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Working with death, struggle and guilt

Abstract: This paper considers how I built on Jaspers' ideas, in my work with an Iranian client, who was struggling with the limit situations of death and guilt. The client's existence had been paralysed by the death of his partner in tragic circumstances and his life had essentially come to a halt.

Jaspers' influence on my work with Rahim will be explored in some detail, but this will be intertwined with a description of the dynamic process of the client's therapy over many months, as we faced these limits together. I have previously published elements of this case, in other articles and chapters, but have never systematically looked at it through the lens of Jaspers' ideas.

Keywords: Death, guilt, loss, limit situation, Jaspers, spirituality, existential therapy

My understanding of limit situations

Jaspers' work has had a profound impact on the development of my version of existential therapy, often referred to as existential-phenomenological therapy (Deurzen et al. 2019, Deurzen 2010, 2012, 2015, 2016). My first introduction to his work in the early seventies was mediated by his book on General Psychopathology (APE), which was of great interest to me as I was working in French psychiatric hospitals, where I was able to apply my philosophical training and especially my understanding of existentialism and phenomenology. Jaspers' notion of looking for the form rather than the content of what patients said and did, was a powerful guide in translating phenomenology into clinical practice. His encouragement to understand first person experiences and to dare immerse yourself into the patient's world, by '*Einfühlung*', i. e., by literally feeling into it and participating in it emotionally, taught me to use authentic human communication rather than psychoanalytic interpretations in my work. While I was in the process of completing my master's dissertation in philosophy on the phenomenology of solipsism and solitude, under the direction of Michel Henry (Henry 1973, 1975) at the University of Montpellier, I was able to have regular discussions with him about the application of philosophical ideas to my work in mental health. Henry and I agreed that better models were needed to reach and support people who had become alienated from society. I was working among psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who favoured Lacanian interpretations and had concluded that

these were not a significant improvement on medical interventions. Henry and I discussed how his phenomenological work could be developed into an alternative to psychoanalysis. We agreed that Sartre's existential psychoanalysis and Jaspers' work were important steps in the right direction. Henry would over the years write numerous books that were foreshadowed in those talks (Henry 1993, 2007, 2008, 2012). Henry guided my studies flawlessly and he recommended books by Husserl (1970, 1973, 1977, 1983), Jaspers (PhEI-III, EE, EPE), Scheler (1921, 1926, 1973), Buber (1923, 1929), and Merleau Ponty (1962, 1964, 1968) and I followed up on all these. I introduced him for my part to the work of Laing (1959, 1961, 1967), which I found poignant and relevant to my dissertation (Fabre van Deurzen 1975). My interest in Jaspers' work was immediately ignited as it was most relevant to my daily conversations with the patients at the hospital of Saint Alban, where I was a full-time social therapist between 1973–1975. Later it was a pleasure to introduce hundreds of trainee clinical psychologists and psychotherapists to Jaspers' contribution as part of my training programmes and post graduate degrees in counselling psychology and existential psychotherapy in London (Deurzen 2010, Deurzen et al. 2019).

I moved from France to the UK in 1977, after having completed clinical training in psychology and psychotherapy at the University of Bordeaux, to work in London with the Arbours Association, with anti-psychiatrists Joe Berke (1973) and Morty Schatzman (1973). I was also involved with the Philadelphia Association and Ronald D. Laing, who had contributed a lot to the application of existential phenomenology to psychotherapy (Fabre 1978, Deurzen et al. 2019). It was disappointing to find that none of the anti-psychiatrists had found a way to use existential phenomenological ideas to underpin their clinical practice, which tended to be based in Lacanian and neo Kleinian interpretative work. Laing, who had written a damning critique of Jaspers' Psychopathology and his approach to psychosis (Laing 1964), was leaning towards primal and humanistic therapies by this time. The lack of serious engagement with phenomenology and existential philosophy and psychotherapy was disheartening (Deurzen 2013). It was exemplified by Laing's dismissal of Jaspers' work: "As a psychopathologist, I find Jaspers even less satisfactory than Sartre finds him as a philosopher" (Laing 1964). As a result, from 1978 onwards, I chose to create a new path for existential therapy (Deurzen-Smith 1984, 1988). This path brought me back into collaboration with both Laing and Berke in 1988 when we co-founded the Society for Existential Analysis in London, with a view to re-uniting the field, though this was only truly accomplished with the first World Congress for Existential Therapy in London in 2015.

In 1990 I returned part time to my philosophical studies, alongside my professional practice as an existential psychotherapist and my academic work, on the master's and doctoral programmes I had founded. I finally had an opportunity

to complete a doctorate in philosophy in London, at City University (Deurzen 2003) under supervision with Alfons Grieder, a Jaspers expert (Grieder 2009). I spent considerable time discussing Jaspers' concept of limit situations with him. In his 2009 paper, he helpfully formulated the various phases of Jaspers' definitions of the concept, pointing out how it evolved in Jaspers' work from its first appearance in *Philosophy of Existence* (EE) as a mere border situation that puts a limit to human beings, a limiting situation as it were, to becoming more of a facilitative concept that leads to an exploration of what constitutes a limit of human existence. I was particularly interested in how these limits are not just boundaries, but frontiers and possibly pathways towards something further, something beyond known existence, of the order of transcendence, as discussed in Jaspers' later work (EPE, PhEIII). This idea of transcendence was central to my work with the client I will be discussing below. I will be using the word transcendence in the dialectical sense, as that which outstrips and goes beyond a current situation that involves opposing elements. It signifies an overcoming of what has previously seemed contradictory or conflictual. It usually involves bringing together two or more disparate and often paradoxical realities by finding a way to hold their tension in a synthetic movement of comprehension. In this sense it aligns with Jaspers' use of the concept of the comprehensive. The concept of transcendence is not reserved for religious or mystical experiences. The cosmos, for instance, is a transcendent reality which comprehensively includes everything that is known to humankind, in all its contradictory complexity. In this it outstrips any current scientific or existential understandings of specific and limited aspects of life. Transcendence is the domain of the metaphysical and ontological aspects of existence and in this sense, it stands in contrast with what is ontically immanent, and which pertains to the mundane and concrete world. The extent to which transcendence permeates the immanent world and how it interacts with it remains open to debate. My case study hinges on the idea that a human being's search for transcendence does not have to remain abstract and theoretical as it is in fact a central and essential part of their life. At the same time, in working with someone who had very specific religious views of transcendence, I aimed to find a congruent way of relating to these beliefs, whilst accepting my client's formulations of transcendence for the purpose of our work together. This case study will illustrate that transcendence is what we discover and grapple with when we come to limit situations and seek to go beyond them.

I have found both Jean Luc Marion's work on the invisible (Marion 2004, 2006, 2008) and Jean Luc Nancy's work on borders and boundaries in his book *"The Fragile Skin of the World"* (Nancy 2021) a fascinating and worthy extension and poetic elaboration of these ideas. Nancy shows that limits are liminal spaces, where we cross our borders and are transformed. He links our exploration of lim-

its with the flow of time, showing that time that is lived as planned progression is always perturbed by accidents and incidents to wake us up to the reality of limitations. Human beings can simply not keep deferring endings into infinity. If we want to claim our awakening to being, we must face the reality of limit situations.

In my clinical practice, I have increasingly come to see the immense value of naming and staying within human limits and working with the shadow side of human existence. As is the case with artwork, the application of shades of light and dark give life its depth and perspective. When we have the courage to sit patiently with a client's pain and despair in their encounter with limit situations, we frequently come to a breakthrough. In my book *"Everyday Mysteries"* (Deurzen 2010), which is a precis of my teaching of psychotherapy, I have discussed Jaspers in some detail, sketching out the most relevant aspects of his work for those who are learning to do existential phenomenological work. Over the years I have been told by numerous trainees that they found Jaspers' concept of limit situations enlightening and grounding. They have often commented that Jaspers' book *"Way to Wisdom"* (EPE), which has been required reading on my syllabi for decades was particularly inspirational to them as non-philosophers. They valued Jaspers' reminder that a serious and philosophical stance in the world is always based on awareness of the limits, tensions and contradictions of human existence.

To lead a philosophical life means also to take seriously our experience of men, of happiness and hurt of success and failure, of the obscure and the confused. It means not to forget but to possess ourselves inwardly of our experience, not to let ourselves be distracted but to think problems through, not to take things for granted but to elucidate them (EPE: 122).

This encouragement to live in a more intense and passionate way is very similar to Kierkegaard's message (Kierkegaard 1941a, 1941b, 1980) to take a leap of faith in the presence of anxiety and despair. In my practice, I remind myself of Jaspers' notion that limits are not reductive but maieutic: they do not stop us but force us to give birth to something new, transcending the old tensions and conflicts. This is the principle of dialectics in motion. Limits are no longer endpoints, but front lines and leading edges, which take us towards new discoveries. We go beyond them to explore possibilities and our relationship to transcendence. The bridge between people's suffering and their capacity for transformation is forged by their willingness to live through uncertainty, anxiety and pain. Much of the time, human beings deny and avoid such experiences, living with lazy assumptions, set patterns, dogmas, scientific rules and social regulations, or indeed as Sartre would argue, with bad faith, assuming a particular identity that stops them from exploring other possibilities (Sartre 1956, 1971, 1985, 2000). I have taken great courage from Jaspers' contention that there is another way of over-

coming such limits, which is that of authentic communication, in what he called ‘a loving struggle’ (PhEII). This can provide a mantle of calm and composure at moments of tension in psychotherapy work. You will see how important it was in the vignette I shall now present.

This case illustration is based on my work with Rahim, an Iranian refugee, who I saw for existential therapy in my London practice some years ago. A more detailed discussion of this piece of work can be found in chapter 10 of the “Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy” entitled “*Rahim’s Dilemma*” (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker 2019). A further discussion of the case can be found in an article I wrote for the Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement, entitled *Rising from a Shattered Life* (Deurzen 2020), which looks at the client’s experience through the lens of bereavement and grief (Deurzen 2021).

The client, Rahim

Rahim was a 42-year-old Iranian man who was applying for asylum in the UK, where he had previously lived as a student. He introduced himself to me as a Persian businessman. He was elegant in his self-expression, his gestures and movement and was immaculately groomed. He had fled from Iran in haste after his sexual partner Firouz, a man who was twenty years his senior and who was a business partner and friend of the family, had been imprisoned and eventually executed. Rahim lived in a state of anxiety, despair, grief, guilt and self-loathing when he came to see me. He did not know where to turn and he hoped that because of my Western and secular outlook, and as a woman, I would be calm and sympathetic and would listen to his story without condemning him. I worked with him on a weekly basis for close to two years and later saw him for some follow up sessions. While initially seeming very self-possessed, his façade soon crumbled as he began to tell me of the tragedy that had happened to him and that had left him heart broken and insecure about himself, his home, his relationships, his future, his identity and his religion. He felt that his life had come to a halt.

He emphasised from the start that he was a very ethical person who had always aimed to do what was right, and he was deeply upset about having disappointed, shamed and potentially endangered his family. The guilt for this weighed heavily upon him. He explained to me that homosexuality was strictly forbidden by both the law and religion in his country. It took quite some time before we came to appreciate how much he still agreed with this perspective and continued to condemn himself for his sexual preference. This was a profound inner conflict that paralysed him and tied him into ever more layers of guilt, shame and self-reproach. He was condescending about my liberal attitude when I encouraged him

to explore what could release him from his self-condemnation. He believed it was right that he should punish himself for his 'sinful proclivity', which is what he termed his homosexuality. He was often highly stressed, with droplets of sweat rolling off his forehead and it was evident that despite his outward poise, his inner turmoil was slowly exhausting and depleting him. There was very little chance that he would be granted asylum in the UK on the grounds of the threat of torture or execution (Danesh 2019), as the UK government of that time took the view this was a low and avoidable risk. Predictably his application failed, and he had to find alternative, financially based ways to earn his leave to remain in the UK. This was something he eventually achieved by dedicated and hard work through his company, establishing himself in the UK as a business owner.

Rahim's situation

Though at first Rahim spoke often of these immigration and business worries, they were a mere distraction from his very severe personal, moral and emotional problems. He was burdened by deep feelings of regret, guilt and loss over the death of his lover, Firouz. They had been together in a very close, but secret, loving and sexual relationship for several years and could only meet under the mantle of their business association. He had felt torn by the situation as it involved hiding his true feelings from his parents, who would never be able to accept their son was gay. Eventually Rahim and Firouz were caught in a raid at the hotel in which they were staying, and they were both arrested for the illegal practice of homosexuality.

While incarcerated at the police station, Rahim panicked and he reached out to his father for help, as his instinct for self-preservation took over. His father, who was very well connected to the police and judiciary, stepped in to get him out of prison. His father's lawyers drew up a statement for Rahim to sign, which said that he was heterosexual and that he had been in the hotel with Firouz for the purpose of a business transaction. He felt guilty about lying to save his skin and he felt bad about abandoning Firouz to his fate, but at this stage he trusted that Firouz would also find his way out of prison, as he was his father's business associate. He assumed, wrongly, that his father's lawyers would do the same for Firouz as they had for him. For a while, after he got out of prison and stayed at home with his parents, Rahim was too wrapped up in his relationship with his very angry father to worry too much about Firouz. He dealt with the situation by denial and he froze any emotion. He could hardly let himself think about the plight of his lover. This changed dramatically after a couple of weeks, when his

father, rather vindictively, informed him that Firouz had been transferred to a notoriously strict prison.

As it became clear that Firouz was not going to escape from punishment, Rahim began to feel increasingly guilty about his own escape from the consequences of their forbidden love. A court case eventually took place in which Firouz stood trial, alongside numerous other people, for sodomy and rape. It emerged that Firouz, undoubtedly under duress and torture, had confessed that he frequented this hotel, to conduct homosexual relationships. There were many witnesses confirming this and Firouz was condemned to capital punishment. Rahim had been in agony and did not know what to do or where to turn. His father did not want to discuss Firouz and certainly did not want to hear Rahim speak about his love, his guilt and his despair. Rahim began to resent his father for having abandoned his business associate to his fate and then felt guilty about his hateful thoughts towards his father too. The clouds were gathering, and he felt increasingly doom laden and mortified and now he began to convince himself that he was to blame for Firouz' fate and should have done more to save Firouz from prison, when there was still time.

By this time Rahim lived in a haze of confusion and terror. He had always felt ashamed of his homosexuality and now this shame turned into self-blame and self-condemnation, mirroring his father's ire with him. Because of his upbringing, his religion and the law of the state of which he was a citizen, he convinced himself that his sexual relationship with Firouz had been criminal. Because the law said it was a crime to actively practice homosexuality and his religion said it was sinful, he turned the discrimination he had been subjected to into self-recrimination. A psychoanalytic interpretation of this might have been that he identified with the aggressor. During those lonely days, waiting for Firouz' execution date, he lost track of the fact that neither he nor Firouz had committed any crime, other than to love each other, which had only been defined as a crime by the state and its morality police. He never wavered in his love for Firouz but lived in a fog of intense fear and misery at the thought of his lover being in prison on his own, at the mercy of the animosity of the guards, having to face his dreadful fate. His feelings of guilt over not being able to be by his side were slowly spiralling out of control and led to damning self-condemnation. By the time Rahim came to see me, many months later in London, he was unable to grieve or express feelings of love, guilt or sadness, because he had frozen into a state of stony detachment to cope with the immensity of his pain and confusion.

It took a long time for him to tell me about the day of the execution, when Rahim had gone to the public place of execution to witness Firouz' public hanging, watching his death struggle from afar. He had shouted out his love for Firouz at that moment to comfort his partner, but immediately saw the police training

their machine guns on him and he could not stay till the end. He ran away from the crowd in terror, knowing that as he had now publicly disclosed his love for Firouz, he would have to flee the country, as the morality police would surely find him. This is when he came to the UK, where he could live with a friend and apply for asylum. As he was sinking further and further into passivity and despondency, his friend urged him to seek therapy.

Rahim's therapy

It soon became obvious that Rahim's suffering was constant, immense and relentless. This was not because of his fear for his own life or his sadness at his forced exile, but because of his feelings of culpability and persecutory self-blame over Firouz' death. Rahim was not just bitterly grieving the loss of the person he loved but was also preoccupied with what he saw as his own weakness and cowardice in running away from the tragedy. Sometimes he thought he should have offered himself up to be executed at the same time as Firouz. At other times he was tormenting himself about having failed in his duties to his father, to the state and to Islam. He had never truly committed to his love for Firouz, he thought. He had never fully accepted the consequences of his love. He told me that he had let him die, whilst saving his own skin. He might as well have accused him of rape or have put the noose around his neck, himself. He had failed to make sacrifices for his love, in the same way in which he had failed to make sacrifices for his family, his nation or his religion. He had been a coward and now he was faced with the consequences. His self-accusations were fierce and uncompromising. He wanted to be faithful to his Islamic upbringing and religious beliefs but knew he had failed to do so and didn't think himself strong enough to resist his desire for men. He wanted to think about how he would resolve this dilemma for the future but could not see a solution. He was devoted to his family but had not only disappointed his parents but had shamed them and had brought danger and risk into their lives. His father had lied for him, to get him out of prison, affirming that his son was heterosexual at the very moment that he had found out that his son was homosexual. He knew his father would never forgive him for this. He did not think he could ever face his father again. He was certain that God would not forgive him unless he repented. Rahim was tied in knots and his misery was profound.

He desperately wanted to mourn his lover, but his bitter self-blame and self-reproach would not allow him to find peace in his loss, or in his love. He was racked with guilt and his inner turmoil made it hard for him to sleep at night. It was as if he were strangled by the conflict and he had dark thoughts of taking

his own life, to join Firouz in death. It was impossible for him to forget their embraces, but he continued to feel ambivalent and morally torn, as he was unable to let go of the taboo around homosexuality. He carried the guilt of abandoning the person he had loved with heavy heart. The self-recrimination that now persecuted him every minute of his life for being such a sinful person made it difficult for him to breathe or rest. It was out of the question that he could worship God. He did not think he deserved God's forgiveness until he became truly penitent. He believed he should be punished. It took a while for him to express his disapproval of Western liberalism, as he had deliberately chosen me, a liberal Western woman to be his therapist. We discovered this was because he could not stand to feel judged by a heterosexual man from his own background. He was not ready to be judged by that kind of authority. He wanted me to be supportive of what he had done, but unrelenting in my exploration of what it all meant and how he should be punished.

Facing reality

He berated himself as if he were an unruly child who had sinned out of weakness, instead of taking his desire, his sexuality, his love, his grave loss and grief, seriously. Much of the therapy was about helping Rahim to find the inner calm and strength to face all these realities. We sat side by side as he explored his experiences of desire, ecstasy, tenderness, affection, loss, death, agony and guilt. He had made choices. There had been huge consequences. He was baffled by it all. He was caught in contradictions. He was struggling with himself. It helped him to state these things and talk about his situation. He was insecure, unsure of himself, his identity and his future. He kept wondering whether he should 'execute' himself but told me that his religion did not allow suicide, as it would lead to total damnation. He agreed when I noted that he was, therefore, not totally doomed yet, while he was alive and had a chance to redeem himself.

It was when he finally started to face the facts, instead of constantly accusing himself, that he was able to appreciate his situation. It helped him to see that he had come to a halt because he had crashed into limits and taboos. He accepted that chance and fate had played a part in his life and that he was not solely responsible for what had happened. He had been pushed to a tragic edge, where he had panicked. Now he had to decide whether to retreat in fear or to explore across the boundaries he had breached. He picked up on my use of the word 'tragic'. The experience of tragedy was very real to him. It captured what he felt completely. He told me of the importance of martyrdom in Persian culture and recounted the story of the battle of Karbala, and the religious act of self-

flagellation. The idea that he had overstepped lots of boundaries and had explored a different way of being but had paid a huge prize for it, began to make sense to him. He was now able to tell the story of what had happened without grinding to a frightened stop. He could see that his actions were a lot like those of an actor in a tragedy. The outcome had been predictable, but he had not seen this. He had so much wanted the freedom to love Firouz, that he had blinded himself to the risks they were running. He had ended up with nothing but pain, loss, regret, remorse and a total lack of freedom. And Firouz had ended up losing his life and now the gulf of death separated them. He was desolate without him, and yet, in a strange way, he envied him for having had the courage of his convictions and for having found peace in death. He allowed himself for the first time to remember that Firouz had gone to his death without denouncing him. He was able to let himself notice that Firouz had safeguarded him and had honoured their love by protecting Rahim from the same fate that he himself had to face. This was a revelation that made it easier for him to start remembering and recollecting the love they had shared. He spoke about their intimate relationship, breaking the taboo once more and going over the forbidden mark. He had been condescending about the idea that therapy might be about him learning to express his purloined grief, but now his tears did start to fall, in remembrance of their closeness and care for each other. He was releasing some of his tightly held tension.

Therapeutic crisis

He was even saying that there had been something wrong with denying the importance of the love he had felt and continued to feel for Firouz. He wanted to remember every moment of his life with Firouz and, as he did so, mourned him. He wanted to find a way to honour Firouz' memory and decided to publish the poems Firouz had written for him. He knew some of the lines by heart and quoted them to me, then very slowly and thoughtfully translated them, with tears in his eyes. This led to a softening of his tone and manner and in an unguarded moment, he told me that he had felt closest to God when he was in bed with his lover. I remarked how in that moment his love for Firouz and his love for God had flowed together. This really hit home. He paused for a while, looking shocked and then he thundered at me that I was too soft and lenient with him. He attributed this to me being female and Western and he affirmed vehemently that I didn't understand his religious values. What I had said about the confluence of his love for God and Firouz alarmed him, as such a thought was still anathema for him. He looked daggers at me and it was obvious that he was trying to pick a fight with me, externalising his inner conflict, forcing me to hold one of the horns of his dilemma.

He provocatively declared that I could never appreciate the exacting demands of his religion. I was trying to protect him and save him, he scoffed, whereas he wanted to suffer because he deserved to take his punishment. I pointed out that he held fast to a very particular interpretation of what God demanded of him. And yet, I reminded him, he had just told me that he had felt closest to God when he was sleeping with Firouz. Perhaps his God was less damning of him than he himself was. Perhaps he had discovered that love was something beyond human understanding, something limitless and divine, something transcending.

He paused and considered this carefully and tentatively accepted this idea. But he still felt that God would judge him and that I could not understand this because I was too ignorant of Islam. I agreed with him on the latter point, and I committed to read more about Islam and invited him in turn to explore whether there were other interpretations of Islam that would allow him to loosen the tight grip around his heart. I did begin reading the Qur'an and it helped me to understand him better. For his part he came upon an article by Imam Muhsin Hendricks, the director of a queer South African Muslim organization (Hendricks 2006), which shocked him. We discussed some of the philosophical points that Hendricks made that he was struggling with. This created a new dynamic in the therapy, which allowed him to see that we were in partnership, and he did not have to fear me. But we also agreed the limits of what we could do together. He really was going to have to work out some of his questions with a person who had the knowledge and authority to speak for Islam. He found a local Imam who was willing to be in dialogue with him about homosexuality and who brought him into contact with other Islamic men (from various countries), who lived their religious commitments in rather more liberal ways. He began to recognise that he had had a very strict upbringing and that there were other ways of practising his religion and his sexuality that were not mutually exclusive. This ability to take a new stance towards his plight and to explore other views and other ways of making sense of his situation was extremely liberating. It was made possible after he allowed himself to be angry with me and bring his inner conflict out into the open. This led to us having a more authentic and frank relationship.

Transformation

It made our therapeutic work more fluid and less tense, as he explored the idea whether it may have been acceptable to God that he had loved Firouz. He felt more and more deeply moved by the memory of Firouz' love for him as he reread and translated his poems. They were heavenly and deeply evocative and had noth-

ing to do with sin or lust. He allowed himself to remember the many ways in which Firouz had loved him. He was able to accept the gift that Firouz had given him, by not only sacrificing his life for him but by protecting him from harm till the bitter end. He came to see that Firouz had saved his life by taking all the blame. It was hard for him to comprehend the purity of a love so unselfish, but he felt certain that God would have lauded Firouz for his loving sacrifice. He cried many tears as he finally allowed his profound feelings of love and longing and loss, regret and gratitude to be expressed. Now it became necessary to revisit his guilt and come to terms with the idea that he had chosen his own survival over his love for Firouz. He accepted that he would carry this guilt till the end of his life. It was a shadow that would never be lifted. Yet, he believed that he had continued to love Firouz and that he could prove this by making his life a monument to their union. By living he was able to keep Firouz alive. Rahim wondered if his life was now a sacrament, and he resolved to prepare Firouz' poems for publication. This changed his guilt into a debt that could be paid over a lifetime rather than being the heavy burden it had been for the past years. If survival no longer just meant cowardice and hiding but was about living for Firouz and to keep the memory alive of the purity of the love they had felt for each other, then it was conceivable that God might forgive him. He was now travelling across the borders of life and death towards new interpretations and greater understanding. He was finding ways to transcend. He began to accept for us to speak of his love for men, rather than automatically reverting to calling this a sin and considering it a transgression. He no longer felt he was exiled and not allowed to seek a home within himself. He began considering the possibility that he did, after all, have integrity and devoutness. It allowed him to begin to reclaim and explore his cultural background, and he started speaking to me about mundane things, like his interest in cooking. He took pride in carefully preparing a particularly complex dish that was deeply meaningful to him, sharing it with his Iranian friends.

Second crisis

One day he confessed to me that he had tried having sexual relations with one of the men he had become close to. Then, deeply ashamed again, became enraged with the casualness of it all. He thundered at me about depravity, theirs and mine and prided himself in the self-sacrifice of abstinence. I remarked how he saw himself as superior to people whom he judged to be immoral or decadent. Our discussion revealed that he felt he had a special relationship with the divine. He was able to acknowledge the importance of this to him and he accepted that it was his closeness to God that had made him feel such deep shame at his infidelity.

He was by now discussing his crisis in his faith with the wise and relatively liberal Imam who had become his guide through the holy texts. He slowly found his way back to prayer and worship and became reconciled with his dual reality: his fierce love of God and his strong love of men. This was not about ambivalence. The only way to reconcile the ambiguity of this split passion, was to accept the paradox, that he loved God more for knowing the love of men and that he could only love a man who was devout. His homosexuality was not primarily about lust and therefore it had become conceivable that these two aspects of his loving reality were more aligned than in opposition. Both were male pursuits and excluded females. Both were about transcendental experiences for him. Neither was about aggrandizing or pleasing himself. Both were about going beyond his instincts and daily duties, into a realm of unity. Finally, Rahim let go of his fierce self-deprecation and self-condemnation. He could see that there was good in him and that he may be able to pray again and to live in such a way that it would be considered worthy by God. When this moment of self-forgiveness happened, he wept for the first time about his own life, the struggles he had been through, as well as about Firouz' unheard pain and that of his estranged family. He allowed himself to feel compassion with the frightened Rahim who had lost his love and had to emigrate to the UK. He could acknowledge the arduousness of the long journey he had made through no-man's-land and uncertainty. He made a new close relationship soon after he had been able to find this self-compassion. His new 'special friend' was much lighter on his feet in interpreting God's demands and the ongoing challenges of his life, although he was a practising Sufi. They had inspirational discussions about all the moral issues he had been struggling with and Rahim felt he was able to breathe again. He even started coming to therapy in jeans rather than in his formal attire. His whole mode of being seemed to ease.

Application of Jaspers' idea of passion for the night

In my work with Rahim, I had to remind myself of the importance of being willing to descend into the darkest spaces of Rahim's mind and soul which he had been avoiding because he was afraid of being destroyed. Jaspers' notion of 'passion for the night' (*Leidenschaft zur Nacht*, EE) as that which breaks through every order I have established, because of my inner urge to ruin myself in the world, in order to become completed in the depth of world-lessness and darkness, was constantly at the back of my mind. My client presented on the outside as the perfect representative of the 'law of the day' (*Gesetz des Tages*, EE). He was dressed to the nines

and cautious and careful in his presentation at every level and keen to be seen as a moral and irreproachable, socially responsible person. He was always toeing the line, trying for perfection and blocking his own freedom and creativity in doing so. He very much feared being wrecked and ruined if he allowed himself to become impassioned. His self-condemnation for having crossed that line in the past was strict and severe. Liberating him to allow for the play of night and day was one of the objectives of the therapy that emerged as time went by. Jaspers' idea that both sides of life are equally important and in constant tension with each other, was a helpful concept, especially in reminding Rahim that he was free to live his life in search of the highest goals, truth and perfection for instance, but would at the same have to allow for his humanity and imperfection.

The use of the concept of limit situation in the therapy

The concept of limit situation was central to Rahim's therapeutic journey. It was clear from the start that his life had ground to a halt, in the face of his confrontation with the existential limits of death, fate, struggle and guilt. It seemed as if he were hemmed in on all sides and he felt trapped. When we began to think in terms of what lay beyond these limits, a road appeared. Initially this road constituted the border of Rahim's life, and it was a dangerous road that marked the frontier with the illegal and dangerous territory of his forbidden homosexuality. He saw nothing but destruction and doom on the far side of that road. The therapeutic dialogue allowed him to slowly explore what else may lie beyond the border on either side and how he could reclaim some freedom of movement. Simply to speak about what had previously been unspeakable brought new perspectives and ideas into view. It was a relief to him to find that we could talk about such things in simple words, without him having to fear disapproval or condemnation, so that he could begin to think about himself and his life in new ways. The safe domain that he had left behind once and for all, was the home country into which he knew he could never fit again, given its cultural and social conventions. It was sharply separated from his heady experience of marginal living with his same-sex lover Firouz, which had made him an outcast. He had tried to flee back to safety but was acutely aware that he could never live with the lie of pretending to be heterosexual as would be required of him in his home country. He described his life in the UK, as that of a kind of no-man's land, cut off from both Iranian society and from UK society in which he was a supplicant and an asylum seeker. This seemed apt to his emotional situation too. He knew that he had to

transform himself in order to create a safe dwelling place again. For this he had to begin exploring beyond the frontiers that confined him. This is exactly what Rahim accomplished, first by obtaining the right to remain in the UK through earning a good income as a businessman and secondly by confronting the inner conflict about his homosexuality, which was the cause of much of his turmoil. Initially, he was incapable of doing so, frozen as he was at the boundary that he had once crossed with his partner. It had been a journey with lethal consequences. He had literally encountered death beyond that border of forbidden love and had to rethink his whole life and his very *raison d'être* before he could make sense of this. In the beginning, his guilt for having trespassed and brought this tragedy into his life was overwhelming. The guilt covered everything: he felt guilty towards God, his society, his culture, his religion, his family, his lover, and himself for having become a bad person who did not deserve to live.

The Loving Struggle

What created the shift in Rahim's attitude towards himself was his willingness to engage with me in a real and authentic way, instead of staying with safe and predictable exchanges. I invited him to reconsider his spirituality, facing up to his real relationship with God. This led to him becoming angry and allowing himself to speak from the heart. It was an engrossing, passionate and deeply felt exchange in which he made explicit what had troubled him and became aware of his inner attitude which had remained hidden. In this tense moment between us he articulated and externalised what had been unsaid and it brought new clarity and strength. He for instance became aware of his secret assumption of his superiority over women, and of his belief that he was a very devout man who had been close to God and could be so again. It was this that became the articulation and the hinge around which his transformation became possible. He could widen his worldview and challenge some of his assumptions. He could also reclaim some of the things he had lost. He had lived divided by a lethal border inside of himself, but now he had opened a portal in that border. He began to see that he had chosen for forbidden love and that the consequences of this had been terrible, but that in doing so he had also chosen for love and the consequences of this might be beneficial in some ways. Though his life had been overshadowed by fear, punishment, guilt and death, he had not wanted or pursued these negatives. He had not actively invited them into his life. They had come into his life through religious and societal circumstances and taboos. He had chosen to live in a different kind of society now. He did not have to live in fear and punishment all his life, though the memory of death and guilt would always remain with him. He wanted to be able to

retrieve the love he had given and that had been given to him. He had chosen for survival, so he must find a new way to live and be worthy of this new life.

He now started to talk about having been given a second chance. What was he going to do with this chance he had? He wanted to earn God's love again. He wanted to cross back from a life of fear and persecution into the land of forgiveness and tolerance. He was slowly coming to recognise that he had been very strict and condemnatory in his inner world and that God may be more encompassing and understanding than he had believed or given him credit for. He was becoming aware of the myriads of interpretations of every verse of the Qu'ran, instead of staying with a dogmatic view of these hidden meanings. The wonderful thought he had now come upon in his search into Islam, was that God transcended each of these interpretations and would not deny love or require so much suffering. Frequenting men from different national backgrounds had exposed him to the diversity of Islamic practices. His new male friend, Driss, was Moroccan and had been raised in a tradition of Sufism. He was much more liberal and did not think that homosexuality was a sin if it was not about exploitation and lust. He believed it was allowable if men were respectful of each other and were clean in their interactions. He did not believe being queer was strictly forbidden as Rahim had always thought. He reminded Rahim that God was merciful, forgiving and kind (Qu'ran 49:12). They were working out together what was allowable and what was not. They avoided intercourse for a long time, so that Rahim could feel he was acting on love, rather than lust and because it was hugely important to him to be accepted and forgiven by God. He also wanted to stay faithful to Firouz for long enough to feel he had done right by him. By now, Rahim was constantly in dialogue about his morals and ethics, with Driss, with the Imam and with me, and he felt both challenged and supported. He was once again, dynamically engaged with his life, unafraid to face his responsibility in living with as much integrity as possible. He had discovered that his religion could be a prism rather than a prison.

The point of our work was for Rahim to emerge from his depressed and paralysed state in which 'life had come to a halt' and he was isolated from everyone and everything he valued and frozen in time. He succeeded in this by taking back authority over his life and daring to engage with his emotions as well as exercising his capacity for understanding. He came back to life, instead of living like a drowning man or as a victim of circumstances. It was by aiming for a truth that transcended all human interpretations that Rahim began to see a greater good beyond his narrow childhood interpretation of the word of God. He was deeply engaged in reflecting on morality and different definitions of right and wrong, and became committed to the study of Sufi wisdom, together with his new life companion. Years after the end of our therapy, he told me that he felt as if he

were a worthy and devout person again and had placed both love and worship at the heart of his life instead of allowing these to tear him apart. He had published Firouz' poems.

Conclusions

Rahim's therapeutic exploration led to a great deal of philosophical and spiritual questioning, which loosened the tight grip of dogma that had strangled him for many years. It was only when he found a way to externalize his anger and express the fierce battles inside of him, that we were able to begin to loosen the very tight fabric of his worldview. I came to understand that a person's worldview is a lot like a cell membrane: it needs to be strong enough to be defensive and protective of inner integrity, but it also needs to have enough flexibility and porousness to allow oxygen and nutrients to flow in and for toxic waste to flow out. When it doesn't function like this, a cell, or a person, will crack and burst and be at risk of foundering. Rahim's belief system had become like a hard barrier, stopping any dynamic movement or openness, choking him. When his lifestyle directly opposed his inner morality, the conflict became chronic, and tension started building. When Firouz was imprisoned, and later executed, Rahim's worldview imploded. He tried desperately to reconstitute the system, but discovered he could not repair it, and it had to change. Rahim began to understand that the safety of the ramparts he was living behind was no longer protective but had in fact become destructive to him. He knew that he had to seek greater understanding of transcendent principles of life, before he could mend his inner world. Our therapeutic journey together was essentially a quest for the Encompassing, as Jaspers put it in his *Philosophy of Existence* (EE). The work we did together, in Jaspers' words brought him: "increasing lucidity of a sense of being totally different from all determinate knowledge" (EE: 19). He discovered he was alive and subject to fate, but capable of change. His travels into the darkness of his soul and beyond the frontier of his belief system, exposed him to many dangers, but he found a way through. Eventually he rebuilt a life on the other side of death and struggle, learning to live with his grief and guilt.

Jaspers' notion of limit situations was pivotal in the development of Rahim's understanding of what he was dealing with. He learnt to dare to go to the edge of life, retreating from it when necessary. This is how he got a feel for the territory and for looking after himself on his dangerous journey. Our philosophical discussions allowed him to take a bird's eye view of his situation, instead of remaining inert and petrified, frozen in one place. He had to find solace for himself, without compromising his integrity. His struggle was not over at the end of our work to-

gether. It was in a sense only beginning, as he was still finding his feet and feeling his way towards a new orientation in the world. One of the things he had not accomplished was to initiate a conversation with his father and the rest of the family. But he was very clear about his direction of travel. He had freed himself enough to be able to feel deserving of both love and prayer again, without fearing condemnation. He accepted that he could not know the whole truth about life and that his previous self-righteousness had led to a very destructive form of self-condemnation. He had learnt that it was enough for him to be a decent and mature man, on the way towards understanding, rather than pretending to be a perfect and pure one who had already mastered the art of living. He learnt to rise from the ashes of a life that was untenable. He accepted that damnation was not inevitable and that his choice to stand with truth, did not have to mean that he had to ruin himself. He began to see that human beings are transformed by such experiences with the limits of life and that we can transcend contradictions by rising to another level. Our work together was always a deeply moving experience and we were able to encounter each other in the loving struggle of our differences, as we had the same objective of seeking truth and understanding. Jaspers summed up this search for truth in authentic communication very well:

Truth that is vitally important to us begins precisely where the cogency of 'consciousness in general' ends. We encounter a limit where our existence and another's existence, though both are aiming at truth as something that is one and universally valid, yet do not acknowledge that truth as one and the same. At this limit we either come into conflict, where forces and cunning decide matters, or else sources of faith are communicated which approach each other without ever being capable of becoming one and identical (EE: 36).

Jaspers concluded that truth results from a creative interaction with our environment and comes through a plurality of meanings rather than through a final word. Existential therapy is aligned with this joint search for truth, which can only become enlivened by our willingness to be in the loving struggle of life, in our search for meaning and transcendence.

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