at a broader level, humans inflate their egos in many different ways. William James, a famous psychologist wrote over 100 years ago about the ways we humans enhance our self-image. I talk about my house, my car, my computer, my family, my friends, my education, my job, my chair and my clothes. I even want my teeth to look good.

Imagine yourself without all those things. ---- Imagine yourself on the street, without a home --- and in dirty smelly clothes, with teeth missing and hungry.

Without thousands of material things our sense of self-worth would diminish. Our world would dwindle and we would become less than everyone else. Yes, possibly a few immediate pleasures but the sense of self would be humbled to a small fraction of current worth.

We also have many symbolic conceits too. We readily use well entrenched systems for pushing ourselves up the status ladder.

Subtle insults, slights and putdowns are pervasive. Our age, our looks, our jobs, even our height makes a difference. Where we have traveled and who we know enters in. They all boost our self-esteem, our ego. We find groups to join that have people with the same interests, and those groups attest to our importance.

And then there are people you see and know, and maybe you are even close to. We do experience some pride in having a variety of people we know. "Oh yes, I know her." And we delight and find pleasure especially in friends. However, let's not forget people in our past who we have been close to.

Probably for most of us, we would be pleased to have some "important people" enter our life. Perhaps someone who has been at least a success in business or politics or science or an adventure hero. And then there are athletics and tv and movie celebrities. It gives you bragging rights on occasion.

But to be truthful, good friends whom you can share ideas and be open with are a genuine treasure. And to the rest of the world, they may have little or no significance at all.

There is another means to gain perspective on this illusive subject. How important is our life form? Our scientists tell us there are trillions upon trillions of other life forms. From viruses and microbes to whales and elephants. Intellectually we know.

Now here's the jolt, but still on the subject. Another aspect of how we dismiss information that diminishes our self-concept of being somehow superior. Think of viruses for a moment, the smallest organic life form. They are incredibly small. There are hundreds of millions in a square meter of mother earth. According to 2018

New York Times Science article viruses “are essential to everything from our immune system to our gut microbiome, to the ecosystems on land and sea, to climate regulation and the evolution of all species.” There are millions of viruses in your body. With every breath you take, they enter your lungs and blood system. They require a host, a living organic substance, in which to procreate.

So, they may say: “Ho, ho, ho. I’m entering your body and going to have sex --- and then babies.” I can say “No, no, no, I will not allow it.” But it makes no difference. Without my consent, they do what they do. Toddle-oooh, oh you little viral kids.

Biologists have found that viruses play a life sustaining role in many bodily functions. Without them we would die. We have a symbiotic relationship. Are we superior to some life form that we must have to begin life and to stay alive? For instance, are you superior to viruses that you must have to process and digest your food? You and I are at the mercy of these incredibly small living creatures.

But to return to ego inflation. Is that all there is? Must we deny what we are clearly doing? We continually buy things, say things, and do things that prove we are as good as or better than others. Must we act like we are blind and refuse to see that we are just puffing ourselves up, obliterating our finiteness, our insignificance? Perhaps that is what I am doing right now, with this talk. Interesting you people, influencing you, making you think. How I puff myself up and propose that I am important. Hey, I’m a logical, entertaining and intellectual man, am I not?

My existentialist side says, yes, that is exactly what humans do. They can't help it, even though it is irrational beyond belief. It takes a long and lonely look under the surface to see unambiguously what is happening and why.

Now let us approach the third issue: values are all relative.

As the 18th century philosopher David Hume once said "You cannot deduce ought from is". ---- Hume meant we can find facts and verify and even use them but in the whole of the universe, there are no absolute values that can be logically inferred from those facts. The universe is meaningless. It just is. Yes, it just is, nothing more.

What values humans propose are all relative to our culture, and the particular time, place, and circumstances. What if a woman pulled out a knife and stabbed a man who rubbed up against her in a crowd? Or what if a man burned down a neighbor's house because the neighbor had made fun of his large ears. Or a group of starving people, with seemingly no chance of obtaining food, ate anyone who died. Is it immoral to turn cannibalistic? Where is the line between right and wrong?

Standard textbooks in cultural anthropology and sociology inform us that we are born in a tribe and the tribe wants us to talk the talk and walk the walk. Social pressures are strong on the young and gullible. And those pressures continue throughout life. So, listen a lot, and when necessary, *acquis* a bit for the tribe.

I have presented some dramatic, forceful examples of value issues that raise concerns. There are millions more that are common and questionable because they are below society's norm. That's what most of us personally argue and fight about. It is value differences that create the background for many wars.

Cultural anthropologists provide compelling evidence of differences in what values are learned in differing cultures.

Some believe in active cannibalism.

Some believe that no cow should be slaughtered. All cows are sacred.

Some believe in many gods. Wood gods, lake gods, gods of thunder, gods of war, gods of fertility.

Some believe in heaven, others in reincarnation, still others (perhaps only a few) in Valhalla.

And then there are people like me who believe there is no afterlife, just silence and black forever nothingness.

And to turn to beliefs not prevalent today in the United States: seven-year-old child brides are OK or weddings between brother and sister or father and daughter are all allowable in some parts of the world. Girl babies can be left on a mountain to die. Mating with animals is OK. The elders can be left with inadequate food.

(Repeat) Which reminds me, I am contributing to your entertainment, aren't I? I do deserve a place at the table, don't I?

So, what can be done? In my existential philosophy, I say be strong and do not let the tribe determine your values. They are all relative and not absolute. If you can see that, then be more audacious and develop your own value system.

We certainly have work to do.

But the wise would advise us to be careful with what we say and do. The tribe will punish you if you break a major taboo. And even if you ignore some common norms you can be ostracized and alienated.

If you regularly leave feces on your floor or repeatedly leave the kitchen stove on you could find yourself declared incompetent. If you stand too close to people or touch them without permission, you could be arrested and end up in court. If no “reasonable” explanation is forthcoming, you might be institutionalized and lose most of your freedoms. And if you hurt no one but just act strange repeatedly, without an explanation, you will find yourself in deep trouble. Try a daily walk around a town, saying “spiders” and nothing else to everyone you see for the next week. The tribe will get you if you don’t watch out.

Speaking of being careful of what you say and do, remember the story of Socrates, that famous ancient Greek. With brilliant questions, Socrates taught the young to challenge and cast doubt on the values and beliefs of society. On principle he thought that people should have the right to mistrust their elders and the “normal” ways of thinking. He was brought before a tribunal, found guilty of teaching heresy and ultimately put to death.

It has happened thousands upon thousands of times that people who break with common ways of behaving or believing get in trouble. And they are punished, sometimes severely.

So, I say question, form your own beliefs but be careful and keep your head down.

The fifth issue for my existentialist conjecture is the absurdness of life. Yes, values are relative, never absolute. Yes, the universe is absolutely meaningless. But the vast majority of humans deny the factual and embrace socially approved positions. Yes, these positions are relative, yes, they are restrictive and they’re often stupid. What to do? The tribe cannot be changed or even challenged on most issues!

Perhaps the best way of handling it is to have a glass of wine and smile. It is absurd. So, laugh to yourself at how strange and ignorant and out of touch society has become and will always be. Stand above and laugh. It really is sad, strange, funny how much the culture shapes all people of our gullible social species. It is comic. In fact, it relentlessly shows up in the comic strips, the absurd nature we display in every-day behavior. Look at the comic strips this Sunday and check out how often they portray the silliness of our cultural habits and beliefs. **So, laugh but (wisper) still keep your head down.**

Does this make me an insufferable elitist? Of course. I may be largely alone but that is the price I pay for questioning tribal standards and taboos. So, if I am strange, perhaps you can applaud the diversity, and share a glass of wine with me. Maybe you think outside the box and you are an elitist too. Or maybe just stare at me with pity or contempt. It is probably the latter. Whatever.

Well, there is another ray of light. And here it is.

You can say all right **REALITY SUCKS. LET'S FIND SOME DISTRACTIONS, SOME DIVERSIONS, SOME PLEASURES, EVEN IF MOMENTARY.** Perhaps it is revenge for the thousands of tribal "You musts" and "You shoulds" that we live with. Eat a jelly donut. Watch an adventure movie. Read a book. **Distractions help.** Go on social media. Find a friend and gossip. Freud and Andre Gide and all those other reality stars may be right but **they SUCK.** So, stay in the moment. Meditate. Take a walk in a forest. **Distractions help.** Massages, and music. And then find ideas that help make sense of this crazy world of humans. (***Whisper – like these ideas***).

For me, another thing I need and enjoy is toleration for my peculiar and diverse views, at least from my friends. I am me, and cannot help who I am. And you cannot help who you are. Furthermore, if you are my friend, you tolerate and enjoy my nature and discussions and ideas.

Today we have discussed one existential belief system. It entails the brevity of life and yet how we, you and I, deny our fragility and our finiteness.

We then considered the idea that there are no absolute values, no matter what the tribe and our neighbors say. Values and beliefs are all relative. So, we must show courage and make our own system.

Finally, perhaps you and I can smile at the stupidity of the pressures of the tribe. Ah well, maybe I'll join them. Perhaps tomorrow the common man will be molded to greet one another this way **(FLAP MY ARMS AND STICK OUT MY TONGUE)** Hey, join me. The absurdity lets one stand above, an elitist. And a few other brave souls, perhaps some in this congregation, may stand with you.

But even if you did not change your thinking a slight bit because of this talk, your receptivity to the message or messenger was programmed into your nature. You can't help who you are.

So, go to hell and happy hunting and au revoir. And if you come to my house you can spit on the floor and call the cat a bastard.

Randy Grumpelt

Can I shake your hand or maybe better yet, give you a hug? And in the next year, I'll work on making our bond stronger. You'll see.

Harvey Weinstein, murdered his wife. He grabbed her by the throat and choked the life out of her and then threw her out the window of their 12th story apartment. But the court was shown an MRI and a PET scan both of which provided evidence of a cyst which had covered much of his frontal and temporal brain lobes. He was unable to control his emotions in a normal way. He was able to plea bargain a manslaughter conviction which had a maximum jail time of seven years.

Relevant?

Opening Words

You and I have the capacity to reflect on ourselves, to think about the past and the future and to engage in abstract thought.

And these virtues have given us some uncomfortable truths: We know that everyone we care about will age, become frailer and die. We recognize life is uncertain. We understand that pain and sorrow are part of our destiny. What is the point of it all?

But moving on from you and me, our species as a whole has only a limited time left on this planet. In one sense, life is short for our whole species. Most complex species become extinct within one to ten million years. Scientists estimate that 70% of North

American large mammal genera went extinct at the end of the last ice age. And we have had five ice ages.

An asteroid strike could leave clouds of dust that would wipe out most vegetation and most complex animal species. A series of volcanic eruptions could do the same. And under the earth's thin crust, lies hot, molten lava that is miles thick. Either an asteroid strike or volcanic eruptions could produce another ice age. These events will probably not occur in our lifetime, but they could. And one or more probably will in the future. When is the question?

And there are the man-made factors to take into account. In addition to natural calamities, we humans have produced atomic and thermonuclear bombs. They are likely in the hands of the US, Russia, China and twenty or so other countries. In addition, most of these same countries have produced chemical and bacteriological weapons that are equally deadly but less harmful to infrastructure. Will some fool pull the trigger?

Of course, even if our species lasts ten million years, in the grand scheme of things that is just a moment in time. If the probability is low that any of us will last longer, what happens to our sense of importance. The species would be gone. Eventually even the buildings and roads would crumble and little would be left of us to wonder about.