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and send all contributions to: EHI c/o Pacific Institute  
432 Ivy Street  
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**About the Existential-Humanistic Institute**

EHI provides a forum, a "home," for those mental health professionals, scholars, and students who seek in-depth training in existential-humanistic philosophy, practice, and inquiry. EHI is for trainees who believe that in optimal psychotherapy, as Rollo May said, it is not this or that symptom, but "the life of the client" that is "at stake" - and that it is precisely this life that must be supported, accompanied, and encountered.

The goal of the institute - via both its curriculum and newsletters - is to support existentially and humanistically-informed psychologies and psychotherapies throughout the world. By "existentially informed," we mean perspectives that stress freedom, experiential reflection, and responsibility. By "humanistically informed," we mean purviews that address two over-arching questions - What does it mean to be fully, experientially human, and how does that understanding illuminate the vital or fulfilled life?

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- Nader Shabahangi | President
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# The Existential-Humanist

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Nader Shabahangi

Associate Editors:  
Mary Madrigal and Bob Edelstein



## Letter from the President

*There are always a few events in the life of people and organizations that have the power to shape directions for years to come. Such an event occurred last week for our Existential-Humanistic Institute, a now over 12 year old organization launched with the blessing of our dear mentor Jim Bugental. Sitting in a conference room at Saybrook University's new home at the waterfront in San Francisco, Orah, Kirk and I were present when our Saybrook colleagues voted on partnering with our organization's new certificate program. After a question and answer session, our Saybrook colleagues voted unanimously to create a joint certificate program with EHI. This joint program will allow Saybrook students to attend our theory and practice oriented program in existential-humanistic psychotherapy, a program initially one year long with more advanced trainings to follow.*

*In the next months we will sit down with the EHI board and refine our curriculum further and develop a reader and bibliography. We will use Orah and Kirk's recently published book *Existential-Humanistic Therapy* (2010) as a textbook to guide us through the program. As a review of their book states succinctly: "Contrary to its common reputation as a purely intellectual form of therapy, this approach emphasizes not only the concepts of freedom and responsibility, but experiential reflection, in which clients experience their problems in session through a process of checking in with their affective and bodily sensations." It is exactly this emphasis on experiential learning of complex human phenomena that highlights the importance of our existential-humanistic approach in helping others and ourselves gain a deeper understanding of this life we are living. This understanding tries to be as free as possible from the judging and categorizing of human experience into good and bad, desirable and undesirable; rather, it seeks to understand the meaning of particular symptoms and conditions within the context of each human being's lived life as the goal of our therapeutic work.*

*To this end, EHI has made a big step last week in partnering with Saybrook University, an institution which was founded on the same principles as our own, that is, in their own words, "on the belief that every person is a work in progress and that each of us has the capacity and the responsibility for our own development." We hope you will join us in this important landmark endeavor and look forward to a long and rich collaboration.*

- Nader Shabahangi

Check out our new website!  
[www.ehinstitute.org](http://www.ehinstitute.org)

Stay up-to-date with current and upcoming events and courses, get information on becoming an affiliate, and connect with the EHI community.

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## Upcoming Conference Announcements

### DEEPEN YOUR THERAPEUTIC WORK USING AN EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

a one-day workshop combining lecture, discussion, demonstration, and experiential exercises

Saturday - May 22, 2010, Portland, Oregon

Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT • 6 CEs Approved\*

An existential-humanistic approach to counseling or psychotherapy is at its heart an experiencing-centered therapy. This interactive workshop is designed to help you deepen your therapeutic work by demonstrating the crucial importance of being present to the lived experience – your clients' and yours – within the therapeutic container. Learn to work powerfully with what's immediately alive within the intra-psychic and interpersonal fields. Understand the purpose of resistance in existential-humanistic terms, and learn ways to effectively engage client resistances using existential-humanistic therapeutic interventions to facilitate growth and healing.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants will learn:

- The meaning and significance of core existential-humanistic therapist qualities, attitudes, and skills such as being with the client's lived experience and developing an I-Thou relationship;
- How to cultivate presence in the therapeutic relationship and use presence to guide therapeutic interventions;
- How to facilitate the client's inward searching process as a way to deepen subjectivity and facilitate self-discovery;
- How to explore the evolving authentic interpersonal relationship between client and therapist;
- Why clients resist both deepening into their subjectivity and making an authentic connection with their therapist;
- A range of existential-humanistic therapeutic interventions, such as emphasizing process over content and evoking what needs to be expressed that is not yet fully conscious.

Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT, is an existential-humanistic therapist based in Portland, Oregon. He has been a therapist since 1973. Bob provides consultation, supervision, workshops, and ongoing training for professionals on existential-humanistic therapy. He also leads workshops on Authentic Engagement and has published a number of professional articles on the existential-humanistic perspective. Bob is a former board member of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, a founding member of the Association for Humanistic Psychology - Oregon Community and is an executive board member of the Existential-Humanistic Institute.

WORKSHOP LOCATION: OSM, 9500 SW Barbur Blvd, Suite 100, Portland, Oregon 97219 EARLY BIRD DISCOUNT: register by May 8th: Professional \$125, Student \$95; after May 8th: Professional \$145, Student \$115. [There is an additional \$10 processing fee for participants wanting 6 CEs.] INFO: 503-288-3967 or Bob@BobEdelstein.com TO REGISTER: visit www.BobEdelstein.com or mail a check [payable to Bob Edelstein] to 4605 NE Fremont Ave., Suite 211, Portland, OR 97213 \*6 CEs APPROVED: NASW - Oregon Chapter. Also, this training is co-sponsored by the Oregon Counseling Association (ORCA) to provide 6 NBCC continuing education contact hours. ORCA is recognized by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) to offer continuing education for National Certified Counselors (NBCC provider #2038). ORCA adheres to NBCC Continuing Education Guidelines.

### First International Existential Psychology Conference, China, 2010 Kirk Schneider

"The First International (East-West) Existential Psychology Conference" took place in Nanjing, China between April 2nd and April 5th this year and was a smashing success. I along with several Western colleagues were honored to take a central part in that momentous, and I would add, historic occasion, and the bridgebuilding that is sure to grow from it in the years and perhaps even months to come.

One of the most striking features of the conference was the unbowed enthusiasm among Chinese students and faculty for the existential-humanistic and in particular "awe-based" perspective in psychology. There were consistent references to the need for an existential and spiritual awakening among the growing ranks of those disillusioned with many of the problems of modernization in China that have plagued the West – an overemphasis on materialism, making the quick buck, erosion of the environment, and loss of touch with profound historical influences, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Repeatedly, I heard that too many, especially among the young in Chinese society, have lost touch with the great wisdom teachings of the past, as well as the need to update those toward an invigorating future, and that the consequences were debilitating. This conference then provided the first comprehensive opportunity for



existential psychologists both East and West to address the latter challenges, and to set the course for an existentialism that could benefit both cultures, not to mention the psychological profession within which they are both increasingly influential.

My warmest appreciation goes to the organizers of the conference – Louis Hoffman, University of the Rockies, Colorado Springs; Mark Yang, Alliant University, Hong Kong; Xuefu Wang, Zhi Mian Institute of Psychotherapy, Nanjing; the China Institute of Clinical Psychology, Beijing; the Japanese Academy of Counselors, Tokyo; and Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing, China, where the conference took place.

More information can be found about the event at [www.ep-china.org/english/czzhuce.php](http://www.ep-china.org/english/czzhuce.php), as well as at the Division 32 Society of Humanistic Psychology of the APA website newsletter, where there is an overview of the conference by Louis Hoffman as well as my opening keynote address.



## Recently Released Existential Humanistic Books

Kirk J. Schneider and Orah T. Krug

*Existential-Humanistic Therapy* by Kirk Schneider and Orah Krug provides an in-depth survey of contemporary existential-humanistic (E-H) theory, practice, and research. In particular, this uniquely American version of existential therapy, currently experiencing a renaissance, highlights E-H therapy's historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and practical applications alongside the very latest in process and outcome research. The book features the most recent theoretical and practical applications of E-H therapy to a broad diversity of ethnic and diagnostic populations. Among the theorists *Existential-Humanistic Therapy* highlights are Rollo May, Irvin Yalom, James Bugental, Kirk Schneider, and Orah Krug, an emerging female voice within the E-H movement. Each theoretical discussion is richly illustrated by case vignettes, drawn from the authors' practices.

The book also accents an integrative E-H approach. This approach is augmented by numerous case vignettes that articulate, step-by-step, the processes by which mainstream therapeutic approaches can be interwoven within an overarching E-H context. The book also highlights recent transpersonal and spiritual expansions of E-H practice.

Finally, the book features a discussion of the political and economic challenges that beset E-H therapy, and proposes alternatives to address them. To sum, *Existential-Humanistic Therapy* provides a rich, comprehensive, and practical overview of the very latest in E-H theory, practice, and research. It also exemplifies leading therapy researcher Bruce Wampold's suggestion that "an understanding of the principles of existential therapy is needed by all therapists, as it adds a perspective that might...form the basis for all effective treatments" (Wampold cited in *PsycCritiques*, February 6, 2008, p.6). 2010. 176 pages. Paperback.

Kirk J. Schneider

*Awakening to Awe* is a self-help meditation on an alternative—and growing—spiritual movement. This is a movement comprised of people who refuse the "quick-fix" model for healing, whether that model entails popping pills, indulging in material comforts, or adhering to doctrinal dogmas. By contrast, the movement about which Schneider writes is composed of people who have developed the capacity to experience the humility and wonder, or in short, awe, of life deeply lived. In particular, this book highlights the stories of people who through the cultivation of awe have transformed their lives. For example, readers will discover how awe transformed the life of an ex-gang member into a beloved and productive gang mediator, an ex-drug addict into a communally conscious healer, and a

sufferer of stage three cancer into a contemplative and spiritual seeker. The book will also inform readers about the challenges and joys of awe-based child-raising, education, humor, political activism, and aging. Drawing on the philosophy of Schneider's earlier work, the acclaimed *Rediscovery of Awe*, *Awakening to Awe* tells the down-to-earth stories of a quiet yet emerging revolution in the transformation of lives.

Nader Shabahangi

The following is an excerpt from the new book by Nader Shabahangi entitled: *Conversations With Ed: Waiting For Forgetfulness: Why Are We So Afraid Of Alzheimer's Disease?*

Our understanding of personal and social growth is embedded within a dominant framework of striving for more – more outcomes, more memory, more years to live. From this notion of gain, it is fair to assert that loss is anything that prevents us from reaching outcomes – from accomplishing, from being engaged in work, from remaining youthful achievers. Forgetfulness falls on the loss side of this equation.

Alzheimer's disease is caused by various changes that result in so-called damaged brain cells. In the public it is predominantly defined by its symptoms and interpreted as the decline and final loss of memory and other cognitive abilities. Many of us might place most, if not all, of our hopes on finding a treatment and ultimately a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

But the fruits of such an approach are elusive and difficult to obtain, and no clear timetable can be set for harvesting the fruits of this belief. What if, in spite of all the best efforts of those conducting research into treatment and cures, these goals remain elusive into the foreseeable future? How do we care for people who are different from our expectations of what is normal, and what does that mean in terms of a philosophy of care? Do we treat them as diseased? Would that imply a certain derogatory stance toward the people for whom we care about? Or do we approach forgetful people with an attitude of respect, kindness, and acceptance of who they are in their new realities?

Just think for a moment: how does your attitude change if you know you are approaching someone you think is your teacher versus if you are approaching someone you think is diseased, cognitively impaired? We are very sensitive people and can sense the attitude behind those who care for us – whether we are forgetful or not. A central question thus becomes: How would you like to be approached if you were forgetful? What would you like the eyes to see that look at you?

Some argue that even if substantial therapeutic advances will be available in the near future, they may not be robust enough to slow the progression of forgetfulness among the many people who are experiencing cognitive changes as they age. The unfortunate by-product of the belief in the discovery of a cure is that we have not begun thinking about ways that our society can see forgetfulness as something more than a demon to be exorcised by a hoped-for medical treatment. Yet, rather than a debilitating disease that leaves those afflicted in a sad and lamentable state of existence, dementia may be another, altered state of consciousness, as valuable and important as our everyday or "normal" way of being. This requires, foremost, a curiosity, an openness to all that is, to look at forgetfulness, as it is, not in the way we believe to know it.

By engaging people to think about forgetfulness in the context of a wider horizon of possibilities, social change is possible. We may reduce the social stigma that people labeled with Alzheimer's disease experience. In that way we may not only accept and help others who are forgetful, but we may also be better prepared for our own inevitable forgetfulness. We believe it is time for society to think about and act toward forgetfulness and forgetful people in ways that may be currently unthinkable, but perhaps will become a reality in the future. Instead of being a crisis, forgetfulness may one day soon present an opportunity for knowing and deepening who we are.

## Towards a Common Goal: Creativity in Motion

By Sonja Saltman and Candice Miller Hershman

Community-mindedness has resurfaced as a major theme in these days of economic and social upheaval as it did in the 60s and 70s. In our Existential Community, with its focus on increasing a sense of self in the most authentic way possible, we are challenged to notice many opportunities provided by living in the present and observing existential principles. EHI not only supports and encourages, but prioritizes the provision of a thoughtful space for reflection on contemporary challenges as a community. With the fast pace and seemingly excessive workload that seems to accompany everyday living, it is rare that we have a chance as a community to enter into a creative dialogue that can burgeon possibilities into collective expression. Therefore, on the last day of the EHI 2009 Conference, Sonja Saltman and Candice Hershman facilitated a workshop that included small group discussions followed by a large group discussion. The purpose of the workshop was to give people an opportunity to discuss contemporary concerns with the hope that creative solutions would emerge that could be implemented both on a personal as well as community level.

EHI was heartened to see a great turnout for this workshop, and grateful to the participation of attendees for their genuine passion, deep engagement, and thoughtful work on addressing themes that emerged during the group process. In the beginning of the workshop, attendees were asked to extend any ideas they had for focus group topics. After people broke into small groups and explored their topic of interest in greater depth, the large group came back together as a community and a representative of each small group reported back relevant discussion threads. The resulting thoughts were provocative and created deeper questions to explore. The following are the four topics and discussion threads:

### The Place of the Ego

The arts are the place of the ego, versus psychology.

How do we define “ego?”

Does ego become a label?

How does ego relate to issues of freewill, unity, and context?

### Existential Vulnerability

How do we take a role of political leadership?

New slogan: do we have the “courage to care?”

How aware are we of our own protectiveness of self and others?

What is the vulnerability of our time, and its ratio to the vulnerability to other times historically?

How do we bridge grandiosity and vulnerability?

Do we live in a culture that is biased against vulnerability?

What resiliency traits belong to vulnerability?

How do we advocate for the vulnerable?

### Publicizing Existential Ideas

How do we get new existential therapists to embrace being existential therapists so they can defend what existential therapy has to offer when confronted with questions and/or misperceptions about the perspective?

How can we get new existential therapists both to understand and promote how powerful and pragmatic existential therapy is?

How do we publicize existential ideas on a global level?

What are some intra and interdisciplinary stereotypes and impressions about existential psychotherapies?

How do we translate existential concepts into accessible language for both professionals and the public?

How do we increase training for existential psychotherapies?

What are the various generational impressions regarding existential psychotherapies?

How do we use technology to promote an existential paradigm?

Where are the existentially oriented mentorships, and how do we make them available?

How do we build an existential community (i.e. - membership options, learning community meetings, a certificate program - all things EHI is currently working on, if not already offering.)

### The Ambiguity of Aggression versus Tolerance

How do we balance polarities?

How does choice and action lend itself to taking a position, and what are the pros and cons of this?

What does it look like to take risks with an awareness of polarity?

The process of finding a place on the polarity spectrum of tolerance versus intolerance will probably be uncomfortable.

Is there antagonism between passion and tolerance?

What are the limitations of post-modernism in relationship to global, local, and personal concerns?

Can one take a stand on an issue and bracket their assumptions about the issue?

How do we negotiate between the guilt of action and anxiety of non-action?

Some attendees expressed that the EHI Conference modeled a process of negotiating the ambiguity between tolerance and action.

Once again, EHI would like to extend thanks to the people who made the effort to join us in exploring the creative process of community-based solutions. It serves as an important reminder that community and collective hope to create a better world for ourselves and others adds greater meaning to our lives. You are an important aspect of our community. It is the hope of Sonja, Candice, and the board that we continue these conversations and create more space for us to come together around the things that matter most to us.

## Existential Meaning Making and Therapeutic Change: A Case Study

By Orah T. Krug

### Existential-Humanistic Institute

This paper, Existential Meaning Making and Therapeutic Change: A Case Study, was delivered as part of a symposium entitled, Existential-Humanistic Therapy Comes of Age, at the APA Convention, August 2009. The panel included Kirk Schneider, Ph.D., chair and Presenter, Orah Krug, Ph.D and three graduate students from Pepperdine University, Dave Fischer, MA, Alexander Bacher, MA, and Pernilla Nathan, MA.

### Symposium Abstract

This symposium signals the potential for a renaissance in existential-humanistic (E-H) theory and practice. Not only is E-H therapy regaining visibility through a new monograph and DVD series, co-authored by Kirk Schneider and Orah Krug and published by the American Psychological Association, it is also being reassessed as a leading evidence-based modality (e.g., see Wampold’s Feb. 2008 review of “Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy” in *PsycCritiques*). This reassessment is exemplified by the latest “contextual” or “common factors” research, which upholds both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of therapy as well as self-healing capacities of clients as the key variables for effective therapy. This panel, comprised of both clinical graduate students and the co-authors of the E-H monograph, will explore the nature, implications, and practical applications of the aforementioned findings, and relate them directly to E-H case material.

As Kirk has suggested, and as our panelists have discussed, current research clearly indicates that therapeutic effectiveness is due, not to specific treatments or modalities but to commonalities among all therapies.

Dave, Alexander and Pernilla have carefully articulated what these commonalities are, and how existential therapy has long valued these contextual factors. Kirk and I will now illustrate the principles of existential therapy within the context of our case studies. But before I present my case of “Mimi,” I would like to share with you an intriguing hypothesis, put forth by Bruce Wampold, concerning the effectiveness of existential approaches.

Wampold (2008), in his review of Kirk’s book, *Existential-Integrative Therapy* (2008) hypothesizes that existential approaches are effective not because of the “usual common factor suspects” - empathy and working alliance - but because existential approaches are concerned with seeking meaning. He suggests that clients come to therapy seeking explanations for their experiences, and when skilled therapists provide compelling, albeit theory specific explanations, clients understand them, not as such, but rather as “alternative narratives never considered.” Consequently, Wampold hypothesizes that “perhaps it is the clients who make psychotherapy existential (p.4).”

Although, I heartily agree with Wampold’s hypothesis, I and other existential therapists perhaps take an even broader view of meaning-seeking and meaning-making behavior—we in fact, understand it as an essence of human nature. We assume that meaning-seeking and meaning-making behavior is a creative process, that is a part of each living moment. This perspective consequently informs our understanding of personal identity formation and therapeutic change.

Let me explain. If we assume that our clients, who come for therapy,

have already made life-limiting meanings from past life experiences, then going forward, they necessarily have the potential to make new meanings that are life-enhancing. This can happen if they have compelling experiential encounters with the “life-limiting” aspects of these meanings and related behaviors. Experiential encounters are imperative because change occurs experientially, not didactically. In the case of Mimi, I will illustrate what this looks like—how I helped Mimi let go of old meanings and make new ones, not by advising or suggesting, but rather by cultivating a therapeutic context rich in here-and-now experiences.

We call this experiential approach the cultivation of intra and interpersonal presence (see Krug, O.T., 2009). The intention is to illuminate a client’s underlying subjective way of being that is actual but unregarded in the living moment.

Existential therapists call this pattern or way of being a client’s self and world construct system. The term refers to how a client implicitly understands and manifests through behaviors and attitudes his or her own nature and relationship to the world. It isn’t of course only clients who construct a “way of being.” Each of us has and continues to create our unique “way of being” from our life experiences. Like an astronaut’s spacesuit, it is both life sustaining and life limiting. Some aspects of which we are conscious of, and many we are not. As a therapist it is those aspects that are actual, yet out of awareness, hinted at in my client’s attitudes, behaviors, etc. that I mainly focus on and try to illuminate experientially.

The cultivation of intra and interpersonal presence demands a deep and multi-directional attunement to the ongoing process—with Mimi I attuned to her intrapersonal process as well as my own. I attuned equally to our interpersonal process. I was present to her body language, her voice, and her behaviors. I listened for her attitudes, values and beliefs, and took note of how her way of being affected me. I paid attention to my impressions, thoughts, and feelings as I sat with her. I was, as Theodore Reik (1948) suggested, listening with my third ear.

Now let’s meet Mimi:

(Excerpted from *Existential-Humanistic Therapy* (2009) Schneider and Krug, APA Books

Mimi was an attractive, 29 year old woman of Persian descent, married, with two small children, and seven months into her third pregnancy. Mimi was referred to me by her primary care physician because she was exhibiting posttraumatic stress symptoms resulting from an incident, which involved her and her children. Two months previously, she and her children had been sitting in their living room when a small plane making an emergency landing, smashed headlong into her kitchen.

In our first session, Mimi described her confusion; thinking it was an earthquake, she grabbed her children and ran to the nearest doorway. Only then did she look around to see the nearby plane and the devastation it had caused. As she related the event, I could see how much she was “caught” in the experience. This is a common and unfortunate aspect of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). By emotionally reliving the trauma, she was in effect, re-traumatizing herself each time she retold the story.

Mimi seemed to be coping with her fear, horror and sense of helplessness with an overlay of anger toward the person piloting the plane. Let’s listen to Mimi tell her story:

“It isn’t fair, I wasn’t prepared. I was just innocently sitting in my home and now because of this person’s stupidity, my house has been violated, my children have been frightened, and perhaps my unborn child has been affected. I’m very irritable. I’m not relaxed or happy the way I used to be. We have to live in a cramped apartment until our house is repaired. Mice have gotten into my house and eaten my clothes and shoes. I feel like my things have been defiled.”

As I listened, I felt how the injustice of the event was gnawing at her like the mice that ate her clothes. The gnawing injustice seemed to make her replay the event in her mind, which only fueled her irritability. She also was experiencing a general numbing of emotions. She no longer felt the joy or pleasure in life which she had known. She worried that she would never feel happy or calm again.

Overall, Mimi appeared to be highly functional, who prior to the incident, had felt generally happy and content with her marriage and life but whose sense of security was now badly ruptured. Although Mimi was drained both physically and emotionally, she was extremely motivated to feel better and get “her old life back.” Given that Mimi was set to give birth in a few months, we had a limited time period in which to work. Consequently, I met with Mimi just eight times over a two month period. Her high functionality, co-operative attitude and motivation contributed to her rapid progress.

My work with Mimi was an integration of behavioral strategies within an existential context. The aim was: (a) to alleviate her PTSD symptoms, and (b) to help her cultivate more personal presence so she could constructively incorporate the traumatic experience into her life. I shared my aims with her and explained how I worked in the here-and-now to help her become more aware of her thoughts and behavior patterns that might be blocking her healing process. I asked her if she felt okay about working with me in this way. She readily agreed saying that she wanted to do whatever was needed to feel better. I wanted her to understand that our work is a collaborative effort and so I began with Mimi, as I do with all my clients, to build the therapeutic relationship with my self-disclosures. I don’t believe in keeping the process of therapy mysterious. I want my clients to understand the way I work and more importantly, to have an experience of it in the first session.

Throughout the work, I made sure to check in about our interpersonal connection by asking questions like, “how was it to share that with me?” or “how has the space felt between us today?” or “what was the most difficult part of our session today? These types of questions brought Mimi’s focus to our relationship. By inviting her to express her feelings about me and our relationship, I intentionally cultivated interpersonal presence and a sense of safety and intimacy between us. I also tried to help her feel safe and understood by cultivating intrapersonal presence. I listened to her “music” as much as her words, mirroring back to her, my felt sense of her terror and anger.

After laying this groundwork, I began to focus her on her anger because it was clear that she was stuck in it. She expressed it as a sense of injustice (“it isn’t fair, I wasn’t prepared”). By tagging these expressions, I helped her become more conscious of how much and the ways in which she was expressing this injustice. I held up a mirror to her experience noting, “once again, you say how unfair it is” or “can you hear yourself getting angry again as you tell me what happened?” Fairly quickly she began to agree with my comment that her repetitive statements were gnawing away at her like the mice gnawing on her clothes. To move out of her “stuckness,” I taught her a “Stop” technique (Penzel, 2000). First, I taught her abdominal breathing, and then we created a visualized “safe

haven” for her. Then, whenever she heard herself begin the repetitive litany, she was to say, “Stop. I don’t need to go down this road,” begin abdominal breathing, and then visualize herself in her “safe haven.”

At the next session, Mimi reported that at first she struggled to stop her repetitive thinking but after using the technique for a while, she found success and began to feel better. Given that Mimi was beginning to let go of her anger, I decided to focus on other, perhaps unconscious feelings and meanings that were associated with her trauma. Consequently, I suggested we explore her feelings of “it isn’t fair, I wasn’t prepared.” I shared with her my belief that if there is intense emotion in a phrase and it is often repeated, as was the case with “it isn’t fair,” it usually means that there are other feelings present besides the angry ones.

“First take some nice deep breathes,” I said, “and when you’re ready turn your attention inward, and make some space for your feelings of “it isn’t fair.” As soon as she began to slow down and breathe deeply, tears began to run down her face. “Are there any words?” I asked softly. “There was no place to go and I thought we were going to die. I didn’t know what was happening and I couldn’t protect my children.” Now, Mimi was “with” her experience, not “caught” in it. We worked from this place for a good part of the session. At the end, Mimi said, “I felt different—I felt separate from my feelings for the first time.” By being subjectively present, she could be both in the experience and outside of it. She could move from repetitively expressing her anger to experiencing it, and then to encountering her feelings of helpless, vulnerability and terror as she remembered how death literally knocked on her door. Mimi was beginning to create a new story about her experience.

Over the next few sessions, as Mimi allowed herself to be with her death terror and sense of helplessness, her repetitive, angry statements soon disappeared. Now we could help her dissolve her traumatic memories. I used a modified version of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) as developed by Shapiro (1998). First I had her do some abdominal breathing and then visualize being in her safe place. From her safe place, I suggested she look around the corner and view, only as much as she wanted, a picture of the event. I told her that these memories could be viewed as if she was on a train and the landscape was moving past her.

As she recalled the memory, I told her to tell herself, “this is just a memory, it’s in the past, and I can let it go by.” I suggested that she try and do the exercise four times before our next session in two weeks. I told her that if at any time she felt “caught” in the experience, she should stop, let it go, and begin her abdominal breathing while visualizing her “safe-haven.”

At the next session Mimi walked in looking relaxed and full of life. She had found the exercise to be extremely helpful, saying that it allowed her to take a step back from the incident and not feel caught in it. She reported that she was no longer plagued by the memories and was beginning to feel more like her old self, sleeping more soundly, feeling less irritable, and no longer jumping at loud noises.

Many therapists would be satisfied with these results and would likely have no further aims other than to consolidate the learning. But as an existential therapist, I sensed that one of the difficulties underlying Mimi’s symptoms was her inability to accept a crucial aspect of existence, namely that personal safety and security is an illusion—at any moment it can be shattered.

Short term therapy requires a therapist to balance time restrictions with

the ability to help a person open to his or her self and world construct system that is both life-sustaining and life-limiting. I sensed that Mimi’s difficulty in accepting what happened stemmed in part from a life-limiting aspect of her self and world construct system. Mimi had, as most of us do, a belief in her specialness which often results in the unconscious belief that life’s contingencies happen to everyone else but us.

Yalom (1980) describes this process quite well. “Once the defense is truly undermined,” [as it was in Mimi’s case] once the individual really grasps, ‘My God, I’m really going to die,’ and realizes that life will deal with him or her in the same harsh way as it deals with others, he or she feels lost and, in some odd way, betrayed”(p. 118). This was Mimi’s unspoken attitude and it seemed important to help her explore and hopefully resolve it to some extent within our limited time together.

Consequently in the next couple of sessions, we devoted a substantial amount of time working with her reluctance to face the randomness of death and life’s uncertainties. Our exploration helped Mimi realize how she typically coped with uncertainty-- by being self-sufficient and by trying to be in control, by being “on top of everything” and “keeping a lid on her feelings.”

Her phrase “it isn’t fair” once again emerged. “Go slow,” I suggested, “and explore what it means now.” Mimi got quiet and then tearfully whispered, “It isn’t fair—there’s no plan, no structure, no protection—anything can happen.” Mimi was now present to a deeper meaning of “it isn’t fair, I wasn’t prepared.” Now she was able to feel her vulnerability as she acknowledged the lack of protection from life’s uncertainties. Soon after, she accepted, albeit reluctantly, that anything can happen to her and to those she loves saying, “I don’t like it but I guess that’s just how life is.” Mimi’s view of herself in the world was changing—she was beginning to let go of her old view of security and build a new, more realistic version, based on her newly formed awareness.

I met with Mimi three weeks later for our final session. She reported doing “great,” feeling much better, about herself and her life. She declared her intention to continue her daily abdominal breathing practice, saying it helped her stay calm and energized. I asked how she felt about our work together. She said she had learned a great deal about who she was and why she did what she did. She reported that she felt more willing and able to face life’s challenges even though paradoxically she recognized that bad things can happen to her and those she loves. Mimi had created, as Wampold would say, “an alternative narrative never considered.” This happened, I believe because Mimi was encouraged to experience the life-limiting nature of her old story and its related behaviors—this gave her room to create a new one.

I followed up with Mimi four months later. She and her husband were enjoying their new baby in their rebuilt home. Mimi reported that she felt “like her old self but better.” She told me she wasn’t taking on as many tasks and finding more enjoyment in her children, family and life in general. She said she rarely experienced any bad memories from the accident and if that happened she did her EMDR exercise. She continues to meditate, feels relaxed during the day and sleeps as well as any Mom can with three little ones.

References Upon Request

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## **The Ocean by Sonja Saltman**

**My ears are filled**

***filled with the soothing sound of the waves,***

**My eyes remember**

***the stillness of the sea this morning***

***accommodating one single fishing boat***

***as if it could not bear any more***

**My mind is occupied**

***repetitive thoughts,***

***clarifying, categorizing,***

***comparing, remembering,***

***trying to understand.***

**The sounds of the waves are**

***gentle, rhythmical, deep, delicious.***

**The sounds of my mind are**

***noisy, intrusive, choppy, confused,***

***and I skim its impenetrable surface***

***like a stone.***

**If I sit still, really still,**

**Will the sounds of the sea become the sounds of my mind?**