Staircase to Heaven

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Existential Encounters of Jewish Savants with Death

By

Tova Gamliel

Translated by

Naftali Greenwood

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FOREWORD

Old age is an unwanted destination not only for most members of a society that offers no assurance of an afterlife but even for scholars and philosophers who are supposed to uncover its secrets. Behavioral scientists—psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists—rarely view old age as a human phenomenon that yield an understanding of people. They usually limit their occupation with old age to its ethical-sociological implications, thus chaining themselves to a cultural agenda from which the finality of life is excluded. The reasons for this repudiation are clear; they are rooted in a cultural structure that sanctifies progress and development and denounces retreat and decline. As a result, the image of the elder is barred from the public discourse and transformed into a phantom that hovers between life and its opposite. This twilight zone is one of the few remaining areas of taboo in a society that preaches recognition of various complexions of Otherness, decries oppression and dehumanization, and defends the right of the dispossessed and the humiliated to be heard and seen. The social lens through which one may contemplate the world of the elderly, according to those vested with power and knowledge, blurs their physical presence, amplifies their imagination for the middle-aged, and depicts them as clinging to the altar of life with all their might. The random forays into the public sphere of the untouchable elderly, with whom the encounter may become a bad omen of death and de-existence, are also camouflaged with fig leaves that cleanse the social conscience. The public optics of old people—impaired, ill, exploited, befuddled—more than presenting a given human situation, are meant to inspire moral or moralistic cover-and-hide operation that alleviates the threat intrinsic to the exposure and awareness that it dictates. Gerontologists usually cooperate with this cultural effort to spread a camouflage net over old age and mask its features behind heavy makeup of concepts of comfort and hope such as "successful old age," "mental well-being," "integration," and "meaning." These coinages, clad in the "scientific" pretense of numbers, tables, and theoretical and methodological expansions, produces a culture of attribution of meaning and forces old age into controlled frames of econo-political discourse that measures, estimates, and positions old people on the basis of their proximity to, or their distance from, the image of a "normal," "reasonable," "deserving," and "reasoning" person who shares our time and place. The

fear of old age that beclouds scholars joins forces with the generous encouragement that they give to confirming elders' need for social management and offering those who deal with them a scientific pretext to justify what they do. The result is a culture of knowledge about old age that dovetails with the existential situation of its elderly research subjects in dubious and problematic ways. Furthermore, the impermeability of old-age research to the potential knowledge embedded in its subjects' reality makes old age and its subjects, as in other branches of the behavioral sciences, professional handmaidens of the ruling establishments of social hegemony. Thus, the academic discourse becomes an ally and a mirror of the public agenda, their interdependency preventing paradigm change in both.

Social anthropology might have unburdened itself of this social baggage and, in the name of the ethos of understanding Others in accordance with their way and worldviews, might have offered a path that would snap the magic cycle of conservatism and defeatism. Indeed, in certain pastures of academia one finds scholars who have managed to challenge regimes of knowledge fattened on establishmentarian power and to offer interpretive, sometimes revolutionary, alternative ways of contemplating the place and plight of the Other. Evident, for example, is a postcolonial current that probes the dialectic between the enslaved and their enslaver as the product of cultural representations of control, enthrallment, and emulation, in regard to national, ethnic, gender, and functionally challenged groups of the dispossessed and the excluded. This movement, however, fails to make its way to the aged. Few studies on the fate of elders as Others have earned academic recognition, even though on the face of it, the cultural setting of old age abounds with elements and indicators of Otherness in language, time, and social relations. The explanation for this of turning anthropological eyes and interest away from this available and inviting field evidently lies, inter alia, in the internal structural limitations of the anthropological discipline and its ethical and intellectual principles, which declare no object of research off-limits to cultural analysis, define culture as the product of human spirit and action, and, therefore, consider all cultures impermanent and, consequently, all "Otherness" reversible. Old-age Otherness, foremost in its radicalized manifestations of dementia, loss of control of bodily orifices, and total long-term dependency, meets none of these conditions of entrance to the arena of anthropological research. It transcends the cultural, not to say the human; it ostensibly returns individuals to their raw pre-cultural, perhaps bestial, "natural" state. Be this as it may, it is an Otherness that, despite the inevitably futile attempts to resist the uncompromising tyranny of the biological time that produces it, is

irreversible and therefore issues the anthropological discourse, which is unable to accommodate it, a warning tap on the shoulder.

Tova Gamliel knew all of this when she decided to enter the shadow kingdom of invisible Others, elders interned in an institutional enclave of time and space. Nevertheless, she mustered the courage to peer into that forbidden orchard. Furthermore, she added to the misdemeanor of anthropological hubris the felony of transgressing the universal taboo against dealing with the signified that has no signifier—death itself. In a modern world where consumer experience and bureaucratic rule are steadily overtaking the ritual settings that mediate between human life and its meaning, death is repressed and shoved to the fringes of mind and space. This is the place where Gamliel chose to place her focus, wresting from it a rare ethnographic account of the culture created by those who doomed themselves to social excommunication but retained their last shreds of existence in order to work them through on the basis of their new measures and needs. The death culture that Gamliel presents, along with its logic and insights, enchants and terrifies us—enchants due to the salient aesthetics of its internal logic and the tapestry of the strands of daily life of which it is woven, and terrifies because these institutional tenants' days and nights are typified by the extinguishing of the lights of meaning, faith, trust, and will to live. Neither dimension of this hidden world, of which only a mere tip penetrates our field of vision, admits even a bit of the anthropological exoticism that sanctifies and prettifies itself by honoring or dishonoring the Other being researched; nor does it accommodate the gothic of the theology of symbolic immortality, creativity, and development of and acceptance of the self. The chilling sobriety that Gamliel communicates to the reader by means of her subjects' Gorgon gaze, which has made the moment the purpose and the meaning of their existence, offers no assurance of redemption and also lacks nihilism and despair. It does, however, have consciousness and knowledge that, in this shadow-of-death world, evokes something of the melancholia of Edgar Allan Poe mixed with a Kafkaesque confrontation of that which is arbitrary, purposeless, and tasteless.

Had Gamliel approached the special materials of life that she encountered with the help of the routine anthropological toolkit, she could not have shaped and presented them in the unique, original, and compelling way that she does in this book. As stated, the rules of the method and its fulfillment—the rote imperatives of anthropology—might have defeated her attempt to track the experience of turning of tables, survival, and value and symbolic nullity that do not respond to accepted methods of decoding. Instead, Gamliel successfully blended into the crucible of the institution's death culture using tools acquired not necessary by dint of her professional

training the academic infrastructure of knowledge in which she is proficient, and surely not via some political, ethical, or ideological stance that she takes. The throbbing, broad, and unique melody that Gamliel inserts between the lines of her writing originates in her exacting discernment, her penetrating eye, an emotional and intellectual depth that allows neither masquerading nor whitewashing, and, above all, diction that verges on poetry. The style of the book, rich in Jewish cultural allusions, enriches the ethnography with symbols of collective identity and belonging that give the residents of the institution, their vision voided of past and future, a mythical, timeless lamina that allows the author to bridge between the living and the dead. Gamliel's linguistic culture equips her aptly for a craft that might overwhelm a researcher's ability to stitch the seam that separates life from death. Her linguistic expressiveness penetrates the gloom of Plato's cave and illuminates its inhabitants amazingly without succumbing to the temptation of their cultural representations. This book demands of the reader a level of courage in reading that matches the author's boldness in writing.

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INTRODUCTION

After I first walked through the main entrance to the old-age home, it took me a few days to size up the place as a forsaken venue that throbs with death. The institution looms large: a multistory building in the center of town, its architecture masking the motion of the cessation of life. At its various elevations, its sights and sounds blended into a reality I had never known before, one to which I had not assigned a name at the time. From the residential floors via the departments for the "frail" toward the great lobby, the impression of a special collectivity of stern demeanor gathered strength. As one place succeeded another, I collected pieces of that "canopy of death" under which old people live. In the spacious halls where all the people pause next to each other, there are invisible signs that guide some of the movements of the group of elderly residents and determine its rhythms. Gliding past each other, far enough from each other to avoid colliding in the common space, they express verbal consent, make similar bodily gestures, and invoke patterns of eye contact that coordinated their movements. Their precise coordination attested to compliance with codes that were largely concealed from strangers' eyes and, at first, from mine as well. One thought piqued my curiosity: In a place where many aged inhabitants are hearing-impaired and struggle to communicate, quiet but synchronized movements are valuable allusions to the existence of a culture. I knew neither the identity nor the nature of this culture but only that all I wanted was to discover it. As I moved among the seniors, close and far from the corners that I had designated to write down my impressions, I gathered "snapshots" of places where the elevator arrived and threw its doors wide open.

A Surreal Reality: Pictures from Different Elevations

A trip in that old steel elevator is a journey within surreality. The doors of the lift open with a deafening clatter, in one stroke calling attention to the glowing floor number. Everyone stands there, pressed to each other and to their canes. A woman who tries to push her way in at the last moment fails because the occupants of the lift leave no room for her walker. Pushed together after breakfast, not exchanging words, turning their gaze slightly upward or toward one wall or another of the elevator, everyone rushes in thoughtlessly as though in a hurry to get somewhere. They make room for

a woman who wishes to head upward from her storey, an ascent for the sake of descent. A few carry some food, loot from the latest meal: cheese folded in creased paper, fruit in a bag, or slices of bread, sometimes dangling from a jacket pocket. When they wish to debark, a picture of minimal friction almost always appears, despite the typical shoving as they enter their legs tic-tac-toe'ing across the square floor tiles in the order of the storeys. Thus, it seems as though in response to some unexpressed command, the stragglers stand behind the earlier-goers.

They speak about a woman tenant as they walk across the lobby until the moment they begin to cluster in front of the elevator. Nothing was wrong with her until she fell off her chair in the dining hall that morning. They describe her prostrate form on the floor, bits of cheese in her mouth, leftovers that she had not had a chance to swallow. As they totter out slowly in couples and threesomes, they express a consensus: You mustn't touch a tenant who has fallen, it's a rule, and it's a good thing the ambulance got there in time and took her away. "Poor thing, no one remembers her name, but she's a good woman." And then, in another consensus, no one said, "What will be our own end?" They crowd in front of the elevator door, very close, breathing down each other's necks. No one grumbles audibly. A wintry wind blows outside, shoving around the branches of a tree that overlooks the large lobby windows. Two woman residents peer out and one of them emerges from the waiting crowd to ask, "How does that torn bag hold onto the wobbling branch so tightly?" The question hovers over the heads of those waiting; no one answers.

They fix their gaze on the elevator lintel overhead, patiently watching its numbers change. Pungent odors combine with the noise of the grinding machines to mingle with the voices of the men at work. The workers, engrossed in renovations, dangle on ladders that turn toward a ceiling that opens onto an unlit void. Here and there electric wires and black bits of plastic protrude into the elevator compound from every corner. "If only I'd die already," blurts someone in the compressed crowd. "I bash my head all day long. What am I living for?!" The elevator has arrived. The tenants press even closer to each other as another mass of humanity prepares to disappear from the lobby.

The elevator discharges residents into lengthy hallways. On one side is an array of closed doors; on the other are views of a special railing. Yes, everyone knows, lots of residents used to take their own lives. Suicides were like a "contagious disease." Things are different now: A tenant can do it only if someone else pitches in to help out.

The picture of the closed doors on the residential floors gives way to one of routinely open doors in the department for the "frail." Peering in, you can

see residents on their beds: sitting, curled up, prostrate, half-naked, or covered. In the late morning, several residents are scattered in the small lobby. They have hardly had a chance to get up from their places at breakfast, but the tables have already been cleaned and the people have already received their daily medication. In a little while, the cultural coordinator will visit the rooms and nag those in bed to come join the circle. A resident who used to be a journalist and is known as having "gone to university" volunteers to give a lecture on international relations. Seven or so residents will seat themselves at the table. The lecturer will clutch the microphone and repeat the very same idea several times over. The others will listen to him, nodding. They will not ask him any questions, they will just stammer a few words of gratitude for the "interesting lecture." They glance at the clock again and again *ad infinitum*, checking and rechecking how much time remains until lunch. They'll spend a whole hour waiting together for the meal.

They eat in great silence. Hunching over, they focus all their strength on the trembling trip from dish to mouth. They hold their peace and quash their emotions even when young men in work uniform emerge from the elevator bearing a stretcher, even when the men stop in the middle of the small lobby and lift one of the residents from his chair to the stretcher, and even when it involves calling for a nurse. The sated residents do not know exactly what happened while they were eating. Perhaps they know the tenant whom "they took away" but they do not know his name. They neither talk about him nor even express some expectation of seeing him again. "Look," they tell me, "Those who come here know that people die here." Someone who was late for lunch and could not help but witness the goings-on folds his fingers and raises them across from the eyes of the man on the stretcher, smiling, as if to say, very personally, "Good work!"

The elevator doors open onto the spacious entrance lobby. Several elderly volunteers, nonresidents, stand in the cafeteria, complaining that there is nothing for them to do at the home. They live on their own and come to serve the residents every day. The residents, however, do not reach the cafeteria. "All these years we've been fighting about the people who don't come. We write personal letters to each of them. We speak with the director over and over: 'Look, what are they doing?!' People sit here without talking to each other. They're apathetic. Some have no money, too. Their children pay their way. Others are stingy. The people here aren't living. They don't come." Another volunteer adds, "I don't know whether people here have *joie de vivre*. There should be quiet music here. There's such a silence here." A third volunteer says, "No, I wouldn't want to move to a miserable seniors' home like this one, just one step from the last stop."

The "independent" residents also sit in the lobby every day, looking forward to the meal, eyes riveted on a point in front of them. They do this quietly and in ranks, soundlessly staring ahead. For a lengthy moment they seem to be listening to someone, perhaps someone standing there invisibly, a lecturer or a staff member who announces something. But no, no one is standing there; there is no telling what they are gazing at. Here and there residents chat quietly. For a moment all eyes follow a young staff member or an unfamiliar female relative as they rush by. Heads swivel and then shuttle back. The roar of buses in the distance, the clicking of the elevator, and the ringing of telephones at the reception desk do not disrupt the unofficial "moments of silence." Suddenly, as if a covert signal is given, the inhabitants stand up slowly in unison and march in ranks of three and four to the dining hall. Two of them rush ahead to open wide the two doors of the wide and hold them so that many others weaker than they, dragging walkers and canes, can pass more easily. Here and there, within a radius of several of those in the crowd, people repeatedly retell the story of the resident who fell: "That woman, there were still remnants of cheese in her mouth, and who knows what was with her, she was a really good woman." Those standing at the doors contemplate those entering and nod in response to their thank-you's. They stand there as if greeting invitees to a festive event.

On the way to the elevator, awaiting its arrival, inside it, and emerging from it—there is something unfamiliar about an elevator. However well one knows an instrument, the elevator has meaning as a transitional motif. Foremost, it opens its doors onto a different reality, in which a herd of people disregards the fringes of its past and future existence. These old people, it seems, do not believe in denying something that's so threatening and palpable. All that remains is the silence, a silence that unifies everyone and insulates each individual from the others. It may happen that someone will wish to stand out, to speak, to do something—to exploit the lack of resistance to present something of his or her selfness. However, in an existence comprised of one moment and then another, in which a plastic bag snared in the branches of a tree might attract attention, this is an act of self-deception. I and Other are two peas in one bent pod. Pictures from the elevator sow an uncertainty that drives a frightening event into the memory or induces consensual self-limitation as to what can be produced from a bowl of hot soup. There is no picturesque culture of a faraway tribe in this place, no stunning exotica. What exists instead is a reality of death that forces even an outside observer to slow the movements of her body and her mind. Before they can be accommodated, they must come to a "screeching halt."

Strange: Respected Objects of Death

We know we will die and sometimes we wonder when it will happen, how we will experience our last moments, whether we will be aware of the approach of death, how we will feel about it, and, also, who will stand at our side and how the departure from life will take place. Our random encounters with real or fictional death events evoke lots of questions. Our existential bewilderment quickly defers to matters of life, demonstrating the extent to which the tyranny of routine surmounts death. At the daily photo exhibition that our consciousness produces as it roams, there are always less-attractive pictures that appear not in color but in black-and-white. The remarks from here on pertain to this dissonance. The purpose of this book is to dwell on many questions that deal with death. The anthropological story that it tells is based on observation from one point on the human endline.

Some posit that we cannot believe in or even imagine our own death even if we want to.[1] Our minds cannot grasp a form of existence in which there is no thinking; neither can they experience what is in fact non-experience. Sometimes we may imagine our future graves and stare at our bodies lying in them, but these depictions are accompanied by a sense of strangulation and disillumination that inspires us to flee to comforting distractions that safeguard the here-and-now. The grim and shocking sensations that afflict us when we envision our own death confirm our life in the present, which consumes the entire palpable world. Our consciousness does not know how to dream of its de-existence. We awaken from our most terrifying nightmares "a moment before" we crash to the bottom of the abyss. Grasping our non-presence lies beyond the limits of our ken. Our awareness is by nature utterly uninhibited in its consistent tendency to perpetuate itself. Our protracted aging process nurtures this paradox. We become aware, not for our own good, of the ongoing indications of the disposability of our bodies. The evidence is seen in the slowly deepening creases in our skin, our faltering eyesight, and the disarray that besets the grids of our memory. Compellingly they remind us of the frightening self-fulfillment of death, before which every fence and wall topples. Even when facing this natural destructive force, however, our consciousness persists "innocuously" in avoiding dealing with the end.

The deeper we search, the more we discover that philosophy's wrestling with this question excels more in contortion than in reaching safe shores.

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[1] Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death* (New York: Moffet Yard, 1918); Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity," in S. Hall and P. D.Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996).

Laypersons know this. They defeat any effort to know death by noting the simple fact that no one has ever come back from it and that no one can speak about it reliably. Epicurus the Greek's wise elocution dooms us to be alive in a state of separateness from our death. That is, as long as one exists, one is not dead, and vice versa: Wherever death is—one has ceased to be.[2] Still, no matter how giant the steps of progress in human understanding may be, death remains mysterious and unknowable. It is the ultimate defeat of the mind.[3] Philosophy exhausts all its strength shedding light on the challenge per se; it cannot but content itself with metaphors such as *breeze of death* or *touching death,* all of which belong to domains of the living. Needless to say, this study is no exception; it does not deliver a report on death by people who have returned from it. It does, however, abound from start to finish with reflections of people who are verging on their natural death—those who—it is easy to believe—hold the key to deciphering the secrets of our existence.

Old people in our society are the quintessential representatives of natural death. The value of their take on death depends on their appreciating the state of finitude as an absolute fate and a reality of life. The face of death in old age may embroider itself into their mind's eye over time and draw sustenance from irregular volatilities, retreats, and discoveries of thinking. As agents of knowledge, the elderly are supposed to philosophize, come, and go with thoughts of their demise in hand. To tempt us into believing that their wisdom has substance, they should devote themselves to death just as we do to life.

My elder acquaintances were eighty or older. Many "admitted" that they were elderly and, in their own eyes, unchallengeable harbingers of death. Throughout the period of my research, 1998–1999, this backdrop of human identity generated narratives of thoughts about the sense of the impending end—thoughts that evolved into a social discourse about death, rich in metaphors and symbols.[4] Death showed itself to be crucial in defining the affairs of these elders down to the last of them. Their awareness of being partners in a death discourse made them participants in a "death culture." Might this culture serve as a peephole onto real or imaginary solutions to

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[2] Edith Wyschogrod, *The Phenomenon of Death: Faces of Mortality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

[3] Freud, *Reflections on War and Death;* Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[4] Robert. A. LeVine, "Properties of Culture. An Ethnographic View," in Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine. *Culture Theory. Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984; Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2000).

the existential paradox, the problem of our consciousness's inability to know death? The answer seems equivocal. I assumed ab initio only that old people have existential outlooks to which the shared approach of death may impart much value. My elderly respondents proved to be in the know or, should I say, in on the secret. As they sat at the gates of death, I saw them as possessors of honor.

Many of them breathed their last after having survived harsh realities in their lives. They were on the winning side in a confrontation that at first glance seems impossible—a reality that plunders the self and threatens to rout the sense of self-respect. When I met them, I found them trapped between two doors: the main entrance of the institution, which when first traversed made them into tenants and wards forever separated from the ambience of their social lives, and the side door, through which they pass when they die, carried on a stretcher and never to return. Between their initial entrance and their final exit, they lived in a state of utter destitution as they waited, and they outsmarted it.

They lived for months and years in an empty environment somewhat akin to that of a hospital. The walls of their rooms were whitewashed and nearly barren. A simple bed, one dresser, and one chair—these were their possessions. They had nothing from their homes but a few souvenirs. They had to go to the dining hall for the privilege of meals from a menu and of a flavor that they were not allowed to determine. Their cumbersome bodies steadily declined. They lacked the autonomy and independence with which they could manage time, space, and movement. Their lives were divorced from everything familiar. Some time after moving in, they found themselves compressed into the territory of a constraining institution that sent them authoritarian signals and responded to their social needs solely by offering routine activities that had one purpose: to kill time and then to kill some more. The consciousness of death, imposed on them by the state of waiting, sapped their spirits and severely reduced their interest in each other. All they could do was spend many days working though their death while still subjected to dispossession. Their self-identity, it seemed, had nothing to cling to and was meant to be stripped of its assets. Such a psychological colonialism is liable to transform people into *non-people*, into its victims.[5] Some believe that it can topple the social protective walls and shatter every grip on ontological security.[6]

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[5] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy. Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1983).
[6] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

Between the doors, the institution offers its tenants a death of the self. Unlike the tableau that other ethnographic narratives produce,[7] the reality of my elderly respondents' lives inhabits a threatening space between social death—the outcome of ageist stereotypes and institutionalized wardship— and the materialization of physical death. Between the two, the respondents elevated themselves and fended off the melancholia that lurks at the door of their extreme reality. They created a death culture that accommodates the significance of a "peaceful passage."

Concentration camps and prisons are places that close in on people who have a consciousness of being doomed. We think of such inmates as having departed from the world; certainly we cannot associate them with caregiving institutions. Goffman, however, alludes to the connection by noting the power of the total institution's influence.[8] Cohen[9] describes the culture of a collective in a death trap and decodes the responses of tortured souls. The behavior at issue, Cohen says, granulated into, among other things, manifestations of egotistic and altruistic conduct, a tendency to dehumanize the other, expressions of indifference to death, and retreat from the encounter with reality. Cohen also addresses himself to the "torturer" in the concentration camp—a cruel Gestapo operative, whose prisoners have an interest in understanding the rules of logic that govern his actions. The death culture of my respondents, I found, includes responses similar to those of concentration-camp prisoners. In both cases, the fate of those controlled is

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[7] Earlier ethnographies described the subjective world of the institutionalized "old-old." Given that they dwell on matters other than those of concern here, however, they fail to give death discourse that they elicit thorough treatment and allow no possibility of the construction of a death culture by the respondents: Hava Golander, "Rituals of Temporality: The Social Construction of Time in a Nursing Home," *Journal of Aging Studies,* 9, no. 2 (1995): 119–35; Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978); Joel S. Savishinsky. *The Ends of Time. Life and Work in a Nursing Home* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991). Another cluster of ethnographies strays even farther from these issues by centering on aspects of the total institution and the elder as a ward: Victor W. Marshall, "Organizational Features of Terminal Status Passage in Residential Facilities for the Aged," in *Toward a Sociology of Death and Dying*, ed. Lyn H. Lofland (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976); Renée Rose Shield, *Uneasy Endings: Daily Life in an American Nursing Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Peter Woolfson, *Old Age in Transition: The Geriatric Ward* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1997); Jennifer Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old. Aging and Dependency in the Life Course* (London: Sage, 1993).

[8] Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961).

[9] Elie Aron Cohen, *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp* (New York: The Universal Library, 1994).

indeed gloomy but is not described as a final conclusion. The "torturer" changes his appearance as he moves from the concentration camp to the old-age home, metamorphosing from a real human being into an abstract reality of death. Ultimately he becomes the beginning of a story built on motifs of heroism or surmounting, a last twitch of resourcefulness before death arrives.

This book focuses on *the position that our elderly respondents staked out in view of their suffering*. Less important is *describing the suffering* itself or *assessing its extent.* Unlike a classical work that portrays a geriatric institution as "hell's vestibule" and delivers lengthy grotesque descriptions of the wretchedness of existence there,[10] I do not intend to depict the elderly wards as victims of an ongoing tragedy. Nor shall I assess the morality and therapeutic ethics of the institutional policy. That is for another story. My aim is to probe the possibilities of response that trace their *source* to this form of suffering. The wealth of metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of death that roll off the elders' quotidian assembly lines preserve psychological avenues of choice. It may let us peer into a human experience of impending death in which the subject is not necessarily a victim.

Doomedness, insofar as the ethnographic text will mark it, denotes an inner reality that instigates action—a transition to suffering but something also invested with power. The respondents' story is an example of a struggle for ownership under conditions of doomedness. The fruits of the struggle are the *freedom* to convert one's unique selfness into something else and even the *freedom* to give up. Drawing on his stay in a concentration camp, Viktor Frankel concluded that suffering cannot determine the attitude or stance that the individual should take toward it. If the situation cannot be changed, if the suffering cannot be thwarted, what remains is the individual's ability to change themselves:

> We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation . . . we are challenged to change ourselves.[11]

Once my elderly respondents' suffering acquired meaning, it evidently ceased to be insufferable and became just one more task, albeit an especially challenging one, to perform in their lives. Reading Frankl's existentialist

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[10] Jules Henry, *Culture against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963).
[11] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning, an Introduction to Logotherapy,* Fourth Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 51.

texts[12] and the respondents' existentialist remarks, we realize how emphatically individuals can defeat the dark cellars in which they are sealed. When they stand with their noses pressed to the steel gate, they see only the gate. When they step back a little, they can make out the windows around, which can be opened to admit sunlight. Seniors on the brink of death may teach us how doomedness becomes the source of a game, a structure, a *Staircase to Heaven.*

It is death at an advanced age that grants life its longest duration. Of all kinds of death, it is the one most hoped for. It is a known fact that more and more people in Western societies, which specialize in making the possible come true, have the privilege of dying in "ripe" old age. Therefore, it stands to reason that if we take care of ourselves well, there is a good chance that our innate ageing potential will be materialized. The picture of our walking down a sidewalk quickly and athletically, in contrast to the gait of an elder who staggers along with the help of a cane, is not strange. We pass him by. We stare ahead down a hopeful abstract line that lies beyond us. To gain utility from the death stories of old people, we need only remember that at the end of this imaginary line down which the old man walks, the man whom we rushed past—we know in our imagination we will meet up with him. The picture that we share with him is basically one predicated on continuity, not on contrasts.

Anthropological work may instill this kind of consciousness. In the "Field Work" chapter, I describe its immense power for the reconfiguration of my conceptions of, and feelings about, old age. At thirtysomething, I was several decades removed from my respondents in terms of age. I sensed the gap plainly when I defined my presence in the home as a personal task that belongs to a stage in my life, as against complaints from the respondents about being distanced from all tasks. This, however, did not have the effect of erecting walls between us. Although the main theme of this study is death—to the exclusion of any other matter related to old age that might soften the blow or lend the situation some optimism—the strands were woven into a cloth that envelops us all. Thus, something of the dust of my respondents' death adhered to me, awakening my latent anxieties but also basking me in serenity. The elders became microcosms of myself who made their inner voice heard. They were actors in a drama that alternately erased and granted meaning to my life. This experience, which I call "self-assimilation," was a tenable one that came to pass in a way that provided

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[12] Viktor E. Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism: Selected Papers on Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967); Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning; Viktor E. Frankl, Psychotherapy and* Existentialism*: Selected Papers on Logotherapy* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

reward and spiritual uplifting. This experience is not alien to anthropologists whose work builds a bridge between themselves and the elderly. Myerhoff explains:

> I consider myself very fortunate in having had, through this [anthropological] work, an opportunity to anticipate, rehearse, and contemplate my own future. […] I see old people now in a new way, as part of me, not "they."[13]

Shield sends a very similar message in her book *Uneasy Endings*. The more she got to know the elders, Shield reports, the more commonalities she found between them and her: more aspects of youth in them, more aspects of old age in her, more elements that linked them than kept them apart. When she began to empathize with her respondents and their experiences, she realized that she was in fact writing about herself. If people continue to live, they will age, and so it should be, Shield concludes. The perceived gulf between old people and young people, she laments, deludes the latter in a way that keeps them from understanding their potential as old people.[14]

Not only anthropological methodology helped me to down the barriers between myself and the elders; existential theory served the same purpose by allowing me to view death through the fragments of a multifaceted prism. Old people cope with suffering and death anxiety; so do we. There is no escaping this fate. The forms that this suffering takes on, the features of the anxiety, and the representations of death are highly diverse in the realities of our lives. We do not identify some of them with death and we do not suspect that the slightest stain of anxiety has clung to them. Nevertheless, they are but camouflage. They insinuate themselves into our intimate behavior with those close to us, projects to which we sanctify our most strenuous efforts, our relations with people, and innumerable other matters.[15] Theoreticians use generalizing structures in a way that explains the "necessity" of a profusion and range of symbols in the human death experience. Freud, for example, considered death a threat to what he called the "oceanic feeling"—a fundamental existential sense, a deep narcissistic one-with-the-universe feeling that an infant experiences before her or his ego separates from the world.[16] In other words, a nameless and borderless

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[13] Myerhoff, *Number Our Days,* 19.
[14] Shield, *Uneasy Endings.*
[15] Robert J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection. On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979); John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[16] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* V. XVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1961).

existential reality in our reality may metamorphose into various symbolic forms with which we may cope with the dread of death. Other theoreticians consider the sense of heroism as an object of the individual's indefatigable quest. They present society as a set of codes for heroism, a living myth of meaning for the individual's life and, for our purpose, an infinite symbolic mechanism that can dwarf and surmount death.[17] My respondents' death story neither attests to "symbolic deprivation" nor specifies certain tendencies that belong "just to the elderly." It accommodates styles of anxiety and webs of death as themes that may kindle our empathy. Given these preliminary revelations, there is good reason to ask about the added value of their story. My answer is that this ethnographic account tells the uncommon tale of a culture woven around the question of where the ego stands in view of its death.

A death culture hands us a magnifying glass with which we may examine a thick entanglement of death symbols and methods of protestation and confrontation. It is the canvas on which the spontaneous solutions, conscious and unconscious, of old people on the verge of death are drawn. Most important, in view of the covert symbolic multicomplexity that death imposes on our lives, this culture may focus attention on something that we fail to recognize in the elderly and in ourselves. At the least, it may elucidate feelings that we harbor but do not express in words.

Some believe that our Postmodern culture has lost contact with death because it has lost contact with experience. Not only are we unaware of some of the symbols of death, it is argued, but our culture is rife with obstacles on the road to an authentic past that ought to be quotidian and accessible. Namely, not only has death ceased to exist; so has life, leaving us in continual disconnection from reality. The reasoning behind this is anchored in the ascending power of the virtual dimension of our lives, the hypnotic dominance of appearance, and the essentiality of the characteristic of nomadism, which transfers entire fields of reference from one sphere of existence to another without giving us chance understand them. "Overlapped and invaded by the symbolic appeal of the possible," cautions Alberto Melucci," experience is in danger of being overwhelmed by a limitless presence of extreme fragility and of becoming shrunken to the dimensions of the instant."[18]

We are living in an era of acute dichotomy between experience and thinking about experience. Experience has gone missing due to the bands of

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[17] Otto Rank, *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1958); Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
[18] Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self. Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107.

symbols and images that mimic it. To retain the possibility of rediscovering it as a "desert of the real," as Slavoj Žižek puts it, we must impose on ourselves a conservatism that includes forms such virtual consumeristic minimalism and deliberate slowing of the pace of life. These are some of the forms that Žižek analyzes in his challenge to the dismal state of the real.[19]. Another form, no less dramatic, is proposed by Melucci: It laments the human experience but also presents the possibility that inheres to our encounter with old people. He explains: Old people symbolize the loss of our being here as a possibility, if not as a fatal tendency. Old people in complex societies speak to us about meaning, presence, and the limitations of presence—theirs and ours.[20]

Our craving for the real in the era of the non-real may motivate us to act in "non-way-ways" to rip all veils off the face of reality. One of these ways, an especially impressive one, is the deliberate laceration of the flesh until one bleeds. People cut their skin, contemplate the hot blood that bursts forth, and sigh the sigh of people who have come home. On second thought about the craving for the authentic, we may not need such a resolutely "masochistic" gesture as this. It suffices for us to enter the old-age home, shut the door behind us, and pause there without familiar remedies in hand. Only then, it seems, will it dawn on us that in this place of emptiness and death that has snared the elderly, they are guides to our selves.

My aged respondents, it turns out, had much to say about the reality of their lives—the missions of our lives. They wove threads between this reality and their inner, covert world. They told stories. Between the pages of the ethnography that follows, they philosophize as do savants at the gate, respected partners in an intelligent multilevel discourse that unpacks death and creates its experiences. Inspiration for this perspective, about the aged as possessors of honor, yields one of the most neglected narratives in the literature about members of traditional societies.[21] According to this narrative, the very *proximity* of old people to their death endows them with the sublime *authority* of expertise and knowledge. According to several sources, some mysterious tie binds stooped and toothless old people to the spirits of the dead and the gods. Way back then, it was the elderly who controlled acts of sorcery and could predict the future by turning magic tricks. They were known as agents of the supernatural among the tribe. Unlike the revulsion with which we react to the "old witch" metaphor, the

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[19] Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 385–9.
[20] Melucci, *The Playing Self,* 16.
[21] Lifton, *The Broken Connection*; Leo W. Simmons, *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1970).

special status of these seniors helped those younger than them to assimilate their pronouncements and elixirs with unreserved trust. This narrative suggests that elders' troves of knowledge may be valuable for understanding the human condition. On the cusp of death, the knowledge that is theirs alone grants them a place of honor.

Familiar: An Anti-Heroic Death

The mythological attitude toward the elderly that once prevailed in contemporary Western societies no longer exists. All that remains of it is a slender residue of attributions of "wisdom." Like old people in antiquity, those of our times are considered death-objects. Various circumstances of social and technological progress, however, send a different social fate their way. Manifestations of physical and mental decline underscore weakness and powerlessness that leave room for no other interpretation. The elders' proximity to death is cloistered between institutional walls and does not speak out. In the wake of natural death—a fate reserved for them alone—the old-timers are "Others." According to some, the protractedness of their demise makes them objects of primeval fear even today.[22] This fear, however, does not translate into the awarding of authority and social roles such as those granted to ancient tribal notables. Instead, it leads to the revocation of these awards. Thus, the "wisdom of life" of today's seniors does not suffice to lend them grace. It is portrayed as *wisdom facing death*, the kind of wisdom that no one wants.

What is the nature of a death that snatches away people in their prime, decades before they reach old age? Is it the same death, or might its "unnatural" nature make it other? Here is what a soldier wrote to his relatives the year he perished in a crash of an F-16 aircraft on a training flight[23]:

> I don't know why I thought I had to write a goodbye letter in case something unexpected happens to me, but it doesn't seem to be a bad idea at all. Altogether, such a possibility really exists and if you read the letter, it's apparently more than just a possibility. I'm writing not because I've had a premonition but for the same reason that people insure themselves—so it'll be there. The main thing that's pushing me to write is that I wish to explain how I'd want you to behave in the event that something like that happens to

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[22] David Johnston Maitland, *Aging as Counterculture: A Vocation for the Later Years* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).
[23] *Ha'ir* 1148, September 26, 2001, 58–59 [in Hebrew].

me. […] I'm dying to see my own funeral but I don't think I'll have the chance. Everyone's invited to come visit me and tell me jokes.

Ethnologists call this model of written death "good dying."[24] The good-ness of this death is the halo of heroism that envelopes its objects, turning the deceased into someone who is concurrently absent and present—someone with a voice. A heroic death is considered a preemptive practice in which the individual expresses themselves emotionally but authoritatively toward those around h/him. The preemptor of death has three goals in mind: to impress the survivors, to redesign how they will remember her, and to make sure her image reverberates after she is gone. She cements her heroism by looking death straight in the eye and being willing to contemplate the world that will survive the ego's disappearance. It is a ruse that guarantees and even amplifies ongoing designed configurations of the image of the self. Since "death" is unrepresented among today's young people, heroic death has stepped in as a default of sorts—a finality that the non-survivors find preferable.

The phenomenon of "revival of death"[25] has been gathering strength in recent decades. People are increasingly involved in designing the contents of their funerals and tombstones. Some wish to dictate what will be said or expunged from the eulogies that they foresee; others determine who may attend their wake and how the grief ought to be managed. Another variation reflects preemptive coping with the approach of death; it belongs to people on their deathbed. Thus, the terminally ill today receive spiritual aid in institutions known as hospices. There, they marshal the remnants of their strength to design "correct" parting rituals from their dear ones. Heroic death is basically public death. Its management evokes the message of the self, sometimes in circumvention of religious authorities. This kind of death mimics a familiar privilege of those sentenced to death, whose enunciations of confession and terror are well documented, and creates a space of public

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[24] Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Clive Seale, *Constructing Death. Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Lesley Cullen and Michael Young, *A Good Death. Conversations with East Londoners* (London: Routledge, 1996); Christopher Justice, *Dying the Good Death. The Pilgrimage to Die in India's Holy City* (New York: State University of New York, 1997).
[25] Walter, *The Revival of Death*; Seale, *Constructing Death*.

discourse.[26] It is the kind of memorialization that those who fall in battle are afforded ex post.[27]

Elders are people who have survived for a long time. At any given moment, some of them join the "club" of those who live too long. Although this is a social fact, we know little about "their" death because it outlies the "revival of death" configurations and the definition of the cultural "death system."[28] Old people's death receives neither publicity nor any social embellishment. Some believe that in many societies, including Western society, only "premature" death shapes our perspective on death.[29] A death event such as that, they claim, is translated into "loss of life" whereas old people's death, in our eyes, is a mere "passing on." Our disengagement from the elderly leaves their natural death hidden from the eye, boringly foreseeable, totally lacking in background and victory. Seale expresses this bluntly:

> Those who die in extreme old age, [...] the demented and the institutionalized, have much less opportunity to strike an heroic pose, but are more frequently portrayed as dribbling, undignified figures waiting for death as a release from life. The lives and deaths of these individuals have become the horror stories of our times.[30]

The death of our elderly men and women is a tale of non-heroic death. Deliberately these people abetted the vitiation of the heroic dimension of their life-reality. They awaited their end as if condemned to death row and as if their last words were of no interest to anyone. Their story is one of a protracted confrontation with an extreme reality of emptiness or with the realness of death in its one form as lacking realness. There of all places, in the old-age home, however, one may encounter unexpected heroism of an exceptional type. Staring death in the face, the elderly prove to be masters of relinquishing life.

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[26] Charles Davies, "The Ethics of Certain Death: Suicide, Execution, and Euthanasia," in *Perspectives on Death and Dying. Cross-Cultural and Multi-Disciplinary Views*, ed. Arthur Berger et al. (Philadelphia: The Charles Press Publication, 1989); Ernest van den Haag and John P. Conrad, *The Death Penalty: A Debate* (New York: Plenum Press, 1983).

[27] David Clark, "The Sociology of Death: Theory, Culture, Practice," *The Sociological Review* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[28] Ruth Kastenbaum and Robert Aisenberg, *The Psychology of Death: Concise Edition* (New York: Springer, 1976).

[29] David R. Counts and Dorothy Ayers Counts, *Coping with the Final Tragedy: Cultural Variation in Dying and Grieving* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 1991).

[30] Clive Seale, "Heroic Death," *Sociology* 29, no. 4 (1995): 612.

Death as a Literary Swamp

The motion of the elevator, ascending and descending among floors enveloped in death, yields a picture of very static life. Can a comprehensive and systematic theoretical explanation exist for so radical a reality of life in old age, one influenced mainly by inhuman treatment? In the literature, the total institution is invoked as a pejorative metaphor for the geriatric institution, a place where practices that should not be institutionalized are gathered. This does attest to awareness in gerontological research of the plight of the elderly and even of the critical involvement of research in it. Plainly, however, the emergence of a cultural theory from a critical posture such as this is neither "appropriate" nor foreseeable. By and large, ethnography tends to underscore narrative themes specific to subjects' lives, such as those dealing with community involvement, taking care of pets, and past memories.[31] For this reason, ethnographies are of limited value in understanding the current case study.

The death culture of the elders in this study plays out behind an outline of social disengagement and despair. Directing observers toward this existential swamp, mainly, are the signposts of disengagement theory and Erik Erikson's theoretical model. Importantly, even though both theories plot the direction and hypothesize the psychological impact of the proximity of death at the end of life, they do not fill this possibility with content. The signposts lead to an impasse.

The disengagement theory was published in 1961 in *Growing Old* by Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry. Their formula was considered a bold attempt to define, perhaps for the first time, an interdisciplinary theory of normal ageing. Cumming and Henry portray disengagement as "an inevitable process in which many of the relationships between an aging person and other members of society are severed, and those remaining are altered in quality."[32] They add that the disengagement process, not necessary a rapid and total one, modifies the quality of such social connections as continue to exist. The general argument in disengagement theory is composed of nine basic premises:

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[31] Hava Golander, "Havnayat ha-yom-yom be-matsave metsuqa: Defuse hitmodedut shel qeshishim mugbeli tifqud" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1989) [in Hebrew]; Savishinsky. *The Ends of Time*; Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*.

[32] Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 758.

1. Although individuals differ, the expectation of death is universal, and decrement of ability is probable. Therefore a mutual severing of ties will take place between a person and others in his society.

2. Because interactions create and reaffirm norms, a reduction in the number or variety of interactions leads to an increased freedom from the control of the norms governing everyday behavior. Consequently, once begun, disengagement becomes a circular, or self-perpetuating, process.

3. Because the central role of men in American society is instrumental, and the central role of women is socio-emotional, the process of disengagement will differ between men and women.

4. The life cycle of the individual is punctuated by ego changes—for example, aging is usually accompanied by decrements in knowledge and skill. At the same time, success in an industrialized society is based on knowledge and skill, and age-grading is a mechanism used to ensure that the young are sufficiently well trained to assume authority and the old are retired before they lose skill. Disengagement in America may be initiated by either the individual because of ego changes, or by the society because of organizational imperatives, or by both simultaneously.

5. When both the individual and society are ready for disengagement, completed disengagement results. When neither is ready, continuing disengagement results. When the individual is ready and society is not, a disjunction between the expectations of the individual and of the members of his social systems results, but usually engagement continues. When society is ready and the individual is not, the result of the disjunction is usually disengagement.

6. Because the abandonment of life's central roles—work for men, marriage and family for women—results in a dramatically reduced social life space, it will result in crisis and loss of morale unless different roles, appropriate to the disengaged state, are available.

7. If the individual becomes sharply aware of the shortness of life and the scarcity of the time remaining to him, and if he perceives his life space as decreasing, and if his available ego energy is lessened, then readiness for disengagement has begun.

8. The reduction in interaction and the loss of central roles result in a shift in the quality of relationship in the remaining roles. There is a wider choice of relational rewards and a shift from vertical solidarities to horizontal ones.

9. Disengagement is a culture-free concept, but the form it takes will always be culture-bound. [33]

These premises underscore the universalistic dimension of the process that awaits the elderly. The ideology of production and modern generativity that underlies the theory is a steamroller that obliterates dispositional differences. Old people everywhere are doomed to an inevitable retreat into an inner world, manifested chiefly in the vacating of social space. In theoretical terms, there is a tendency to social exclusion that old age cannot withstand. Theoreticians disregard the implications of this tendency and how meaningful it may be in elders' eyes. The theory dictates what old people prefer to do in their dotage—things that do not deviate much from surrender to passivity and freedom from normal imperatives. The theory would consider the state of wardship that has snared our aged respondents a warranted result of their predisposition to inhabit places of staticity and comfort—places that are "outside the contest," outside of life. From the standpoint of this theory, in segregated settings such as these one would expect to find a reign of death being nurtured in the minds of the elderly and not materializing in the consciousness of everyone else. The theory leads the scholarly imagination to possible arenas of emptiness. As it does so, however, it drops off the subjects and leaves them on their own. It does not tell them what's awaiting them in a place of meaning that lacks meaning. As a result, a delusion forms that only death, from which we readers should avert our gaze, can exist behind the line that the "disengagement" narrative draws in the sand. It's a narrative of disengagement-from-here, a functional act propelled by a powerful social motor, that does not become a disengagement-to-there. It offers no theoretical hope whatsoever for the evolution of the death process into a "culture."

One may interpret similarly the concept of "despair" in Erikson's developmental model.[34] Erikson's eight stages of human development theory is renowned for the impact it has been making on modern psychology since the second half of the twentieth century. It broke significant new ground in grasping the ego's developmental capacity and challenged the regnant Freudian perspective. It describes the psycho-biological changes that occur during an individual's lifetime and views them through anthropological lenses. As the changes take place from infancy to old age

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[33] Cumming and Henry, *Growing Old,* 213–18, in W. A. Achenbaum and V. L. Bengtson, "Re-engaging Disengagement Theory of Aging: On the History and Assessment of Theory Development in Gerontology," *The Gerontologist* 34, no. 6 (1994): 758.
[34] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

and death, the individual is presented as being in confrontation with existential dilemmas that take shape in constant social and cultural contexts. Each of the eight stages is typified by relations of contrasts between pairs of possibilities in psycho-social existence. The ideal and the real coexist in a perpetual tension that is resolved in a manner unique to the individual in response to their surroundings, and the solution chosen leaves its imprint on a constellation of future choices. The theory helps the self to navigate the stations of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, until the psychological compensation mechanism reaches the limit of its ability. This last stop is called "despair"; it appears as a distant pole that symbolizes the opposite of the spiritual mind's desire, known as "ego integration" or perfection of the psyche:

> Only he who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being, the originator of others or the generator of products and ideas—only in him may gradually ripen the fruit of these seven stages. I know no better word for it than ego integrity. Lacking a clear definition, I shall point to a few constituents of this state of mind. It is the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning. It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for. It is acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted no substitutions. The lack or loss of this (accumulated) ego integration is signified by the fear of death: the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the ultimate of life. Despair expresses the feeling that the time is now short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity. Disgust hides despair. . . . [35]

In the eighth and final stage of development, the individual is capable of contemplating her or his life as it had been from a full and satisfying perspective. Does the theoretician pay a similar visit to the stage of despair? Probably not. Despair is mentioned only as a possibility; only hints about its nature are offered. Despair remains a nebulous concept, alluding generally to a freight of sadness, disappointment, and death anxiety. The individual feels that she has finished her life in error and has not enough time left to make repairs. What becomes of her? How does she spend his time, just the same? Does the emotional failure doom her to protracted suffering? How is this suffering manifested? Theory offers no answer. The literature pursuant to the theory also makes regular mention of despair as

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[35] Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* 268–69.