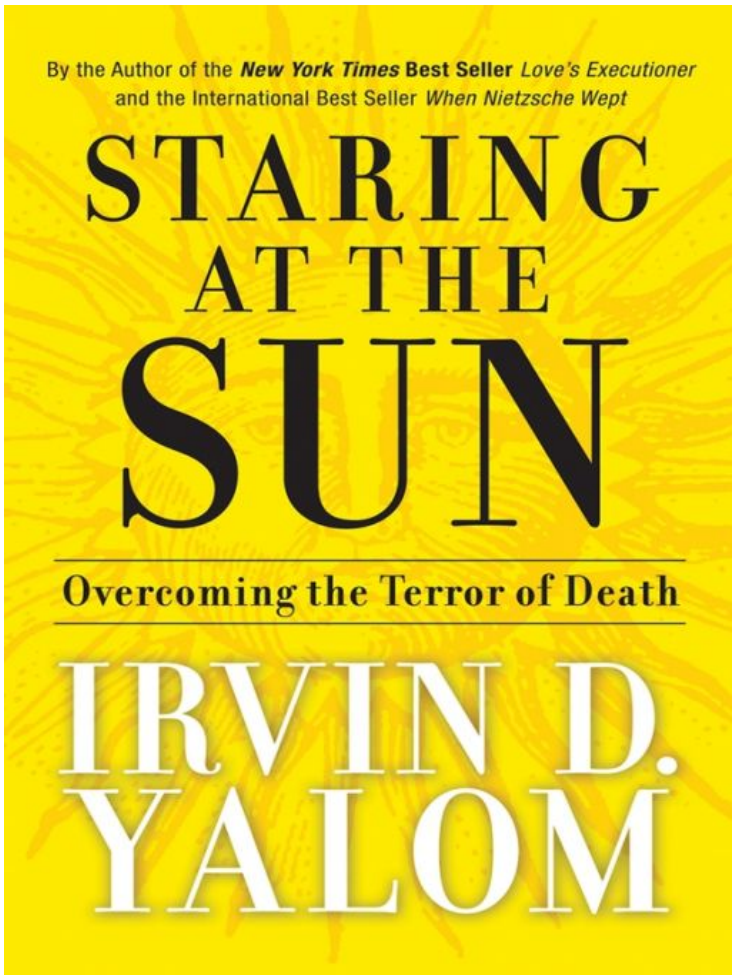
By the Author of the ***New York Times*** **Best Seller** *Love's Executioner*
and the International Best Seller *When Nietzsche Wept*

STARING AT THE SUN

Overcoming the Terror of Death

IRVIN D. YALOM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MORE PRAISE FOR

Staring at the Sun

"Irv Yalom has written a beautiful and courageous book—a book that comforts even as it explores and confronts death. Yalom helps us understand that we must all come to grips with a paradox: The physicality of death destroys us; the idea of death saves us."

George Valliant, author, Aging Well, and director of the Harvard Medical School Study of Adult Development

"In *Staring at the Sun*, Irv Yalom brings uncommon wisdom as a gifted psychiatrist now in his mid-seventies to a universal human experience: the terror of death. He provides a brilliant, enriching, and transforming perspective to our fears. *Staring at the Sun* is riveting, compelling, and ultimately uplifting reading. A crowning achievement."

Jack D. Barchas, M.D., chair and psychiatrist-in-chief, Weill Cornell Medical College, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, Payne Whitney Manhattan and Westchester

"In *Staring at the Sun*, Dr. Yalom shares with us the problems of his patients linked to their mortality, his compassionate, healing insight into their death anxiety, and perhaps most movingly, his own feelings and personal experiences with death. While the existential realities of death, isolation, and meaninglessness may seem at first bleak and full of despair, Dr. Yalom's existential approach helps his readers frame these realities in positive and meaningful ways that foster personal growth and intensify our connections to others and to the world around us."

Harold Ramis, actor, writer, and director (Ghostbusters, Groundhog Day, and Analyze This)

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Irvin D. Yalom

Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder en face.
(You cannot stare straight into the face of the sun, or death.)
François de La Rochefoucauld, Maxim 26

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Dedicated to my mentors who ripple
through me to my readers:
John Whitehorn, Jerome Frank,
David Hamburg, and Rollo May

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is not, and cannot be, a compendium of thoughts about death, for throughout the millennia, every serious writer has addressed human mortality.

Instead, this is a deeply personal book stemming from my confrontation with death. I share the fear of death with every human being: it is our dark shadow from which we are never severed. These pages contain what I have learned about overcoming the terror of death from my own experience, my work with my patients, and the thoughts of those writers who have informed my work.

I am grateful to many who have helped along the way. My agent, Sandy Dijkstra, and my editor, Alan Rinzler, were instrumental in helping me shape and focus this book. A host of friends and colleagues have read parts of the book and offered suggestions: David Spiegel, Herbert Kotz, Jean Rose, Ruthellen Josselson, Randy Weingarten, Neil Brast, Rick Van Rheenen, Alice Van Harten, Roger Walsh, Robert Berger, and Maureen Lila. Philippe Martial introduced me to the La Rouchefoucauld maxim on the title page. My gratitude to Van Harvey, Walter Sokel, Dagfin Follesdal, my dear friends and long-term tutors in intellectual history. Phoebe Hoss and Michele Jones provided excellent editing. My four children, Eve, Reid, Victor, and Ben, were invaluable consultants, and my wife, Marilyn, as always, forced me to write better.

Most of all I am indebted to my primary teachers: my patients, who must remain unnamed (but they know who

they are). They have honored me with their deepest fears, given me permission to use their stories, advised me about effective identity disguise, read some or all of the manuscript, offered advice, and taken pleasure in the thought of rippling their experience and wisdom to my readers.

Chapter 1

THE MORTAL WOUND

> Sorrow enters my heart. I am afraid of death.
>
> *GILGAMESH*

Self-awareness is a supreme gift, a treasure as precious as life. This is what makes us human. But it comes with a costly price: the wound of mortality. Our existence is forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and, inevitably, diminish and die.

Mortality has haunted us from the beginning of history. Four thousand years ago, the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh reflected on the death of his friend Enkidu with the words from the epigraph above: “Thou hast become dark and cannot hear me. When I die shall I not be like Enkidu? Sorrow enters my heart. I am afraid of death.”

Gilgamesh speaks for all of us. As he feared death, so do we all—each and every man, woman, and child. For some of us the fear of death manifests only indirectly, either as generalized unrest or masqueraded as another psychological symptom; other individuals experience an explicit and conscious stream of anxiety about death; and

for some of us the fear of death erupts into terror that negates all happiness and fulfillment.

For eons, thoughtful philosophers have attempted to dress the wound of mortality and to help us fashion lives of harmony and peace. As a psychotherapist treating many individuals struggling with death anxiety, I have found that ancient wisdom, particularly that of the ancient Greek philosophers, is thoroughly relevant today.

Indeed, in my work as a therapist, I take as my intellectual ancestors not so much the great psychiatrists and psychologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Pinel, Freud, Jung, Pavlov, Rorschach, and Skinner—but classical Greek philosophers, particularly Epicurus. The more I learn about this extraordinary Athenian thinker, the more strongly I recognize Epicurus as the proto-existential psychotherapist, and I will make use of his ideas throughout this work.

He was born in the year 341 B.C.E., shortly after the death of Plato, and died in 270 B.C.E. Most people today are familiar with his name through the word *epicure* or *epicurean,* to signify a person devoted to refined sensuous enjoyment (especially good food and drink). But in historical reality, Epicurus did not advocate sensuous pleasure; he was far more concerned with the attainment of tranquility (ataraxia).

Epicurus practiced “medical philosophy” and insisted that just as the doctor treats the body, the philosopher must treat the soul. In his view, there was only one proper goal of philosophy: to alleviate human misery. And the root cause of misery? Epicurus believed it to be *our omnipresent fear of death.* The frightening vision of inevitable death, he said, interferes with one’s enjoyment of life and leaves no pleasure undisturbed. To alleviate the fear of death, he developed several powerful thought experiments that have

helped me personally face death anxiety and offer the tools I use to help my patients. in the discussion that follows, I often refer to these valuable ideas.

My personal experience and clinical work have taught me that anxiety about dying waxes and wanes throughout the life cycle. Children at an early age cannot help but note the glimmerings of mortality surrounding them—dead leaves, insects and pets, disappearing grandparents, grieving parents, endless acres of cemetery tombstones. Children may simply observe, wonder, and, following their parents' example, remain silent. If they openly express their anxiety, their parents become noticeably uncomfortable and, of course, rush to offer comfort. Sometimes adults attempt to find soothing words, or transfer the whole matter into the distant future, or soothe children's anxiety with death-denying tales of resurrection, eternal life, heaven, and reunion.

The fear of death ordinarily goes underground from about six to puberty, the same years Freud designated as the period of latent sexuality. Then, during adolescence, death anxiety erupts in force: teenagers often become preoccupied with death; a few consider suicide. Many adolescents today may respond to death anxiety by becoming masters and dispensers of death in their second life in violent video games. Others defy death with gallows humor and death-taunting songs, or by watching horror films with friends. In my early adolescence I went twice a week to a small cinema around the corner from my father's store and, in concert with my friends, screamed during horror movies and gawked at the endless films depicting the barbarity of World War II. I remember shuddering silently at the sheer capriciousness of being born in 1931 rather than five years earlier like my cousin, Harry, who died in the slaughter of the Normandy invasion.

Some adolescents defy death by taking daredevil risks. One of my male patients—who had multiple phobias and a pervasive dread that something catastrophic could happen at any moment—told me how he began skydiving at the age of sixteen and took dozens of dives. Now, looking back, he believes this was a way of dealing with his persistent fear of his own mortality.

As the years go by, adolescent death concerns are pushed aside by the two major life tasks of young adulthood: pursuing a career and beginning a family. Then, three decades later, as children leave home and the end points of professional careers loom, the midlife crisis bursts upon us, and death anxiety once again erupts with great force. As we reach the crest of life and look at the path before us, we apprehend that the path no longer ascends but slopes downward toward decline and diminishment. From that point on, concerns about death are never far from mind.

It’s not easy to live every moment wholly aware of death. It’s like trying to stare the sun in the face: you can stand only so much of it. Because we cannot live frozen in fear, we generate methods to soften death’s terror. We project ourselves into the future through our children; we grow rich, famous, ever larger; we develop compulsive protective rituals; or we embrace an impregnable belief in an ultimate rescuer.

Some people—supremely confident in their immunity—live heroically, often without regard for others or for their own safety. Still others attempt to transcend the painful separateness of death by way of merger—with a loved one, a cause, a community, a Divine Being. Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which, in one way or another, attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude. God, as formulated transculturally, not only softens the pain of mortality through some vision of everlasting life but also

palliates fearful isolation by offering an eternal presence, and provides a clear blueprint for living a meaningful life.

But despite the staunchest, most venerable defenses, we can never completely subdue death anxiety: it is always there, lurking in some hidden ravine of the mind. Perhaps, as Plato says, we cannot lie to the deepest part of ourselves.

Had I been a citizen of ancient Athens circa 300 B.C.E. (a time often called the golden age of philosophy) and experienced a death panic or a nightmare, to whom would I have turned to clear my mind of the web of fear? It's likely I'd have trudged off to the agora, a section of ancient Athens where many of the important schools of philosophy were located. I'd have walked past the Academy founded by Plato, now directed by his nephew, Speucippus; and also the Lyceum, the school of Aristotle, once a student of Plato, but too philosophically divergent to be appointed his successor. I'd have passed the schools of the Stoics and the Cynics and ignored any itinerant philosophers searching for students. Finally, I'd have reached the Garden of Epicurus, and there I think I would have found help.

Where today do people with unmanageable death anxiety turn? Some seek help from their family and friends; others turn to their church or to therapy; still others may consult a book such as this. I've worked with a great many individuals terrified by death. I believe that the observations, reflections, and interventions I've developed in a lifetime of therapeutic work can offer significant help and insight to those who cannot dispel death anxiety on their own.

In this first chapter, I want to emphasize that the fear of death creates problems that may not at first seem directly related to mortality. Death has a long reach, with an impact that is often concealed. Though fear of dying can totally immobilize some people, often the fear is covert and

expressed in symptoms that appear to have nothing to do with one's mortality.

Freud believed that much psychopathology results from a person's repression of sexuality. I believe his view is far too narrow. In my clinical work, I have come to understand that one may repress not just sexuality but one's whole creaturely self and especially its finite nature.

In Chapter Two, I discuss ways of recognizing covert death anxiety. Many people have anxiety, depression, and other symptoms that are fueled by the fear of death. In this chapter, as in those to follow, I'll illustrate my points with clinical case histories and techniques from my practice as well as with stories from film and from literature.

In Chapter Three, I will show that confronting death need not result in despair that strips away all purpose in life. On the contrary, it can be an awakening experience to a fuller life. The central thesis of this chapter is: *though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us.*

Chapter Four describes and discusses some of the powerful ideas posited by philosophers, therapists, writers, and artists for overcoming the fear of death. But, as Chapter Five suggests, ideas alone may be no match for the terror surrounding death. It is the synergy of ideas and human connection that is our most powerful aid in staring down death, and I suggest many practical ways to apply this synergy in our everyday life.

This book presents a point of view based on my observations of those who have come to me for help. But because the observer always influences what is observed, I turn in Chapter Six to an examination of the observer and offer a memoir of my personal experiences with death and my attitudes about mortality. I, too, grapple with mortality and, as a professional who has been working with death

anxiety for my entire career and as a man for whom death looms closer and closer, I want to be candid and clear about my experience with death anxiety.

Chapter Seven offers instruction to therapists. For the most part, therapists avoid working directly with death anxiety. Perhaps it is because they are reluctant to face their own. But even more important is that professional schools offer little or no training in an existential approach: young therapists have told me that they don't inquire too deeply into death anxiety because they don't know what to do with the answers they receive. To be helpful to clients bedeviled by death anxiety, therapists need a new set of ideas and a new type of relationship with their patients. Although I direct this chapter toward therapists, I try to avoid professional jargon and hope the prose is clear enough for eavesdropping by any reader.

Why, you may ask, take on this unpleasant, frightening subject? Why stare into the sun? Why not follow the advice of the venerable dean of American psychiatry, Adolph Meyer, who, a century ago, cautioned psychiatrists, "Don't scratch where it doesn't itch"? Why grapple with the most terrible, the darkest and most unchangeable aspect of life? Indeed, in recent years, the advent of managed care, brief therapy, symptom control, and attempts to alter thinking patterns have only exacerbated this blinkered point of view.

Death, however, *does* itch. It itches all the time; it is always with us, scratching at some inner door, whirring softly, barely audibly, just under the membrane of consciousness. Hidden and disguised, leaking out in a

variety of symptoms, it is the wellspring of many of our worries, stresses, and conflicts.

I feel strongly—as a man who will himself die one day in the not-too-distant future and as a psychiatrist who has spent decades dealing with death anxiety—that confronting death allows us, not to open some noisome Pandora's box, but to reenter life in a richer, more compassionate manner.

So I offer this book optimistically. I believe that it will help you stare death in the face and, in so doing, not only ameliorate terror but enrich your life.

Chapter 2

RECOGNIZING DEATH ANXIETY

Death is everything
And it is nothing.

The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out.

Each person fears death in his or her own way. For some people, death anxiety is the background music of life, and any activity evokes the thought that a particular moment will never come again. Even an old movie feels poignant to those who cannot stop thinking that all the actors are now only dust.

For other people, the anxiety is louder, unruly, tending to erupt at three in the morning, leaving them gasping at the specter of death. They are besieged by the thought that they, too, will soon be dead—as will everyone around them.

Others are haunted by a particular fantasy of impending death: a gun pointed at their head, a Nazi firing squad, a locomotive thundering toward them, a fall from a bridge or skyscraper.

Death scenarios take vivid forms. One person is locked in a casket, his nostrils stuffed with soil, yet conscious of lying in darkness forever. Another fears never seeing, hearing, or touching a loved one. Others feel the ache of being under

the ground while all one’s friends are above it. Life will go as before without the possibility of ever knowing what will happen to one’s family, friends, or one’s world.

Each of us has a taste of death when slipping into sleep every night or when losing consciousness under anesthesia. Death and sleep, Thanatos and Hypnos in the Greek vocabulary, were twins. The Czech existential novelist Milan Kundera suggests that we also have a foretaste of death through the act of forgetting: “What terrifies most about death is not the loss of the future but the loss of the past. In fact, the act of forgetting is a form of death always present within life.”

In many people, death anxiety is overt and easily recognizable, however distressing. In others, it is subtle, covert, and hidden behind other symptoms, and it is identified only by exploration, even excavation.

OVERT DEATH ANXIETY

Many of us commingle anxiety about death with the fear of evil, abandonment, or annihilation. Others are staggered by the enormity of eternity, of being dead forever and ever and ever and ever; others are unable to grasp the state of nonbeing and ponder the question of where they will be when they are dead; others focus on the horror of their entire personal world vanishing; others wrestle with the issue of death’s inevitability, as expressed in this e-mail from a thirty-two-year-old woman with bouts of death anxiety:

I suppose the strongest feelings came from realizing it would be ME who will die, not some other entity like Old-Lady-Me or Terminally-Ill-and-Ready-to-Die-Me. I suppose I always thought about death obliquely, as something that might *happen rather than* would *happen. For weeks after a strong panic episode I thought about death more intently than I ever had and know now it is no longer something that* might *happen. I felt as though I had awakened to a terrible truth and could never go back.*

Some people take their fear further to an unbearable conclusion: that neither their world nor any memories of it will exist anywhere. Their street, their world of family gatherings, parents, children, beach house, high school, favorite camping sites—all evaporate with their death. Nothing stable, nothing enduring. What possible meaning can a life of such evanescence contain? The e-mail continued:

I became acutely aware of meaninglessness—of how everything we do seems doomed to oblivion, and of the planet's eventual demise. I imagined the deaths of my parents, sisters, boyfriend and friends. Often I think about how one day MY skull and bones, not a hypothetical or imaginary set of skull and bones, will be on the outside rather than the inside of my body. That thought is very disorientating. The idea of being an entity separate from my body doesn't really wash with me so I can't console myself with the idea of the imperishable soul.

There are several main themes in this young woman's statement: death has become personalized for her; it is no longer something that *might* happen or that happens only to

others; the inevitability of death makes all life meaningless. She regards the idea of an immortal soul separate from her physical body as highly unlikely and can find no comfort in the concept of an afterlife. She also raises the question of whether oblivion after death is the same as oblivion before birth (an important point that will come up again in our discussion of Epicurus).

A patient with death panics handed me this poem at our first session:

Death pervades.
Its presence plagues me,
Grips me; drives me.
I cry out in anguish.
I carry on.

Every day annihilation looms.
I try leaving traces
That maybe matter;
Engaging in the present.
The best I can do.

But death lurks just beneath
That protective façade
Whose comfort I cling to
Like a child's blanket.
The blanket is permeable
In the stillness of the night
When the terror returns.

There will be no more self
To breathe in nature,
To right the wrongs,
To feel sweet sadness.

Unbearable loss, though
Borne without awareness.

Death is everything
And it is nothing.

She was especially haunted by the thought expressed in her last two lines: *Death is everything / And it is nothing.* She explained that the thought of becoming nothing consumed her and became everything. But the poem contains two important comforting thoughts: that by leaving traces of herself, her life will gain in meaning, and that the best she can do is to embrace the present moment.

THE FEAR OF DYING IS NOT A STAND-IN FOR SOMETHING ELSE

Psychotherapists often assume, mistakenly, that overt death anxiety is not anxiety about death, but is instead a mask for some other problem. This was the case with Jennifer, a twenty-nine-year-old realtor, whose lifelong nightly death panic attacks had not been taken at face value by previous therapists. Throughout her life, Jennifer frequently awoke during the night, sweat-drenched, eyes wide open, trembling at her own annihilation. She thought of herself vanishing, stumbling in darkness forever, entirely forgotten by the world of the living. She told herself that nothing really matters if everything is ultimately slated for utter extinction.

Such thoughts had plagued her since early childhood. She vividly recalls the first episode when she was five. Running

to her parents' bedroom shaking with fear about dying, she was soothed by her mother, who told her two things she has never forgotten:

"You have a very long life ahead of you, and it makes no sense to think of it now."

"When you're very old and approach death, then you'll be at peace or you'll be ill, and either way death won't be unwelcome."

Jennifer had relied on her mother's words of comfort all her life and had also developed additional strategies for ameliorating the attacks. She reminds herself that she has the choice whether or not to think about death. Or she tries to draw from her memory bank of good experiences—laughing with childhood friends, marveling at mirrored lakes and pillared clouds while hiking with her husband in the Rockies, kissing the sunny faces of her children.

Nevertheless, her dread of death continued to plague her and strip away much of her life contentment. She had consulted several therapists with little benefit. Various medications had diminished the intensity but not the frequency of the attacks. Her therapists never focused on her fear of death because they believed that death was a stand-in for some other anxiety. I resolved not to repeat the errors of previous therapists. I believe they had been confounded by a powerful recurrent dream that first visited Jennifer at the age of five:

My whole family is in the kitchen. There is a bowl of earthworms on the table, and my father forces me to pick up a handful, squeeze them, and then drink the milk that comes from them.