# Ch 3 - Talking to Myself

Anxiety, in the traditional sense, is often understood as dread for the future: I am anxious to finish this rough draft and send it to friends for review. Within the ideals of existentialism, anxiety is a tool used for understanding the meaning of *being*. The “phenomena” of being—of existing and whatever that implies—is something many existentialists have dedicated their lives to trying to understand. This piece is indeed a work of existentialism, for it aims to question who we are, why we are here, and what our lives truly mean.

For most animals on this planet, their lives are a sequence of moments unconnected to the grand conception of time and of impermanence. Humans, of course, have this “special” combination of traits and genes and other sciencey-stuff that allows us to contextualize our memories with the present in order to prepare us for our future. The primary consequence of this ability is the understanding and acknowledgment that everything that lives will one day die. We often understand this consequence far *too much*, spending most of our lives doing whatever it takes to escape its ultimate inevitability. But all things die. All things end. And endings are sad. But they are also so beautiful.

From the moment you begin to grasp the concept of death, which is usually sometime in your early life, you begin to feel a twinge of angst in your heart. This is unfair. Life is so fragile. To live and to love—that’s something everyone should be owed, yes? But beings are not *owed* life—life just *happens*. Beings will cease to be, and then…they're gone.

To a lot of us, there is relief in hope. Hope that the people they love stay with them even after they're gone here on Earth. A promise of life after death, given by the powerful men who sit upon marble thrones inherited by blood and deceit, who call themselves holy, who espouse virtue and acceptance—yet the ones who alienate and dehumanize their fellow “neighbors”—are denying the fundamental understanding of life. This understanding is, I think, what gives it any meaning at all. Death, insofar that it is known to be the inescapable eventuality of life, is simultaneously absurd and beautiful. It is absurd because it makes no sense and it is beautiful because despite this, here we are. An ultimate meaning to life is not assigned to *all* beings, for that constitutes a life of predetermined action. If you are afforded no real choices in life, how is it worth living? How is that meaningful? Is there meaning in life as a meat puppet? I think not.

BELIEF AND ACCEPTANCE

Do I believe in God? … I believe in the idea of God. Of goodness and love. That there is—in everything—a common essence, shared and passed on. That doing good things for no other reason than to try to be good is what we all ought to strive for. Do I believe we were created, chosen? … I think what's more beautiful is the uniqueness of the human condition. The barriers our species overcame that lead us to who we are now. We were certainly created, but not directly, I don't think. But what started everything—in the beginning? Well, that's what I want to know too.

This project isn’t about God or religion, but it bumps up against the topic, so I think it appropriate to cover. While I personally am at odds with the concept of God, or of any deity for that matter, I have absolutely no problem with the belief in God, a god, or gods. I am always willing to be proven wrong—it is ever so exciting! And perhaps there is something out there. Maybe the flow of energy through time lends itself to something leaning on spirituality (in the transfer of energy through life, where the fluidity through beings becomes a current of spirit). I could see myself getting into that. It kind of reminds me of Andy Weir’s story, *The Egg*. Regardless, the essential catalyst is not incompatible with faith and spirituality; they just need a little redefining. Humanity is an extraordinary product of evolution and—while God can certainly be involved in the creation of matter in “the beginning”—any sense of divine intervention as significant as manifestations or tampering within time and space is a fundamental violation of the physical world *as we know it*. Again, I am happy to be proven wrong, but—for the moment at least—a worldview without significant contradictions in logic suggests that if God is real, it/he/she/they are an observer to us, waiting to see if we can stick this thing out.

I do however have a problem with the intentions of many institutionalized organizations who've found that they are really rather effective at getting people to do things out of pure faith. Anyone involved is/was just as human as you or me; there's *no reason* to treat any of their doctrines as infallible. No, we can’t allow ourselves to attain *personal* meaning through God.

Therein lies my belief: Our personalities are constructed from a foundation of nature and nurture and are built up from lived experiences. What makes us who we are is the unbelievably complex biology and chemistry in our heads and the energy required to power most of its functions. Death means the ceasing of that energy to its outputs, which in turn means the total loss of personality, if at all recoverable. The mind of a being is not separable from the functions of the brain (insofar as any neuroscientists can tell) and so when death rears its way to the inevitability of The End, that being is no more. It ends...

It is comforting to hold on to the hope that you will one day join those whom you loved and lost, but it is also comforting to know that they are still with you. True, memories are not lossless packets of data ready to be relived at any time, but the experience is still there, stored within you. Such memories are, in essence, a part *of you*. I mean, suppose you believe in an afterlife: would anything you do or say to the people in your life right now really matter if you knew you would see them again for eternity? Would there even be any urgency in the matter of relationships like that if we were promised to be united again? To me, the knowledge that everything has its end is what makes anything really meaningful.

One day, there will come a time when you see your mother for the last time; by that, I don’t mean to depress you, but wouldn’t that saddening knowledge now bring meaning to the next times that you see them? Because of this, every meeting grows more and more meaningful. See, Camus wrote that “in order to exist just once in the world, it is necessary never again to exist.”1 And so I don't see a point in eternal life. Even a life tragically cut short was beautiful in its time already spent here with us—to spend your time hoping for an eternally distant reunion instead of cherishing the moments you actually had with them only serves to weaken your memory of them as they were. This burden, this angst, this suffering from death—universal to all of humanity—is what makes us truly alive.

NOTHING MATTERS

Surely, it is how we face the absurdity of *being* that defines who we are and what we believe in. Meaning is derived from our intentions, actions, and passions as we carry out our journeys into the world as individuals and as a community. Meaning, insofar as it is traditionally understood, tends to be intertwined with religious doctrine. From Christians, the 10 Commandments or the belief that God helps and guides us is considered to be the “meaning of life.” Although the contemporary cultural scene seems to suggest that the “meaning of life” is a funny joke, implying that there isn’t an answer/there is no meaning to life. You can see this in references like the quirky, nonsensical answer, “42,” from Douglas Adam’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Ambivalence about answering this entirely human question is a relatively new development, though. “When the throne of God is overthrown,” Camus explains, “the rebel realizes that it is now [their] own responsibility to create the justice, order[,] and unity that [they] sought in vain within [their] own condition and, in this way, to justify the fall of God.”2 It is easy to misrepresent statements like these from existentialists, for we are so far removed from the history of their times. Just remember that they are coming off the heels of the toppling of powerful monarchies where kings were believed to be divinely chosen—that God spoke through them and determined the rules. The death of god, by ways of revolution (and decapitation), revealed to those at the time that their lives were not dictated by a higher power. In this shift of perspective, people felt like their values were stripped from them, that there was no longer a meaning to live. This was the birth of nihilism.

Nihilism is often understood as the belief that nothing matters. Most of us in the West would then go a step further, claiming that if nothing matters, then “everything is permissible and nothing is important.”3 Indeed, in the absence of meaning, there is a lack of goodness on account of all the badness that accompanies it. Nihilism posits that goodness or badness are just accidents4—bound by nothing, anything can happen, with no apparent rhyme or reason.

This is not what we observe in the world, though. If nothing matters, then nothing is worth fighting for. The slave would not fight back against their master. Kings would not have been beheaded. So then, there is obviously something worth fighting for. Camus could see this contradiction, clarifying, “a nihilist is not someone who believes in nothing, but someone who does not believe in what [they see].”4 The nihilist gets swept up and overwhelmed by the absurdity of the world, oftentimes through isolation, fearing what they do not understand. They are lacking something; something that binds us all together. The nihilist cannot see beauty in the world. Perhaps they cannot see beauty in themselves. That’s where I was, only a few months back. Drained, hopeless, and young, I would wake up for class and desperately fight the urge to throw myself in front of the bus outside my apartment. Escaping this mindset takes time and compassion for oneself. Yet it is never evaded for good.

We see then the emergence of a certain anxiety—an anxiety born from the knowledge and acceptance of our place in the world. Because the world is absurd, because it does not owe us any comfort in survival, it is up to *us* to find meaning in it. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, wrote in his book, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, “as far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”6 What the nihilist doesn’t see in isolation is that meaning comes from within. Nietzsche was a grand proponent of creating meaning for oneself (although many young Nietzsche readers fail to understand that part). God is dead. We no longer derive absolute meaning from him. The nihilist stops there, but Nietzsche keeps going, upholding that meaning is not a collective feeling—it comes *from* you, *for* you.

Sometimes, it can be hard not to blame the nihilist, for we humans can only derive meaning from experience. We are products of our environment, and the operations and values of society shape how we think and act in the world; it matters how you see yourself. An existential crisis is what happens when you finally see those larger systems influencing how you live or act—when you realize the way you lived your life was wrong. This is the true anxiety of being.

Existential anxiety is uncomfortable, leading many that become afflicted to run away from it. Denial and complacency are common responses to this kind of dread. It is easier to give in or to “play your role” than it is to face it in an attempt to gain understanding. This is the affliction of so many liberals today. They are too afraid to see that the way we live our lives is wrong and that we have to do something about it. They’re too afraid to realize that the American Dream is a lie. Too afraid to admit that racist people are created not by themselves or their perceived ignorance or hatred, but by the very system itself. They’re too afraid to see that they too are implicated in the proliferation of racism and misogyny in our cultures. They play by the rules because “that's just how things are.” It is indeed very hard trying to escape this anxiety. And truly it can never be defeated—one must always question themselves and their thoughts—but when we take that uncomfortable stance against those injustices, we begin to weaken their grasp on our lives. In opposing the systems of oppression, we must not let fear, hatred, or envy drive us. Who are we to fight for solidarity if we don’t even believe in it ourselves? If the first step is questioning why things are the way they seem to be, then the next is to maintain our connection to reality. We risk becoming detached from the lives of those around us if we come to conclusions under false pretense or because we don’t like the answer we are finding. What does reality have to say to us and is it worth fighting for?