

“BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH DEATH“
Exploring our own death and dying experiences in order to
make it our ally

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INTRODUCTION

Death has been present (not always consciously) in my life since I was 3 years old and it has always been around (either really or symbolically). I personally was in a position when I was facing some life threatening situations in the past and I was thinking of death with fear¹ and helplessness which were present in those periods of my life. Writing this dissertation made the connection to everything I had experienced with death more vivid and alive. With the help of the processwork approach I had a chance to have a variety of different experiences and emotions with death issues and I managed to create some different connections. During writing this thesis, I was thinking about death literally every day. Sometimes with curiosity and fascination but other times with fear or respect. I was reading books, watching movies, working on my therapy sessions, doing my own work on the topic (innerwork) and I was thinking about my own relationships and fears around the topic a lot.

Before even starting writing the thesis I was asking myself what people think about their own death and how are they open to discuss such a topic. Most of friends of mine or even people I am surrounded by very rarely mention death in front of me. In order to find out more about it I invented something like an interview game. I was asking my family members, colleagues or friends if they sometimes thought about the moment of their own death or if they had any fears around it. Almost nobody replied positively. They were just giving me some very short answers or they answered with a counter question like: „No, why should I when there is no need to?“, „Is everything ok with you and with your husband, your family?“. All the attention suddenly turned to me and my potential problems I „must have“ any when I start speaking about such a topic. It made me feel as if I was talking about something inappropriate and as if there was no space to continue with the topic further. Any other question was answered just quickly and shortly and a change of subject followed. If they answered yes (which was not

¹ For the pupose of this study I will use the words „fear“ and „anxiety“ as synonyms.

often), I was curious in what way. I wanted to know what their thoughts around it were. It was usually about their afterlife beliefs. In fact, most of them said: „No, I do not think of death at all“. I do not know if it was true or if it was just a way how to avoid this conversation but it did not stop me. I did not want to be mean or to make fun of them. I just wanted to discover more about their relation to death and also to make this topic a little bit „alive“. In reality, I would say that I brought in a forbidden topic that did not belong to our everyday small talks or even when talking to our close friends. Later on, I had another idea and I wanted to know what they would do if their close friend started to talk about fear of death while having a drink in a pub together. The typical reaction was that they would think that something happened to them (an illness or a threat) or to somebody in their family. If not, there is no reason to have such feelings and they would try to comfort them by saying „you are still young“; „you have a long life in front of you, do not think about it. Have a drink.“). I believe that this is the way we usually look at death these times. We are focused on our goals, positive experiences, health. We have the experience of having control over many things in our life (technologies, medical progress...) and we can avoid the unpleasant things (p.e. pain, lack of something) and if we work and try hard we can get almost anything. Then, we are not used to losing things, giving up or failing too often. Death is here as a reminder of a kind of power that we usually cannot control, except when we decide to commit suicide. It is safer to hide the topic under the carpet and we hope that every illness will be cured and every danger will threaten others but not us. It is like having magic power that if we do not surround ourselves by death and thoughts of death, it will not touch us, it will avoid us.

When thinking about death, it brings many unpleasant moments and disturbing emotions. So, why should we do it when there is no need to. Why should we bother to even think of this topic when we are fine, healthy and do not feel any anxiety or tension around death? And why

should not we stop our unpleasant feelings when nothing threatens us? It is a problem of the elderly and ill people.

Nevertheless, we cannot avoid or control death. I believe that connecting with death can be a healthy experience for us. To stay with the awareness of our own death and with the fear around it without any hope, just to be with it, to learn how to accept and welcome loss, letting go, can be a very enriching (sometimes also beautiful and transforming) experience. It can be a lesson about how to be in contact with life and at the same time to be in contact with the death quality.

The thesis starts with a reflection on the changes of the attitude to death in our society in the last centuries and my thoughts around the recent increase of fear of death. In the first part of this thesis I introduce you to different therapeutic approaches and their way of looking at death, dying and fear of death. Firstly, I introduce Freud's and Jung's views on the topic and the influence on their followers when working with clients in therapeutic relationships. In the next chapters, I focus deeply on Gestalt, Cognitive-behavioural and Existential approach and I bring their perspectives of the topic. In the chapters 7 and 8, I introduce basic concepts of Processwork, for example levels of reality, primary and secondary processes, an edge and other terms that seem to be related to the topic of death. In the second part of the thesis, I also look at the concept of identity and its death. I also describe the way processwork looks at identity, our belief systems and fears around death and death like experiences (when a part of our identity dies). I also use the processoriented point of view in the practical part of the thesis.

In chapter 9, I introduce a model of grieving from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in working with death and dying. Chapter 10 brings an interesting insight into the point of view of the main world religions and some rituals of smaller religion groups or tribes. In chapter 11 I present Shamanistic approach which is one of the roots of processwork and death has a

significant place there. The last chapter in this part is devoted to my own thoughts about the benefits of dealing with our own relationship to death (also in the role of a therapist).

In the third part, I look at my own experiences with the presence of death in my life. The practical part also consists of an analysis of 14 experiences from the “dying” exercise. I look at different experiences, thoughts and belief systems, I explore and classify them in order to understand various ways of perceiving and experiencing death related topics. The goal is to allow people to talk about and to explore their relation to death and to get an insight into different experiences around death and dying. I also look at edges, signals and essence experiences that appear (I will explain the terms later).

The first reason why I decided to write this work was my personal interest in death and in experiences when death appears in my life through dreams, body symptoms, altered states or as deaths of parts of my identity (changes, moments of transformation). As the opportunity to talk about death is very limited in everyday life, my main reason for pursuing this study was my desire to make death more present in our lives. I wanted to provide space to everybody who is in any way interested in this issue to have a chance to talk and think about death, our fears and to connect with something greater than our ordinary identity. My high dream (my biggest hope) is making the discussion around death more open and showing the value in exploring our own relationship to death and gain some new knowledge in this field. I believe that doing so (physically and symbolically) may enrich each person and may be important also for therapeutic relationships, especially when meeting clients dealing with death and dying issues.

I also believe that this work will contribute to the Processwork community by its focus and deeper exploration of the topic of death and dying from (not only) processoriented perspective. It may bring some useful and interesting patterns and insights into how people

experience the presence of death and it may raise their interest in exploring their own relationship to it. In other words, to integrate it into the thinking of facilitators and therapists.

The target group of this project are processworkers, psychotherapists, psychologists, anybody who encounters death issues in their private or professional life or anybody who is just interested in their own relationship to death and dying.

1. DEATH IN MODERN SOCIETY

The attitude and relation to death has been changing permanently over the history of the mankind. But it looks like that fear of death has always been present although it is manifested in different ways. For example, the Egyptians thought very much of preparation for the afterlife and building rich pyramids and tombs. The Romans used to create dead cities located far away from the towns. In the 12th century, people were afraid of sudden death without being forgiven for their sins. In the 16th century, people started to be curious about dead bodies and they became an object of study for scientists.

In our western culture we are trying to keep death separated from life as much as possible. Nowadays dying seems much more terrifying because of our inability to cope with death consciously. We do not want to talk about it or even think about it. The dying person feels often alone and abandoned. I remember my grandparents who took care of their parents for the last days of their life at home, the stories about the Second World War and all the suffering and death around it. Also, at that time, child mortality was very high so parents could not become so much emotionally attached to their children because of the fear that they may die. Parents used to have many children so there was a bigger chance that some of them will live and the relationship was less important than their contribution to work (Baumeister, Muraven, 1996). I also remember my great grandmother talking about her children who died calmly. Times are changing and we do not have to experience this anymore. Only rarely, we have to witness death personally. We are not used to seeing children and young people dying often and our relationships changed. Death has disappeared from our sight which means: if we do not need to deal with it, we do not. And when a seriously ill or a dying person is around us or even wants to talk to us about it, we feel very uncomfortable and we feel like avoiding the topic. Instead of that, we focus on enjoyment, building our careers and we deny that people

really can die. We think we should be able to manage, control death. When death is not around, we are safe. And when the death is suddenly around we would rather not to see it.

Joseph Matthews (in Kübler-Ross, 1972) wrote a nice story illustrating our death denying society. It is a story about a man who is burying his 92-years old father. Before the funeral, he was shocked by the makeup they put on him which made him look artificial and like somebody else. He almost could not recognise him as his wrinkles were erased and lips were painted. Later on, when coming to the grave, it was all covered by simulated grass as if nothing had been happening there before. As if nobody had died there recently.

I am also a good example. When I started to write this thesis it was not easy to use the word „death“ so often and at the beginning I had a tendency to find some softer synonyms and I felt strange every time I wrote this word. It was just too much death on the paper, in front of me and in my thoughts. It took me some time to get used to it.

Many times I also experienced other people trying to soften or even deny death of somebody close to us by saying „He left us“, „She fell asleep“, „They left this world“, otherwise it would have become real. Some time ago, I worked with a woman whose husband had died more than half a year ago and she did not tell her 4-year old daughter about it because she did not want to traumatise her. They were hiding the reality of death from the child and maybe from themselves too. It was a taboo in the family, nobody was allowed to express their feelings or worries. What happened was that this child started to be afraid of losing the members of her family and to express fear in different situations.

While in past we used to see our family members die in their own beds, we were sitting next to them and witnessing them leaving us, it is a very rare thing in this century. Talking about death as well as the rituals before death and grieving rituals have become a very private and intimate thing. Geoffrey Gorer compared the relation the death in our society to sex in the Victorian age (Gorer, 1955). Now, 70 years later, there is a little bit more openness around it

but there are still some limits. We can talk about death when there is somebody actually facing death or while grieving. We have made quite a big progress in our palliative care and we talk a lot about how to support people going through losses. I feel that it is ok in those situations only. In those situations, I feel that I have the right to talk about it because it objectively touches me or the person close to me. But even in those moments, others prefer if I talk to a specialist and not to them. We can also meet death in a less personal way, in movies or if we are trying to understand different cultures from anthropological or historical perspective. This is the way that is public, extrinsic and far away from me.

This does not have to be all. Being in the presence of dying people can also be a very enriching experience. In our modern times, people do not die at home anymore. Almost every book or article about death compares the old (more personal) way of dying with the modern (hospital) one which sounds like a cliché to me. Instead of that, I would like to share my family story when my grandfather was dying. He was sick for few years and my grandmother was taking care of him. When his last days of life came we knew he was not going to recover. We just did not know if it would take weeks or months. Although he was not very present sometimes, we were trying to be around him and enjoy his presence. I remember the last day when he was just lying down and not talking to anybody. Just looking somewhere without any indication what is happening with him. He started to sweat so my grandmother changed him, switched on the respiration machine and let him rest. About an hour later she found him dead. Everybody who was around came and we were sitting next to him quietly until the ambulance came. As my family live far away from me I did not have a chance to be there but I heard them speak about this experience over and over again (as many times as they and I needed) so I could feel as if I was there with them. Do not get me wrong, it was not a pleasant experience at that moment. It was heavy and scary even talking about it. Now, a few years later, we all speak about this moment with love and we are happy that he died in our family house. I

mention this because it is not really a regular thing to let a person die at home for many reasons. We may think that the person needs more professional care we are not able to provide them, we do not have enough equipment to keep the person alive or help them with pain or we cannot afford to take care of the person the whole day. Sometimes it is true but sometimes it is more about being afraid of letting the person go in front of us. I was sharing this story because I wanted to say that it does not have to be only a negative experience. A client of mine whose mother died in a hospital while holding her hand, feeling each other's presence, told me: It is such a beautiful and painful experience when you can be together in her last moments. This moment is full of love and gratitude. Something connected to this specific moment that you cannot experience in any other moment.

I agree with Ariés (2000) who highlights that anxiety around this topic increased when we stopped sharing our feelings. Their anxiety has never exceeded the threshold of the „inexplicable“. How can we process then or even accept it when we do not dare to talk about it? I meet many clients who suffer because of their inability to talk about their anxiety which separates them from the rest of the world. They do not know how to talk about it and if they dare to open this topic with somebody they have a tendency to understate it or even think of them as being too emotional or they are asked why they are thinking about it when they are not sick. They are too young to think about it. I noticed that all those people express loneliness because of that and strong anxiety they are not able to handle. Just talking about their thoughts and feelings brings relief to them. Somebody who is just open to listen to them. What fascinates me is that bringing the attitude of curiosity encourages curiosity in themselves. The attitude we use can have a big influence on our perception of death. Harrison (2003) points out that in the past we used to see death as a part of our personal experience while nowadays it is more of a failure. Failure of not being able to control our life and to avoid it. How long can I be avoiding it? One day, I am bound to fail and let my life go. Reiss

(2004) explains that if we see death as a failure it naturally creates avoidance. Of course, it becomes something we do not want to meet. Who wants to meet their failure? By using curiosity and learning how to let go when focusing on our fear of death may bring very useful information for our personal growth. I will talk more about this in the next chapters and I will introduce the way of looking at death from the point of view of different psychotherapeutic approaches.

2. FREUD AND PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

The focus of psychodynamic psychotherapy is on unconscious processes which appear in one's actual behaviour. Bringing insight and awareness to actual symptoms or conflicts about an unresolved conflict from the past can already carry a healing aspect.

The main representative of this approach as well as its founder is Sigmund Freud. Freud saw (in his later work) death as an important part of human life. He believed that every human behaviour is motivated by drives and instincts. In his book „*Beyond the Pleasure Principal*“, 1920, Freud talks about two dynamic repressed forces of human psyche: sexual force (Eros) as the life instinct and destructive, aggressive force as the death instinct (Thanatos). (Brown, 1985)

The life instinct creates energy called libido which is responsible for survival of our existence. It motivates us to survive by taking care of our basic needs. On the other side Thanatos represents our desire to die which is aim of each life. The Thanatos energy is expressed by anger and aggression. There is a never ending conflict between those two instincts. Every person has an unconscious wish to die but under usual circumstances, Eros is able to hold our death instincts back (to displace them) and deny our mortality. If we have a traumatic experience the Thanatos energy can take over and we become (self) destructive. (Freud, 1998). According to Gordon (1977), Eros expresses itself in active pleasure seeking but Thanatos in tension-reducing efforts.

Even though death was considered one of the main drives in human lives, it was not the main focus of psychoanalysts. I see a big difference between death as being a drive in our life and actual presence of death in our life. By reading Freud's view of death I see death as usually an unconscious drive which we are not aware of. We cannot meet it or face it until something traumatic happens and we desire to die, we are suicidal. So, it seems to me that according to Freud if we focus on our death something pathological must be happening. That would mean

that everybody who is afraid of death or just thinking about it must have had experience with something traumatic in their past. There is no place for healthy relation to death.

According to Frommer (2016), Freud acknowledged that we all have death anxiety but our unconsciousness does not recognize death. When we die, our consciousness is not there anymore. We cannot understand how it is to die. Even if we try to imagine our death it is not possible because we are still there, the spectator is present. As we have never experienced anything like that, nor we are able to imagine death or nothingness, how can we be afraid of it then?

Classical psychoanalysts understood anxiety and fear around mortality reductively. Death fear was attributed to something more primary (unconscious parts)² – related to death instinct, oedipal guilt associated with aggressive wishes or even castration anxiety (Frommer, 2016). McCarthy (1981) stressed that Sullivan, Horney and Fromm saw death anxiety experienced by a physically healthy person caused by depression and neurotic living (failure in psychic separation). So, if we are not able to separate from our parents healthily, the death anxiety is a result. Fear of death is both a symptom and a defence mechanism against painful affects which arises in a therapy when the neurotic self attempts to grow. It can be understood as a response to feeling threatening the self or fear of loss of the self and it is related to our childhood. Straker (2013) noted that working through our childhood traumas or conflicts allows them to get extinct.

I understand this suppression as an important mechanism when our ego plays a role of a guardian and does not allow any traumatic experience to access our consciousness. Those unconscious parts of course find a way how to get into our attention but they come in a different (more symbolic or indirect) way. It means that fear of death or any other phobia is

² Freud (1998) used the term primary when talking about unconscious instincts (id) which serve the pleasure principle and strive for liberating psychic energy. Primary processes are less known to us and we can understand them through symbols, p.e. by getting to know one's dreams and fantasias. Secondary process belongs to consciousness. It represents a regulation system which protects the reality and can delay need gratification.

just a symbolic, masked childhood trauma. For example, my fear of death can actually be caused by my fall off a horse when I was 8 years old. I do not remember much about it because I might have suppressed it and now it shows itself as fear of death. Or in other words, I project my fear of falling off a horse into fear of death. In this case working on my death anxiety is not really important because there is something more unconscious, some kind of trauma that needs to be processed.

Freud's theory about traumatic experience creating fear of death looks very interesting to me. It made me think more about my own falling off the horse traumatic event. I am sure it was painful and terrifying to be knocked down by such a powerful animal. But if there were not fear of my own death which I faced for the first time, what else could I be afraid of? There is nothing scarier really than losing my own life (my future, my relationships, etc). This was the first time I experienced that something bad could happen to me, that I could die. Isn't then any traumatic experience from our childhood just a reminder of our own death?

But let's get back to psychoanalyses. *"This conception of neurotic death fears concretized Fromm's (in McCarthy, 1981, p. 21) view of fear of death as being synonymous with the fear of life and hence the fear of freedom. It is the fate of the self in relation to the internalized parents that often provides the psychodynamic key for understanding death anxiety in both children and adults."* We are only afraid of death because we are afraid of being free, free from our parental authorities inside of us which makes us neurotic. Loss of the symptom or the neurotic character related to death would mean losing our neurotic self (Culkin, 2002).

Some psychoanalysts were also focusing on stages close to death and people with terminal illnesses and many of them use Kubler-Ross model of grieving when working with defence mechanisms (I will talk about her in special chapter) or Erikson's work which brings different, less pathological view of death.

Erikson (in Schoulte, 2012) created a psychosocial developmental model of the ego. In each of eight stages, the ego goes through a crisis that acts as a turning point in development. If a person gets successfully through those they feel psychological well-being. The last crisis which starts around the age of 65 and continues until our death is called integrity versus despair. It usually starts when we get retired, lose a close one or face a terminal illness. This crisis is a natural part of everybody's life and it is provoked by confrontation with mortality and it is represented by reflecting back on our life, on how I lived my life. It means that if I get through such an experience it can create a crisis in me and I might start questioning myself whether or not I have led a meaningful life... There are two possibilities that can happen. Either I will get a sense of fulfilment from my life or I will regret it and despair over how I lived. By completing this stage successfully, we can feel completeness, integrity and wisdom. If not, uncompleting of this stage brings feelings of a victim of our own unconscious impulses and drivers. Professor Culkin (2002) suggests that from psychodynamic perspective, there are special conflicts and defences arising in a dying person as the person is going through an ultimate crisis of ego development. Facing death generates different and strong defence reactions which bring kind of momentary relief of emotions but at the same time they prevent us from coping with the crisis effectively. Frommer (2016) in his article „*Death is nothing at all*“ mentions a human narcissistic tendency to protect us from clinical „madness“ of having constant access to our own mortality. So, we channel our fear of that into alternative fears.

While Freud saw death anxiety as related to unresolved traumas or conflicts from our childhood because we are not able to understand death, the existential psychoanalyst and anthropologist Becker reconceptualized Freud's theory and created Terror Management Theory of death.

Becker argued that human behaviour is driven by fear of death. „*It is conceptualized as the conflict between our biological proclivity to survive and our cognitive capabilities to be aware that death is inevitable.*“ (in Arnd, Vess, 2008, p. 911)

This conflict creates terror. As we live in a certain culture, we create a myth of immortality through religion which helps us to decrease this anxiety, or it happens through belonging to families or nations that last longer than our own life does. If we meet some specific standards of values espoused by our culture (even just symbolically related to death), we have a sense of self-esteem and the anxiety is reduced (in Arnd, Vess, 2008). We get kind of immortal and it decreases our level of death anxiety. Based on this theory, we can process our fear of death by working on our self-esteem.

In case of a person who discovers they suffer from a terminal disease, one can suddenly start to be strongly afraid of losing their company and this fear starts to be the main anxiety in their present life. One may focus on one's career and work 20 hours per day. One may even start to be hostile towards others and blame them for their failure or accusing them of blocking them from achieving success. According to Culvin (2002), regression often appears and it is accompanied by presence of threat and can be manifested by increasingly immature, dependent or self-threatening behaviours. Some people may become helpless and just wait for their death.

Many therapists working with clients with a terminal illness are trying to help them recognise, confront and replace the defence mechanisms, support them to reach their integrity by helping them find a meaning and purpose in their lives (Schoulte, 2012), support the grief in order to accept the loss of their health, future, unfinished goals and bring emotional relief (Straker, 2012). Straker (2013) also points out that clients with childhood distress (such as history of anxiety over separation from parents) may experience intensified grief or loss so it is important to work with this too.

Psychoanalysts claim that the relationship with a therapist as well as the therapist's attitude and relationship to death can have an enormous influence on the client. But I will come back to this later.

3. JUNG AND JUNGIAN APPROACH

C. G. Jung created his own approach partially influenced by Freud. Jung agreed that unconsciousness is a significant aspect of human mind. In contrast with Freud, Jung differentiated personal unconsciousness (created by individual's personal experience) and collective unconsciousness (the heritage of evolution we all share together). Death was seen in relation to the collective psyche as something what is common to the mankind. He believed it would be more beneficial to look at death as a meaningful goal rather than just a nonsense ending. He thought of death as of such an important part of our life as our birth is, something more than just the end of life.

I liked the way Jung wrote (1959 in Feifel, p. 3) about how differently our society perceives the fear of death in each of us based on the perception of our „closeness to death“ or justification to have such feelings: *“If a young man is afraid of the world, of life and the future, then everyone finds it regrettable, senseless, neurotic; he is considered a cowardly shirker. But when an aging person secretly shudders and is even mortally afraid at the thought that his reasonable expectation of life now amounts to only so many years, then we are painfully reminded of certain feelings within our own breast; we look away and turn the conversation to some other topic. The optimism with which we judge the young man fails us here.”*

We all have more or less the tendency to deny death which we have been suppressing for such a long time and do not want to face. And now it is here, looking at us and taking something important from us that diluted our life, sense of mortality. That causes loss of stability and feeling like falling down into a deep hole. *“When one is alone and it is night and so dark and still that one hears nothing and sees nothing but the thoughts which add and subtract the years, and the long row of disagreeable facts which remorselessly indicate how far the hand of the clock has moved forward, and the slow, irresistible approach of the wall of darkness*

which will eventually engulf everything you love, possess, wish, strive, and hope for — then all our profundities about life slink off to some undiscoverable hiding place, and fear envelops the sleepless one like a smothering blanket (Jung in Feifel, 1959, p. 3)."

In other words, we cannot ignore our unconsciousness because we would ignore our instincts. If I am not facing my mortality and I remove the fact that people (and of course including me) are mortal from my awareness, it will be hidden somewhere and I will not have any access to it until one day, it uncontrollably shows itself or I consciously decide to connect with it (for some reason). And we know that this necessary meeting will happen one day. If I decide not to „prepare for“ it consciously, I become powerless and I will not be able to withstand it successfully. Then I will become frightened to look into the future and be stuck with the secure past because the future is dangerous and risky.

I would like to explain this in a short story. I have been thinking of my own death and death in general quite a lot. I perceived it as something terrifying (and in a way I still do). I used to block any death related to me though because it made me feel nervous or even anxious. I remember a period of my life when I was literally marginalizing death in my everyday life. To be honest, it was a very pleasant feeling. Every time a thought of death came to me, I always convinced myself that it cannot happen to me, I cannot die. I remember a day, when it hit me strongly. I was working in a home for children as a psychologist and one of our children, a boy, was threatening to commit a suicide. Somebody called the ambulance and I was the one to accompany him. We were being driven to the hospital by the ambulance car when suddenly the doctors received information that there had been a severe road accident. A woman with 3 little kids had hit a truck and as I understood the truck driver was dead. It was very touching watching the rescuers helping the people on the spot. One of the children was bleeding so they took her into our ambulance. As I was the only adult sitting at the back of the car I was there to give her support until we reached the hospital. But why am I sharing

this experience with you? After this experience I was not able to hold back my fear and I realised that all I had been saying to myself were just lies. It was quite a strong moment to realise that I believed in some superpowers in me and now, I am kind of „naked“, helpless and forced to open myself and to face the fact of my mortality. And even it is crazily scary and for some time I was not able to drive my car without thinking of it and of the fact that it might possibly happen to me as well, something started to change slowly. Of course, I did not start to like the idea of dying but at the same time it was around me everywhere. I did not accept my mortality but I accepted that I cannot do much about the fact and I will really die one day and it can be even this minute. This experience made me more relaxed and kind of empowered me. And, for me, this is what Jung was trying to say by the need of exploring the unknown parts and bringing them into consciousness and then to face them as they really are (not as we want them to be). Instead of ignoring our instincts, do the opposite. This can bring joy even while going into the scary adventure of facing unexpected future.

Jung divided human life into two dynamic processes. The first one is focused on building our own personality, our ego and getting oriented in the world outside. We fight and compete, we learn and have very active lives. In this part of our life we focus on symbolic developing or creating of our psychic subtle body. This kind of attitude is very close to our Western view of life where energy and expansion are the main symbols and keys to successful life. Jung (in Jaffé, 1998) criticised this attitude as it is not natural to keep this kind of behaviour for our entire life. Everywhere where there is rising also falling needs to come. We can feel biologically and energetically rising but psychologically and personally linger.

And then, the other part of our life comes, the one we have a tendency to neglect, it focuses our attention inwards and it is called individuation. Death is an archetype that challenges us to grow and appears in this second part of our life. It is a process of integrating all parts of ourselves and creating a complete personality. It is like a guideline into who we are. Jung's

concept of individuation was inspired by Eastern religions and believed that this process leads to creation of a higher self, that our body is not just a physical frame but it is connected to something larger (Jung, 1999). From this perspective our self is not an equal expression to ego, it is something more permanent and deeper. Jung (1966) writes that individuation embraces our deepest and incomparable self and through that we become aware of oneself and our only true self. Process of individuation is in other words a natural process of self-realisation that happens to us entirely unconsciously but can be also conscious.

The person who goes through each struggle, pain, joy or guilt bravely and does not avoid such experience will mature into a richer personality and will have full lived-out life. By strengthening the qualities of consciousness we become stronger on the journey of our life (Jacoby, 1958). The second part of this life is actually a natural way of preparing ourselves for death as it is becoming a more present part of our conscious mind. Fear of death drives us to our wholeness. Only after we are able to accept death, we can finally enjoy even the smallest things coming to our life and then we overcome death (Jung, 2010).

Jung (in Hollis, 1995) was convinced that everyone has a Myth about death which we create unconsciously. They are very important because they contain collective archetypes³ which connect us with the transcendence and the infinity. It can symbolically manifest in our thoughts, dreams, fantasies, synchronicities and through them we can practice dying. (Jung in Jaffé, 1998). Von Franz (2000) wrote that the best way how to understand our Myth is exploring our dreams giving us a lot of information to pursue our growth. Also, almost every symbol that appears in our dreams when we are dying can be seen as a symbol - important in the process of individuation. Dreams of people who are close to death are usually accumulated, telescoped. Actually, it looks like individuation dreams and dreams about death may bring the same symbols to us even if our life is not in danger (von Franze, 2000).

³ According to Gordon (1977), archetypes are universal mental representations represented by images which we all share as instincts, arising through the evolution. They represent thought myths, symbols, rituals, fairy tales or instincts.

From the Jungian perspective, death and also a symbolic death can be seen as a terrifying, eternally bleeding scar inside of us that is limiting us, or, as a meaningful transformation, as a rebirth. We can reach the transformation by finding harmony with our own true self only, by integrating all aspects of ourselves, as our ego or our shadow – becoming the whole.

Nowadays, the Jungian Analytical psychotherapy is divided into different „schools“. Some of them follow Jung's views of the individuation process and archetypes, others use more psychoanalytical language, search for early family traumas or emphasize therapeutic relationships or focus more on analytic-developmental perspective and object relations. Death is not their main focus.

4. EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND LOGOTHERAPY

Existential psychotherapy and logotherapy are interested in finding wisdom in suffering through searching for our individual meaning of life.

"The view of existential therapy says that what we are suffering from comes not only from our biological genetic nutrient (psychopharmacological model), not only from struggle with our suppressed instinctive aspirations (Freud's opinion), not only from the inwardness of important adults who may have been uncaring, unloving or neurotic (object of relationship), not only from distorted forms of thinking (cognitive-behavioural opinion), not only from fragments of forgotten traumatic memories or from actual life crises, including those related to employment and relationship with loved ones, but also - from a confrontation with our own existence. " (Yalom, 2014, p. 146).

Existential psychotherapy deals with 4 main ultimate concerns that are present in lives of each of us: 1. death, 2. freedom and responsibility, 3. existential loneliness (isolation), and 4. life-purpose (respectively its absence) (Breitbart, 2017). Tornhill (2017) explains that if we understand that we all have free will to make our own choices and that life is worth living, we also have responsibility to ourselves to live it the best way we can and create meaningful existence in the face of the inevitable existential anxiety that comes with this challenge.

Death is the ultimate form of loneliness. Yalom (2006) noted that death and fear of it is the original source of our anxiety. It is our main anxiety which is present permanently since childhood (consciously, subconsciously or even unconsciously). Sometimes it is so suppressed into our unconsciousness that we may believe it cannot happen to us. We are aware that our life will end one day what is not easy to live with. To avoid paralysis caused by this anxiety we are building different kinds of defence mechanisms to de-escalate our fear like repression, suppression, rationalization, intellectualization through reaching wealth, turning to religion, gaining fame, having children, believing in personal omnipotence. (Yalom, 2006). Like

Francois de La Rochefoucauld (in Yalom, 2014, p. 5) said “*You cannot stare straight into the face of the sun, or death*”. I see these defence mechanisms very useful in protecting us from facing the reality of death, so we do not have to think about it all the time. It gives us feeling of safety.

Writing this thesis was not easy for me. As I have already mentioned, death was always kind of a scary thing for me. Even this topic fascinated me, at the same time it created strong inner reaction anytime I started to be curious a little bit. When I started to think about it more deeply, I realised there was always something that popped up and caught my attention (let’s say something „more important“) every time I set down to write or read something. The more I was putting it aside, the more anxious I felt towards this topic. Am I able to write this thesis? Do I have anything beneficial to say? I started to have doubts if this is the right topic for me and if I am able to manage it. Should I change my focus to something else? - I was asking myself. If we look at this from the Existential perspective, writing about death can confront me with my mortality. Avoiding writing could be my way of protection. Until then I had used those defence mechanisms to be distant from death and to reduce my anxiety. By not thinking about death I can be protected from it. I can be immortal. After some time, I challenged myself and stepped into the unknown. Only then, my anxiety became less of a monster in my closet.

We do not dare to think about death but we can kill or get killed in videogames, use black humour, watch horror movies, have some other fears or do some adrenalin sports. To protect us, this primary identity usually converts it into less toxic ones. Hides it behind other anxieties it is easier to be with and in a way that is easier to avoid. Some of us feel just some kind of discomfort in general, thinking of death just intellectually, others may feel some other psychotic symptoms or even direct conscious death anxiety (Yalom, 2014).

So, from this point of view, we can see claustrophobia (fear of being enclosed in small space or a room and being unable to escape) which is usually not connected with any present real danger, as a fragment that reminds us of the presence of death and our mortality. From this perspective, writing this thesis can be seen also as a way of facing death in a safer way, indirectly. Looking at it from existential point of view, may I just be helping myself to find a way how to *deal with my own mortality by writing this thesis?*

If we can understand those 4 aspects mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we might change the way we live. It means that through understanding the meaning of our life we can also understand our finality and only after that we will be able to accept ourselves and as well as our death. Let me talk about this a little bit more.

Existential psychotherapy and logotherapy believe that each of us has special values that give meaning to our existence. If I am able to live my life according to these values I can feel more stable and satisfied with my life and therefore I am able to tolerate the presence of death. If I am not, the awareness of death can be difficult. So, it is important to be “active”. Fankl (1994) says that activity is not here to escape boredom: boredom is here to avoid doing nothing and to make sense of meaning of our life. Wise approach to life means accepting its short-term existence and finiteness. We cannot measure meaningfulness of our life based on its length. Death gives value to our lives.

If we do not grasp the meaning of our individual lives or we lose it, we get disconnected from the world around us, from our authenticity (Tornhill, 2017). Then, we can start to feel emptiness, boredom or helplessness. We will experience “existential vacuum”.

Logotherapists and existentialists are trying to find meaning in suffering. It means that in every situation there is potentially meaningful information and we can grow through it, enrich our life.

Death is an edge situation. Denial of death at any level is denial of one's own basic essence and it generates even more extensive constraints for awareness and experience. Acceptance of the idea of death saves us. It acts as a catalyst that throws us into more authentic way of living and increases our joy of life (Yalom, 2006). Facing reality usually challenges us. We can start to feel a sudden drive to live our life more fully. Yalom (2014) calls it "awakening experience" or existential shock such as divorce, losing a close one or a job, a terminal disease, etc. The person starts to re-examine their lives. Remembering that life will come to an end and the emotions around it help us get in connection with ourselves and live our life in the present (Critchley, 2009). Most of people on the other hand miss the chance to be fulfilled by death because they never really search for its message (Van Duerzen, 1997).

It means that death is so important that if we are in contact with it, our view of the life can dramatically change and support us to live it more authentically. Yalom (2014) believes that it is important to confront death in the same way as we confront any other fear: *"We should contemplate our ultimate end, familiarize ourselves with it, dissect and analyse it, reason with it, and discard terrifying childhood death distortions."* Yalom (2014, p. 198).

5. GESTALT APPROACH

Death, in a symbolic way, is a very important element in gestalt approach. It is more like transformation of ourselves. Gestalt considers life a cycle consisting of constant changes, leading us to growth and development.

Gestalt approach does not focus on unconsciousness as Freud and Jung do. Gestaltists rather work on something that is more obvious and possible to connect to. They see a human as a whole by bringing awareness to the less known parts. The founder, F. Perls (1996), sees this wholeness in relation to our needs and in the principle of figure and background. Figures are very flexible. They come to our awareness and easily go back and become background and other figures replace them.

We can say that I have a strong need to finish this thesis (or let's say – to win a marathon or to express my anger towards my ex-boyfriend). My need becomes a figure that asks for attention and if I do not regulate the need it will be managing other aspects of my life. It will be hard to stop thinking about it and my thoughts will go over and over again to what I want to do about it and how. I start to think about next steps but I also worry if I am really able to do such a thing. My energy will be focused mainly on getting this done. In case it should take some more time to get it, my interests and hobbies may also go aside until I satisfy this need. After this need is satisfied, it goes into the background and a new need comes to the foreground. If I do not complete this, the old need will stay unfinished and will always attract my attention and will not allow other figures to come. Other needs, like going to a course, going into a new relationship or having a vacation, will not have space because of the old „figure“. And that uncompletion creates anxiousness.

Perls perceived anxiety as positive excitement creating spontaneous activity. We cannot feel anxious if we are in the present moment (in contact with ourselves). If I am feeling anxious I might be somewhere else (usually in my thoughts) but not in a present moment. This positive

excitement has difficulty to be released when we are not sure about the present situation and about what will happen after that. It is connected to our insecurity about being able to manage the situation. By doubting ourselves, we energise ourselves but there is no activity after that. The energy gets stuck and we get stuck in our own fantasies and worries (in Černý, Hajduk, 2009). Because of that anxiousness, a false concept of unchangeable self is created and we believe we are merely that. We stray to the world of our imagination full of prejudices, worries or critical thoughts and get trapped between the past and the future. Our self-image is distorted by how our environment sees us and how we see ourselves because of this. For example, I may believe that I am not a very creative person because I have always heard that we do not have such skills in our family. I may always be comparing myself with artists who are such creative people that compared to them I am not able to produce anything by myself and I may get stuck when I feel pushed (by myself or somebody else) to create something by myself.

Then, if I am not in contact with my „self“ in the present moment, anxiety emerges and does not give me a chance to perceive my potential and sources. I stop being in contact with this part of me because I feel anxious anytime I even think about it. Anxiety suppresses other emotions so I do not dare to have those feelings.

According to Perls (1996) each neurosis consists of 5 layers and the first one is mentioned in the previous paragraph. In this layer, we act as a role, play games and pretend to be somebody who we are not but what we want/should be and we identify with it. We are neither in deeper contact with ourselves nor with others. The second layer belongs to our fear of confronting with our true self and is represented by avoidance behaviour and it is connected with pain coming from this avoidance. The third layer is the feeling of being stuck, hopelessness that there is no possible solution in this state.

The fourth layer Perls calls the lawyer of death or the „implosion“. It emerges as death or fear of death. It appears because we experience implosion or paralysis of opposing forces (Phillippson, 2012). It involves contact with our own death and leaving the old identity behind.

This fourth layer is the realm of „the void“ or „not-thingness“ . Facing this part can be really frightening. Phillipson (2012, p. 197) declares that *„it is also the place where suicide can become an option, as the „death“ of paralysis is identified with physical death. In fact, there is death here: death of the way of being that is assimilated into much wider range of our possibilities. There is also a decision: „ I am not going to be like this any more“, which also may appear as a decision to die.“*

The fifth layer is exploiting when we create our own authentic self. The only healthy self is the one that is changing, forming and adjusting to different circumstances. Clinebell (1981) declares that by enabling to finish incomplete experiences from the past we gain the energy that was locked up and we can use it for our self-awareness and freedom in relationships and the change unfolds in its own way. Then we can finally feel emotions we were not able to feel before. We are in touch with our body, our sensations are clearer and our feelings are more immediate. The anger that used to be frozen is suddenly felt and maybe also voiced or our sadness is finally expressed in its nature. (Cohen, 2014)

From this perspective, each change brings death of the old figure and the new figure can be born. The process of destruction of the gestalt and the process of completing a new one can be overcome and can be also experienced at the same time. If relation to the old figure was really strong, it will become an important part of a person's life story. From this point of view, loss can be manifested as an end and at the same time as a beginning of something new. (Clark, 1982). Cohen (2014) says that people usually come to therapy because of their unchanging view of self (old figure) which does not allow them to adjust to the changing

world and to build a new figure. They become rigid in their perception of themselves (in their tendency to act, feel or think).

Some Gestaltists also focus directly on our fear of death. Philippson (2012) points out that we should talk about death. We must learn to distinguish between surviving and living in the world, only then we can move through despair to acceptance, including death coming to our life. I understand it as giving space for everything that wants to happen.

An illness or other disturbing experience is perceived as a challenge to change, to reach awareness of ourselves. Cohen (2014) mentions that if a grieving, ill or frightened person is in an environment that is too overwhelmed or emotionally impoverished to support these emotions, this person will have tendency to eliminate these expressions of self because it might be painful or even dangerous to express them. For example, someone may choke back tears because they believe that crying would make them exposed to ridicule because they may perceive the environment as cruel and unforgiving. (Yontef, Jacobs, 2010). If I get painful feedback from the environment and I felt vulnerable when expressing my fear of death in the past, this feeling still lives in the background but just as a quiet shadow and I am not very much aware of that. As those feelings look so frightening I will not try to activate them and because I am building my self without those, I almost forget about these feelings but I feel anxious anytime I feel vulnerable. But our body is constantly seeking for completion so even if these emotions are deadened, our deconstructed self (as well as emotions) wants to emerge and to look for completion through the impasse experience.

Young and Lester (2012) describe one of typical crisis intervention techniques which is discussing the client's plan for suicide. If the client gets enough acceptance and support when talking about it, through building the relationship the client will be more open to discover dissociated parts of their self and begin to integrate them. By exploring death and funeral

fantasies we can easily assist them to integrate death concepts or facilitate awareness of their suicidal desires.

Death also often appears in dreams in various ways and we can use it in therapeutic process. Another interesting technique from Gestalt therapy is „empty chair“. Tobin (1971) used this technique when working with death issues and especially with grieving people. He placed a chair in front of the patient and asked them to imagine the dead person sitting on this chair. Then they focus on emotions and thoughts that are coming along with it. Later on the client takes the chair of the dead person and expresses what is happening with them when taking this role. These two parts can lead a dialog until unfinished business is finished.

Staying with one's own memories, fantasies or thoughts (trapped by our belief system) around death keeps us in a kind of fictional reality because we will just stay in our heads. We can set ourselves free by connecting with ourselves in the present moment (and with our emotions or body symptoms). So, the awareness of this all helps us move on (from our head) and find a way how to accept the presence of our mortality by being present „here and now“. Only that way we are able to create our new and better self.

6. COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) as well as Gestalt therapy focuses on our consciousness but they look at death and death anxiety differently. CBT approach considers our belief system and cognition having important connection to our emotions, behaviour or even physical sensations. Malkinson (2010) says that cognition is a moderator between an event and its emotional consequences. This would mean that our beliefs are creators of our feelings and determine how we behave in a specific situation. This is the reason why some of us might have fear of spiders or death and other people not. Beck (2011) explains that instead of improving negative emotions, body sensations and non adaptive behaviour we should mainly focus on identification and modification of our beliefs.

Malkinson (2010) suggests that we are all born with biological predisposition to irrational thinking. We cannot avoid it and some of us have greater tendency to it while others lower. From this point of view it is important to be aware of our irrational thoughts because they are activated by our beliefs and may influence our behaviour strongly as well as our inner experiences. They take a form of evaluation and are far away from reality. We may, for example, think that death cannot happen to us because accepting the fact would be too painful.⁴

The CBT sees 3 levels of our cognition. The first of them is called automatic thoughts. They are conscious and they come to us in diverse situations. We can discover them by asking the given person what was going in their mind when they felt death anxiety (I do not want to die). (Beck, 2011).

On the second level there are intermediate beliefs. The core beliefs influence development of intermediate beliefs, our attitudes („It's terrible to die“), rules („Avoid any situation that can

⁴ Many experiments have been made about the impact of irrational thinking on grieving. For more information, read Cognitive-Behavioral Grief Therapy: The ABC Model of Rational-Emotion Behavior Therapy by Ruth Malkinson (2010).

bring danger“) and assumptions („If I go somewhere where there is danger, I will die. If I avoid doing it, I’ll be ok!”). These beliefs are usually created in early developmental stages and guide us throughout our life.

Then, the last level, called Schemas, consists of Core Beliefs that create one’s most central ideas about the self. These are truths about ourselves, others, our life and future („ I am likable“ or „I do not deserve to live“, „Death is dangerous and meaningless“). Negative core beliefs can appear only in time of psychological distress. (Beck, 2011). If everything is fine, we should have positive core beliefs. Schoulte (2012) describes that we do not have to change our core beliefs to make a change. Even core beliefs can bring the biggest change for us, as they are long-term, it is not easy to alter them. Instead of this, we can focus on challenging automatic thoughts and even intermediate beliefs which is also beneficial for a person.

CBT considers anxiety as normal emotion and death anxiety as a normal human experience or reaction. Usually, people are able to cope with such anxiety effectively which can be seen in common behaviours, attitudes and experiences as willingness to engage in death related behaviours (funerals, visiting a sick friend), being able to have a regular conversation on this topic (like consequences of death for them, family) and focus on living life to the fullest. If there is avoidance of death or illness⁵, or if death creates decrease of enjoyment in life or disabling worries, we can say that the person is using an ineffective coping strategy. (Furer, Walker, 2008).

In general, CBT does not directly focus on fear of death. Death anxiety is seen more as a symptom related to other disorders or phobias. Death phobia (also called Thanatophobia⁶) is a special expression for extreme irrational fear of death or dying which is seen as pathology.

In this chapter, I will focus mainly on death anxiety in general.

⁵ Furer, Walker (2008) see death anxiety as a central feature of health anxiety, hypochondriasis but also appears in other anxiety disorders. Our concern about death is often the main reason why we are afraid of serious disease. Therefore, CBT therapists treat death anxiety the same way how we treat other anxiety disorders.

⁶ Milosevic, McCabe, Phobias: The psychology of irrational fear, 2015

There are some studies of cognitive-behaviour therapists that explore relation of death anxiety and health or disease phobia (Noyes, R., Jr., Stuart, S., et al., 2002; Tearnan, Goetsch, and Adams, 1985; Papageorgiou, Wells, 1998). When working with my clients I often meet people who feel fear of death that suddenly started to emerge after a severe illness or surgery (or illness of their closed one) even though those clients were not under any direct threat of life. Many times, it is their first experience of fear of death ever and it scares them. It is accompanied by unpleasant and scary body symptoms (like sudden heart beating, waking up during the night with a thought of possible death, being afraid of losing a family member...). Checking the blood pressure, pulse, visiting the doctor every time the smallest body sensation appears and interpreting it as a life threatening illness are often present. What is interesting, those clients are not usually coming to the therapy because of their death anxiety but they usually see their body symptoms or behaviour as irrational worries, very disturbing ones and want to get rid of them. According to Beck (2011) a diagnosis of a deadly illness activates schemas – long-term fantasies that can be accompanied with death anxiety but not always necessarily. Furer and Walker (2008, p. 170) also point out that „ *levels of health anxiety may be higher for many people dealing with threats to their health or serious illness.*“

Death anxiety is commonly present at some disorders more than others, like panic disorder (being scared of fainting, collapsing or dying), depressive disorders (suicidal thoughts) (Wilms, 2016) or PTSD (concern about own physical safety or health) (Chung, Chung, & Easthope, 2000; Martz, 2000). „*Extreme trauma, even if it passes quickly, can evoke deep fears and anxieties in people, which may relate to their most fundamental concerns about living*“ (Martz, 2000, p. 4).

I have an experience that I can call an „extreme trauma“ that created acute anxiety reaction in me. During my University studies I used to work abroad during the summer time. One year I worked on one Greek island, close to the sea. During one night quite a moderate earthquake

suddenly appeared. Everybody was shocked, we did not expect that. The next morning, of course, everybody was talking about their experience from the night. We received information that if another earthquake with such amplitude comes it might create a tsunami. The next night another earthquake did come but it was a little bit milder and was not strong enough to create the tsunami. It was the first time I experienced something like that. Even I was not hurt I remember my strong feeling of helplessness and confusion in relation to the tsunami. For some reason, earthquake did not scare me so much, maybe because I had already survived that twice and had an experience that it is something that I am able to handle. I am quite a rational person and I always think about possible solutions so, of course, I was trying to think about what to do should the tsunami really come. Tsunami was something really unexpected and as I normally live far away from the sea I had not learnt anything about the best action to take when such a thing happens. I did not have a car there, no mountains around where I could escape or climb in case it would be necessary. It also happened in my „weakest“ time, while sleeping. In the end, the tsunami did not come at all but this experience changed something in me. I started to watch the sea more often, checking it just in case I could spot something suspicious, some potential danger. I was imagining big waves coming to the beach and myself trying to escape in the last moment. Other times, I imagined myself dying. It was accompanied by feeling of anxiety which I could feel like a pressure on my chest, my body started to shake and I felt very weak. Suddenly I wanted to escape from that island. I knew that it was an irrational thought and tsunami did not just appear on the horizon. I was experiencing this maybe for two weeks. I felt very scared but also curious about the power of the waves and started to read more about tsunami, how they are created, about their strength, what happens when they come to the coast and what I can do to protect myself. What really helped me to get over it was getting to know my fear better by reading about it, making myself stronger by knowing what to do to have a chance to survive and being exposed to my

feelings when watching the sea. The strongest realisation for me was, that I am just a small person against such powerful mass. Even I try to fight my fear as much as possible if it comes it will probably kill me. This acceptance brought calmness and more relief. I am not saying that I want to die or that I am not afraid to die anymore but back then I accepted that it may happen, it does not ask for my permission and the fact whether I am afraid or not does not change anything.

However, some studies suggest that there are people who have experienced life-threatening experiences and tend to become less fearful of death. (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; in Chung, Chung, & Easthope, 2000). Chung, Chung, & Easthope (2000) point out that in their research, the examined survivors describe resignation to death as a remarkable aspect of their existence. It brought them greater awareness of death and sense of peace and tranquillity. Facing mortality can result in positive transformation of ourselves and of aspects of our lives.

According to CBT approach, if we want to treat death anxiety, we can do it the same way as other anxieties by reducing safety behaviours, exposure to feared themes and cognitive reappraisal. Necessary part of the treatment is increased focus on life goals and life enjoyment as well as prevention of relapse. If there is a real threat of death it is necessary to focus on accepting the insecurities coming with the illness and to face the death calmly and realistically (Furer, Walker, 2008).

So, If I become a CBT therapist, my first goal would be identifying the belief system behind the death anxiety which we are usually not aware of. Through asking questions I would explore their presence and meaning on behavioural, emotional and body symptom level. I can ask direct questions like „When did this worry appear?“, „How often does it appear?“, „What does the worry look like?“, etc. After that I would help the client challenge his automatic thoughts or non-adaptive beliefs and transfer them into alter (adaptive) ones. I could use different techniques as relaxation, to reduce bodily sensations, educating about the symptoms

by therapist or giving a „manual“ to provide corrective information and support acceptance or even bring more enjoyment into everyday life. Having the meaning in life is associated with increased well-being and fewer psychopathological symptoms (Debats, 1996; Fischer et al., 2016; Lucette, Ironson, Pargament, & Krause, 2016; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005, 2006, 2008; Moomal, 1999; Volkert, Schulz, Brütt, & Andreas, 2014; Yee Ho, Cheung, & Fai Cheung in Wilms, 2016). And on the other hand - lower level of meaning in life is related to anxiety and somatic disorders (Moomal, 1999; Volkert et al., 2014; Yee Ho et al., 2010; in Wilms, 2016). Exposure is a special technique used by CBT therapists enabling adaptation to traumatic experience by putting us into the position of directly facing the feared situation (Malkinson, 2010). If I am afraid of death, the live exposure could be reading articles about death, going to a funeral or even planning one's own funeral. Exposure can also be imaginary. I can imagine moments that scare me as dying or death of somebody or I can write about my feelings. Another option is to use the exposure on body level and face the same symptoms related to my anxiety (to create heart beating by a short exercise which also happens every time I think about that). Furer and Walker (2008) mention that in their practice they have experience that clients often believe the imagination may come true. That is why they resist to imagine their own death because they could die if they imagine they are dying. One interesting intervention they do is that they ask the client to write a story about the therapists winning a lottery and tell them to wait what will happen. Usually, the therapist does not win anything. This helps client understand their irrational beliefs – if this did not happen, perhaps I will not die if I think of my own death.

Cognitive-behaviour therapy also works with bereaved clients. Grieving is seen as a complicated process that includes the grief itself and a challenge to search or even reconstruct our world and its meaning without this person. Sometimes complicated grieving occurs manifesting in intensification of grief and keeping the „non-adaptive“ stereotypical behaviour

instead of assimilation of the loss. It can be manifested as obsessional preoccupation with the deceased one, persistent yearning or searching for the lost person. Successful grieving ends with breaking the bonds with the lost person and there is no avoidance or denial of the memory of the deceased one's image. (Malkinson, 2010).

7. PROCESSORIENTED APPROACH

Processoriented approach was founded by Arnold Mindell, a physicist and Jungian analyst but processwork was inspired by many other philosophical roots and therapeutic approaches⁷ such as Jungian psychology, Gestalt approach, physics, Shamanism and Taoism.

Comparing to other approaches, Processwork does not only focus on individuals or on the effect of a group on individuals but it also focuses on groups, communities, world issues and problems including also socio-political aspects which are often absent in many psychology-based approaches. Each person as well as each group has their own identity and values and things they do not identify with so processworkers use the same principles when treating couples, smaller or bigger groups. According to processwork, working on world issues is as important as working on ourselves because the world and our inner experience are connected. In other words, the world around us is a channel through which we can experience ourselves. Mindell (1987, p. 121) says *„Imagine what the world would be like if people read newspapers as if they were reading about themselves... When they get upset with a dictator for imprisoning people unjustly, they will find out how they do the same to themselves and to the others, as well as consider how to deal with the actual dictator.“*

Mindell (1985) also uses the terms primary and secondary process like Freud did but in a different meaning. The terms are not related to consciousness or unconsciousness but to the distance from our identity. If we say that something is primary it means it is closer to our identity, we can easily identify with it and it is more known to us. Primary process is not always completely conscious. We do not have to be aware of every aspect of what we do and how we do it but when somebody points it out we easily identify with it and say: „yes, this is me“. For example, I am usually a very organised person but I am not always aware of how

⁷ Stephen Schuitevoerder (2000) in his „Processwork general theory“ wrote about those approaches and their relationship and inspiration to processwork.

I am able not to forget anything and how I am able to have a perspective of things. And at the same time if you say this is my strength I can agree.

On the other hand, being strongly afraid of dying, is something I do not really want to identify with. I can be very much aware of my relationship to death but my reactions towards it are something I want to push aside and I do not give any meaning to it. My wish would be not to have such feelings at all. This phenomenon is called „the edge“ which I will describe deeper in the next chapter. I am afraid to explore this part in me further and that would be something more secondary to me.

As humans, we have a tendency to disavow the parts of us which do not belong to our ordinary identity. They often emerge not just in our dreams but also in many other ways like body symptoms and feelings, fantasies, spontaneous motions, sounds, relationships issues, etc. From this point of view, processworkers focus on an individual's process and support those parts of ourselves to get to awareness.

Those two terms – primary and secondary are not fixed, it is more of a scale. Some parts are more secondary than others. In a very simplified way, what is secondary one day can be integrated into our identity and become primary the next day. After we integrate those parts, they become part of our primary process. In reality, those processes do not belong just to individuals but they belong to groups as well. Each group or even a nation has things they identify with and things they avoid, those that seem far away from their ordinary identity or even opposite to it.

Further in this chapter I would like to write more about basic processoriented terms related to death, dying and fear of death.

Levels of reality

In processwork we can experience three levels of reality: consensus reality, dreamland and essence level. If I say „I am eating pasta today”, „the grass is usually green“ or „I know I am going to die one day like everybody else“ , we are in consensus reality. Consensus reality is our objective everyday reality which can be observed or measured. It is something we all agree on, something we have a consensus with the others about. We also use our ordinary attention to notice and share our observations of ourselves and others, of objects and ideas. (Mindell, 2000a). Nobody can deny that the grass really is green when looking at it and people who had lunch with me really saw me eating spaghetti and we can all agree on what pasta is or the fact that I will die one day. Mindell (2000b) explains it as *„differing perceptions of individuals that correspond with one another“*.

On the second level lies the dreamland, expressed by our body feelings, night or day dreams, signals, symptoms or atmosphere. Dreamland (DL) is full of polarities and roles. When I say: „I am scared of death and do not like this feeling of anxiety around it“, I am in the dreamland. Rose and Ryan (2016) point out that information coming from the dreamland is mostly from the outside of our identity but we are not usually aware of them very much. They may look mysterious or even disturbing so we have a tendency to marginalise and ignore them.

In my dreams, death or a role of a „killer“ often appears. I often dream about being chased by an aggressor or a murderer, getting into fighting for my life. Sometimes I am not able to control my body and protect myself and other times, I am like a superhero jumping from roofs, climbing buildings or using martial arts to save myself. Also my chronic symptom can feel like a „killer“ who has the control over me and my altered experiences can bring me into a state of „death“. It can look like death is all around me.

The sentient (or essence level) is the deepest one. In our everyday life we have a tendency to focus mainly on CR level or dreamland experiences (which are quite subjective). Even

though, from the processwork perspective, all three of them are important and are present simultaneously, whether we are more focused on one or the other. At any point one can connect with one of these levels. The essence level is as important as our consensus reality. Mindell (2000a, p. 35-36) says that in the sentient level *„you notice deep experiences, normally disregarded feelings and sensations that have not yet expressed themselves in terms of meaningful images, sounds and sensations.“* Julie Diamond and Lee Spark Jones (2004) described the meaning of the sentient level eloquently which helps bring more awareness about our separation from others, drop our sense of self in order to develop more fluid or even multifaceted identity.

When going into sentient reality, we can connect with the experience of something deeper, something complete, without meeting any polarities, or separated parts. One example of how we can get there is through being aware of „flirts“, subtle momentary happenings in our environment or inside of us. It may be very subtle sensation, a flash of light that took my attention for a moment or a soft sound we almost do not hear but is present.

Szymkiewicz-Kowalska (u. d.) says that our essence never gets old, it lives forever so through connecting to it we can avoid the pain of getting older. I see this sentence as a very unfortunate one because it sounds like another way of escaping from the reality and all negative feelings connected to it. I believe that connecting to the essence level can bring us more than just this.

Being connected to the essence level one is beyond their usual reactions so what disturbs us is transformed because we get in touch and become the energy of what felt disturbing by going beyond our individual identity. Then it makes sense to us.

If we go beyond any belief and information we have about death and connect deeply with its energy, we can discover and connect to sentient experience. It is connection to something

bigger or greater than we are. Something that is beyond our everyday identity. In this level we can connect with our wisdom or power.

For me, when I go deeper into the qualities of death, I am able to connect with a different experience which is quite hard to explain by words because it is more of a body feeling than an image of something. But if I had to use words, I would say it is something like presence, disconnected connection or letting go. It looks like those are the qualities that have been asking for my attention for a long time. But I will come to this in the chapter on my personal experience. In this experience the judgemental or scary part about what could happen to me, if this had a meaning, etc. does not have a place. Finding our own essence of death is something we all should do. The exercise used with participants in the practical part is one way how we all can get connected with the essence level.

When working with a client in the sentient level, it is often hard to know what is happening with them as they may speak less or do not speak at all. Processwork uses blank access which supports the client to go deeper into the experience and avoid any (mis)interpretations or guiding the client to something different than their process is. *„The patient, in an altered state of consciousness, has their own inner experience which we often can't perceive directly. Blank access therefore supports the patient to follow what is happening for them without us naming it specifically. It leaves things open for the patient to pick it up in the way that serves them best. Example:*

- *Notice, what is happening and follow that*
- *Yes, I can hear that sound/see that movement*
- *Trust whatever you notice inside yourself*
- *Ah ha, hmmm*
- *A light touch on the part that may be moving with a comment about noticing the movement.* “ (Rose, Ryen, 2016, p. 61).

Gary Reiss in the interview with Mark O'Connell (2000) gave a very nice example of an essence experience with a woman who went into a comatose state. She was dreaming about and planning her vacation. A need for relaxation was marginalised and asked for attention in many ways (in dreams, fantasies,...). Coma or other illnesses may be one way of how we can get to those parts of ourselves that we do not allow ourselves to have access to. And it usually appears when we ignore smaller signals. If there is a rake punching my head each time I go into the garden, I can stop and explore this experience before a bigger „punch“ will come. We just need to be more aware of different signals and be open to follow them into the unknown... or we can wait until it knocks us down.

Reiss (2013) stressed that being in the essence level brings us into an altered state where the person experiences oneness. It is usually a very pleasant feeling which drives many of us to seek altered states and things that might help us to get access to this state. Let's focus a little bit on this special state of consciousness.

Altered states of consciousness

An altered state of consciousness (AS) can be any state different from the „normal“ waking state, outside of our usual way of experiencing. Processoriented approach views AS more as a continuum. Some of them are brief (anxiety or any other emotions, tiredness, laughing) and others last longer (meditation, alcohol, trauma, illnesses, coma or death) and at the end of this continuum lie extreme states leading often to hospitalisation. When dying we enter an altered state from where is not possible to get out.

Just thinking about death or meeting it (really or symbolically) often brings us into an altered state. Depending on where on the scale we are, it may be more or less difficult for us to keep distance from it (no balcony view). It can be more or less difficult to explain what is

happening with us and we can just react to that. It can also be harder to have awareness of other signals and to be able to change our behaviour in response to those signals (Herold, 2017).

What does it mean in practice? If I start to have dreams about death, somebody dies or I face my own mortality, it can bring me into an altered state. I will think about death a lot which will make my emotions stronger. I will be nervous, frightened of losing my life, I may even panic. I will not be able to look at the whole situation from distance and I will feel trapped, overwhelmed or helpless. It will be difficult to focus on something else because it will occupy my attention. Who would want that? Why would we go into it consciously? Those unusual modes are also very clever because they emerge when there is a need for transcending of our status quo. They bring important information and relief if we amplify them and understand them. If we look at it with curiosity and openness it may also be a very enriching process.

Some processworkers use processoriented approach with dying and comatose patients when people get easily into altered or even extreme states of consciousness. Mindell (1994) said that working with altered states of consciousness with dying people is similar to normal states, just more intense and remarkable. I find important to emphasize that the goal of a therapist is not to get the person out of the state and it may happen. The only thing that we can do is to support whatever is already trying to happen as we operate with an idea that everyone is trying to complete their own process. Many processworkers working with a dying person or a person in a comatose state (who cannot communicate with us verbally) have the experience that even in those states the patients were completing something that was already happening through different signals. So, our altered states can bring potential to grow even if there is a lot of suffering and our contact with reality is weaker.

We can support the process by mirroring (repeating of the another person's nonverbal signals) and amplifying (intensifying) the client's expression, and following and supporting any

dream-like manifestations even if we cannot see any meaning in it. Rose and Ryan (2016) remind that as the patient gets further along in the dying process, they enter those experiences more often and it might be difficult to connect with them verbally. What we can do is to be more aware of their minimal sounds and movements and to use the blank access mentioned earlier.

Role of an observer

I would like to introduce another processoriented term – an observer. In everyday life, when we are going through an experience there usually is a part of us that is able to watch what is happening to us. It is somebody who is able to watch all of this from a distance. The one stands outside, detached from the effect of the experience and this part of us is able to watch what is happening to us. This observer has an access to different multiple viewpoints or identities which exist within our experience (Diamond & Spark Jones, 2004). The observer can see things differently, in a non-judgemental way and can see some new information which we were not able to see while being in the situation. Rose and Ryan (2016, p. 61) bring this example: *„when noticing a deep breath in the other, we may say „that looked like a deep breath“, or when someone turns away from you, you may say „ I can see you have turned away“, or when feelings sadness you may say „ I feel sad right now”,... Metacommunication is a very versatile and valuable tool and it can be applied in many moments within the process to keep awareness of what is happening for all the involved.“* When we are in an experience, there is somebody watching us, our identity. We can also do this to ourselves.

Sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by all the emotions we have around death and it might be very difficult to stay with them for a longer time. Bringing the role of an observer consciously can make a change. We can gain some distance from our emotions, we realise

that we are more than just somebody being caught by feelings and by looking at it from a different perspective we get some new useful information. By taking the meta-position.

Once, a client who was very anxious about death, came to me with a very scary dream about his own funeral. In the dream he was partially able to connect with himself being dead in the coffin and partially he was able to watch the funeral from above, from distance. Connecting with the dying part made him very scared and anxious and he was not open to exploring this part more deeply. There were too many too strong emotions he was not ready to meet. What made him interested in the dream was the observer role that was present there, becoming somebody who is just watching everything and everybody, even the dead himself fascinated him. I supported him to go into the experience of the observer and to connect with the dream. He was there again, in his own funeral. He did not see himself lying in the coffin, but he watched everybody around crying and mourning. In reality he would be very touched by other emotions and he would go into those and try to do anything to make them less sad and less hurtful. But being the observer, he was finally separated from the others and he could follow anything he wanted to. I supported the observer to finish the dream the way it should be finished and the observer did something that the client would not be normally able to do in his everyday life. He disconnected from the relationship with the others and decided to leave the funeral and start a „new life“. The caring part died that day and he was leaving it there looking at the new beginning of his life when he can focus more on what he wants and not what he should do to please others. The observer allowed him to have access to different parts of himself, those he was afraid of having.

Death and fear of death

From the processoriented point of view, our fear of death and dying mostly comes from the parts we have not dealt with before, we marginalised them. Reiss (2004) noted that many

people go to see a physician to stop feeling unpleasant emotions. If a person is able to cope with the level of anxiety they experience, it may be beneficial to try to work with it first. Many times, behind the panic, there is tremendous energy and power trying to come to us.

The key is to be aware of those parts and let them be truly experienced. It means that by connecting with the sentient level we can look at the scary, avoided, unwanted things in our life or parts of ourselves and find their deeper meaning. „Process work sees fears of illnesses, death and dying as a momentary experience that can be worked in“ (Reiss, 2004, p. 73). Mindell (1994, p. 48) wrote about a man who woke up from a comatose state and talked about death: *„We are all pregnant with death. We all need it. In closeness to death we all have the same chance. We all have a chance to become our whole self“*. Allowing connection to those parts, we will not see death just as a nightmare like ending of our life but as another part of ourselves, perhaps the full expression of ourselves.

Death itself is a part of our everyday life. Every time we change something in our life or about ourselves, it brings an ending, which is a kind of death. We use it when we need to finish something or start something new. By learning about dying every day we can prepare ourselves for the death of the body. If we can learn this, as psychotherapists, we will gain meta-skills, our feeling attitude around death, which helps us to be able to follow our clients' process wherever it goes.

8. IDENTITY AND PROCESSWORK

„Living our everyday life without realizing the existence of altered states of death is like standing in the sun and not throwing any shadow on the ground.,, (A. Mindell)

Who am I? Who do I want to be/become? Who am I not? Who I do not want to be? Our identity is a social and historical concept that creates our own reality we live in. Through separating from others we become who we are. We develop our own identity through interactions with our family, institutions, culture, media and other connections we make in our everyday life. Our identity defines ourselves and tries to protect us (itself) from anything that evaluates as threat.

One of the basic terms in process work, primary and secondary process, has a strong connection to our identity. Primary process contains those experiences that are closer to our personal awareness. We feel they are known to us, they have become a part of our everyday identity. (Diamond & Jones, 2004). Mindell (1985b) also calls the primary process ordinary identity related to psychological concepts of self, ego and identity.

Peeling our inner layers gives us more understanding of ourselves (for example our skills, belief systems, etc.). Let me give you an example. I identify myself as a “woman“, a “wife“, a “psychologist“. I also perceive myself as being an “active“, ”responsible“, “goal-oriented“, also “playful“ and “caring“ person. These characteristics are quite stable and represent me in many aspects of my life. In my everyday life, I consider those characteristics as „me“. Goodbread (1997) noted this primary process is very important for creating basis for stability of our identity. It forms boundaries (edges) around our status quo and makes our identity more resistant to change. I will come back to the edges a little bit later.

Cohen (2014), a gestalt therapist, wrote a story that nicely reminds me of our edges work. He wrote about a story of Columbus’ journey to the New World. His mates believed that going

beyond the edges of the known world would kill them. The cultural belief at that time was that they would fall off the edge of the Earth into nothingness and die. They were so much afraid of going beyond the known and losing their lives that they were not able to see anything else. The fear stopped them from being curious of what could come next if we do not stop there and go further. Instead of crossing the edge, they stayed with the safe old well known “land”. The edge has an important role, it protects us, together with our personal and cultural belief system (why it is better to stay where we are) from danger. Without edges we would not be able to survive. Unlike the others, Columbus did not care about these worries and set off (he crossed the edge). At first he experienced some kind of disorientation when going into the new areas and he was not sure he could survive and get back home, safe and sound. The prize for this adventure was discovering new land, America.

This newly discovered land is something that we call secondary process. The secondary process covers everything behind that which we identify with. There are many things that we consider to be „not me“, that are further from our awareness, from our personal sense of identity. Many times we feel that those thoughts, feelings, sensations are just happening to us and they may make us feel uncomfortable. Even if we become aware of them, we tend to ignore and marginalise them, feel them as disturbers. At the same time they are very important because they challenge our identity, our primary process⁸. (Diamond and Jones, 2004). Some of them come and go quickly but others are long-term and may stay with us for most of our lives and appear for example through symptoms, dreams, accidents, etc. Some edges are not just mine but also belong to our society (they are common for all of us), those edges usually bring crises of our identity.

Processwork looks at our identity as a flow. Our secondary processes appear through signals, symptoms or other experiences always trying to reach awareness. Secondary dream figures

⁸ Processoriented use of the term primary and secondary is different from the way Freud uses these terms. Freud saw as primary something that is deep in our unconsciousness, that we do not have direct contact with, while secondary material belongs to our consciousness. (Diamond and Spark Jones, 2004)

are trying to catch our attention as every person who feels neglected and they talk to us through different channels⁹. They push us so that they can become obvious and we become aware of them. They appear in every nonverbal behaviour, spontaneous signals and double signals¹⁰. Sometimes without our conscious wish or our control they become suddenly stronger.

In our ordinary consciousness, we can perceive primary and secondary processes as duality. When we look at it from a deeper level (from the sentient level), primary and secondary processes can be seen as actually not separable and opposing parts but they are interconnected and coexisting together as a part of the flow of the experience. They both belong to us and our goal is to notice them and join both of them. (Mindell, 2006). Then, there is the edge, which is a barrier of our inner processes. As we cross our edge, our awareness grows and we can expand our identity by accepting the new part, the new essence of it, inside of us. But sooner or later, a new edge appears and new challenges come, again looking so impossible to cross. We can start from the beginning. In other words, after we process our secondary part, it integrates into our primary process which naturally transforms as a result of this change. This transformation can cause that our old identity dies and new parts of ourselves, new identity is born. For example, I may work on my edge to express my physical power because I am afraid I can hurt somebody. By connecting to my own power and integrating it into my life the edge might disappear and I change. The person that was afraid of using her own power is not there anymore and a new person appears – a person that is able to feel and express her own power.

⁹ According to Processwork, each experience unfolds through an ongoing flow of signals: sensory channels as visual, auditory, proprioceptive and movement as well as through composite channels as relationship (when the process occurs in relationship) and world (relationship to the world around us).

¹⁰ Double signal are secondary signals that can appear in any channel and does not go along (are not congruent) with the primary process (Arnold Mindell, 1985a). In other words it doesnot go along with the intended message. For example, saying I like seeing you but at the same time turning away from you. Or if I say yes to something but at the same time my head is turning „no“.The double signals are often disturbing primary process. Than, the primary process can enjoy doing it but the secondary process might be againts it.

From another point of view, primary and secondary „identities“ can be very stable and fixed but also permanently and frequently changing. For example, I might identify with being a curious person in general, but some days or sometimes, I may also identify with being very incurious and not open to new experiences.

As Mindell is trying to say by the quote at the beginning of this chapter, our life is full of small edges which are shadowed by the biggest edge, our mortality. Our own death is the biggest disturber (secondary aspect) in our lives because it threatens to destroy our identity. Fear can be one of the manifestations around the edge, as well as confusion, anger, avoidance, etc. So our fear of death, from the processwork perspective, can be understood as an edge to some secondary qualities that are just waiting for integration. Actually, it is seen as the biggest collective edge in our society. Many times, I was wondering what the quality of death was and I think I still do not have a clear answer. From working on this topic with my clients, I believe that it is different for everyone of us and I just need to find my own answers for my own process.

Let me explain this process with an example. Sometimes, without any control, what happens to me is that I just „disappear“. Usually, it happens when I am tired or I take some time to rest, so I logically used to call it „tiredness“. What happens is that while I am sitting or lying down, suddenly I disconnect from people and things around me, even from my own body feelings. There is no sign of communication with the outer or inner world. I was very much aware of this experience happening to me and I did not see any value in it. Sometimes it even scared me because I felt as if I was losing my own „I“, almost like not being alive for a moment. This fantasy of not being alive was so frightening. My primary process was protected by my edge which was represented by my belief system saying: „you need to have control over yourself and your life“. Then, my edge to such experience is about losing control and letting go. As I started to bring more of that quality into my life those states were not so

scary anymore – „we became friends“. Even now, this state I get into when „disappearing“ is a kind of mystery for me.

Those secondary aspects I had do not appear in our altered states¹¹ only but also in our dreams, body symptoms, fantasies, relationships or world events. We just need to notice it and pick up the energy they bring. Mindell (1985a, p. 13) says that *„every secondary process presents us with a sort of „identity crisis“ because we need to let go of the current sense of self. Let it die. Every time I have this feeling of „disappearing“ it gives me a momentary feeling of death and my connecting back with the world is like being reborn again.“*

¹¹ Secondary states that manifest through our body and put us into a dreamy state of consciousness when it is harder to connect with our awareness. Examples of such states are: being drunk, drugged, strong fear, panic, having strong emotions, being fascinated by something or meditation. Mindell (1998) pointed out altered states can be reached by blocking a given channel or switching to an unoccupied one.

8.1 DYING IDENTITY

Our identity, who we think we are, is being created since the moment we are born throughout our whole life and that's why it may be difficult to change. From the outside, it looks like a stable construct identified by specific roles and characteristics. As we keep building our identity through creating boundaries around our „ego“ we become protective from experiences or things that do not fit into the egos' perception. Other things do not exist or we see them as dangerous. Nevertheless, our ordinary identity is often tested and reorganized by unexpected situations whether we want it or not. Oyserman, Elmore and Smith (2012), when talking about identity, bring in Plato's analogy of repairing a ship. If an owner of a ship sees it is necessary to replace planks to be able to sail, he replaces it. But is it the same ship than? It functions as before but some parts are different now. Even if we change all the components slowly we can look at it as at the same boat or as at a completely new one (because there is no original part left from the beginning). With identity, it is the same, we can see it as a stable construct or as a dynamic one.

Death can be really scary because it can be seen as the inevitable end of the self. It is some external source that ends our our life, our identity but it is also a source that can make us grow. Regardless, it is a part of our lives. Whatever we do and wherever we go, it is like an ally - witnessing every step we make and giving them power by reminding us of our finality. Now,

I like the way existentialists look at identity. Human beings suffer from helplessness which is often experienced as something coming from the outside, something that we are not causing and is not subjectively result of our activity. As we feel these parts as outer ones, it is not a part of our identity, it is not „us“. Because of this experience, we feel that we are losing ourselves, our identity. Therefore, we are more scared of not being ourselves again than of our own dying. What we can do, when meeting something unchangeable, is building an attitude of

acceptance by focusing on our inner aspects. Through that we are able to change the suffering into our power (Mauer, 2012). Then, do we remain the same person after such experiences like this ship that changed?

Joseph Campbell (2004) writes beautifully about human transformation through historical mythology. The hero's journey starts with calling of adventure. He goes into the new experience when he needs to leave the old everyday world behind and step into the unknown. The unknown involves many dangerous moments or even unsuccessful trials. Here the old self dies and a new person is born. After that experience the hero cannot live his life the way he lived before, his identity inverses. The process of change does not always come with a smile on our face. Actually, it can often be accompanied with pain or sacrifices. Sometimes it is a radical personal transformation process changing our values, perception and giving us a sensation of freedom. A path that has brought moments or periods of transformation, are often accompanied by challenge, joy or loss. But it makes us stronger and wiser.

„Many people who have faced death in some way perceive it as a moment of change. It is during the dying process that the call for transformation starts to intensify and we are brought face-to-face with our everyday dying reality, shocking some of us into awakening to the call, or sending others into a place of resistance and denial.“ (Rose, Ray, 2016, p. 24).

Yalom (2006) describes stories about people who committed a suicide but survived. Their view of life changed dramatically. He was surprised how many people use their crisis and the threat of losing their life to make a change. *„I was filled up by the desire to live and the meaning of life. It is something beyond the understanding of most of the people“, „This is the first time in my life I enjoy my life. Finally, I am aware of my immortality.“* (Yalom, 2006, p. 44, 46).

Frankl (1994) stressed that without deeper understanding of death, people would push in front of them and overlook their commitments, their life would not have any meaning. If we turn

everything into something positive, if we turn suffering into triumph, we will grow. We will become somebody else and get inner freedom. Mindell (2000b) also notes that death has an important role in our lives. It brings us to action and gives us impulse to decide when we are „not able to“ move on. So, answering the question: „How would you live if you knew you have the last year of your life ahead of you?“ could give us a clue who we are going to become. Stephen Levin in his book „A year to live: How to live this year as if it were your last“ (2009) writes about his experience of „acting“ as if living the last year of his life. It was a journey of finishing unfinished business, investigating and dealing with his own fear of death and finding his own essential wisdom and joy. Let's practice our own dying and take a minute to actually think about what you would have to change in your life if you knew this was the last 365 days you have. Let's try to answer these questions:

„What would you do more?“,

„What would you do less or differently?“,

„What are you scared to do or delay?“,

„What was stopping you from doing that until now?“

If you started to live your life with these changes from tomorrow on, would it bring more fulfilment and meaning into your life?

And now, imagine yourself one year later, living the same life as you are living now, not changing anything. What would your future „one-year-older-self“ regret not to have done or accomplished? And what changes would you make now to avoid those future regrets?

Having the awareness of our mortality may support us to follow and direct our own life journey towards fulfilment. It is just up to us if we use it or not. It is up to us if we choose to only fear of it or look at it as a possibility to grow.

8.2 DEATH IN EVERYDAY LIFE

„Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn.“

Mahatma Gandhi

Is it not possible to exist without change? Whether we realise it or not, the world around us is changing every second and through time it pushes us to change. As we grow older, our body and view of life are changing, our relationships or financial situation are changing. Even our feelings or body sensations can change every moment.

„Every secondary process presents us with a sort of identity crisis“ (Mindell, 1985, p. 13). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, our primary identity is structured and maintained by the belief system which creates the edge. Everything that is beyond them is not allowed to come in, seen as dangerous and wrong and therefore marginalised. It is evaluated as dangerous and we fear to step into the unknown because we do not know what would happen after we got in touch with it because it seems to be in conflict with our primary identity. If we work with those edges and explore the secondary parts more deeply, we can discover some meaningful and rich information that cause transformational growing. Our old identity is not able to persist in the way it was until now. It dies to let the identity be reborn or even a new identity and new edges arise. From this perspective, death is actually a part of our everyday life.

We all repeatedly experience death every day when we go to sleep or lose our consciousness because of anaesthetics. We also experience something like death every time we forget something (Yalom, 2014).

After we realise that this is something that we cannot avoid and we start to look at it with curiosity, we will be able to let go of the parts of ourselves that need to die and welcome those aspects that need to happen. Rose and Ryan (2016, p. 23) use a metaphor of a snake when talking about changes: *„Life brings its lessons as we move through its various stages or*

passages, calling on us to shed parts of ourselves just as a snake sheds its skin. In order to meet new challenges, adapt to a changing world, and grow in self-awareness, new aspects of ourselves emerge as old ones disappear or transform.“

Mindell (2000b) stressed that in general, we connect death with a thievery more than with a gift. From the other perspective it can lead to freedom as it opens to new realities. Death appears in our dreams as a journey to freedom from the old us, to become a whole. Marrie von Franze also pointed out (2000, p. 148) „*that dreams of people standing on the threshold of death show that their unconsciousness, the world of instincts, does not prepare our consciousness for the end but for deep transformation and continuing living the process which is unimaginable for our ordinary consciousness.*“

9. KÜBLER-ROSS MODEL

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the pioneers in working with death and dying. She was working with dying patients in hospitals for many years. It was not typical in that time to sit next to the bed of a dying person, talking to them and trying to understand them. According to Bild and Gómez (2014) she developed a guide that outlined the stages a terminally ill person usually goes through. These 5 stages should be used just as a general outline and they do not have to follow one after another. The stages can appear simultaneously, in different sequence and we can also come back to a stage we had already been to before.

1. Denial

Usually when we discover that we are dying, our first reaction is shock and denial: „No, it’s not true. I don’t believe it.“, „No, not me!“. The first thing that happens is that we hit an edge which manifests by the refusal to believe that something like this is happening. It is a natural reaction of all of us. It is too painful, too scary to face the reality, so we reject it.

Denial is very important defence because it helps us to pick up and activate less radical defences. For some of us it is also the final state we never pass (when we never cross the edge), for others it is just a temporary defence mechanism leading to another state which we partially accept the reality of (Kübler-Ross, 2015). During this stage we suppress the reality and act like nothing has changed in our lives, we dive into our hobbies/work or go from one doctor to another until we find somebody who will say something different, more positive in order to keep our ordinary identity as before.

I would like to use an example of my grandfather who died 3 years ago. Around 7 years ago, he had been diagnosed with gum cancer. From that day on, even the doctors explained to him everything, he kept repeating phases like: „I do not know why I am not feeling well. At least I do not have cancer, that is something what I know for sure.“ Or „look, now my chest hurts,

if the diagnosis was cancer, I would not have pain on my chest, my legs would not be so heavy“ and so on. If somebody had even tried to tell him that the results might point to cancer, he would get upset and he wasn't able to have any further discussion. Those are frequent behaviour patterns in denial stages (as well as the edge behavior) together with confusion, explosiveness, inability to receive the information and sort it out. He was able to accept some temporary illness from which he will recover soon so his identity of a healthy person that can still have a lot of time to live and experience could be protected. Kübler Ross (2015) believes that it is important to allow people to stay in this state. This can help the person to move to other stages. Anyway, frontal attack almost always fails. Some of us use denial throughout the whole life in various situations and may keep it that way also before death and that is something we should respect too. As I already mentioned, the denial is one of the manifestations of an edge to something secondary when a person is not able to look, hear, accept something. The processworkers deal with the edge by staying near it, switching channels and if there is a positive feedback from the client also jumping over it. Each edge needs to be respected and crossed only when there is a positive feedback from the client.

2. Anger

“When the initial denial is no longer susceptible, a feeling of anger, hostility, envy and annoyance follow. Logically, the question „Why me?“ automatically appears.” (Kübler-Ross, 2015, p. 64). My grandfather, when he was going through this stage, used to blame the doctors. One day, they were giving him wrong drugs, other time he was criticizing them for not seeing him often enough, or another time, for asking him for too many examinations and wanting to see him too often. Then, my grandmother was not paying enough attention to him and he blamed her for enjoying her life instead of taking care of him while he was suffering.

Other time, when she was taking care of him as much as possible he criticised her for not letting him rest. In his voice, I could feel disappointment „between the lines”, almost as if the life itself had betrayed him. It was not easy for all of us and I remember that many times we were thinking of avoiding visiting him and we did not look forward to seeing him. Culkin (2002) says that a person can turn their anger to all directions and the others can feel anxious, defensive or angry. It is not easy to be around a person in the anger stage because all of those negative feelings are often turned against those who are around. Other clients may turn the anger inwards which brings self-blame, depression or guilt feelings.

From my experience when working with my clients when losing somebody or going through an unexpected change, it is necessary not to take their reaction personally. Instead of that, connect with them emotionally and give them enough attention and space to express all the negative feelings. It is not about us, we just remind them of all the things they do not have or will not have. From processwork point of view, the anger and bargaining are another edge reactions. The person is at the limit of what is ok for him and the emotions and concrete behavior is its representation.

In other words, it is about accepting their feelings and their right to feel the way they feel. This can be really hard especially when being in presence of a dying person because such strong emotions can bring also others to an edge because this can push our own buttons. We need to remember that all of these emotions are healthy and they need to be expressed in order to be able to get through into the other stages. By being aware of our own edges, as helpers or therapists, and working on them can support us to not unconsciously support the edge of the client and notice the client's edge. When we stay with the edge, something new happens and we give a person chance to grow by experiencing new experience.

Culkin (2002) mentions that for some people who are used to being in control of everything in their life it is hard to lose control over their health and life. This can create defence

mechanisms protecting them from feeling weak. In these times we are used to having control over our lives in almost every aspect and illness or death takes it away from us. Sometimes, in the anger state, giving up the feeling of being in control is something what may reduce such strong emotions.

3. **Bargaining**

After anger, the bargaining stage emerges, when we are trying to make a deal (of more time or days without suffering) privately with God or other force of the Universe. „If I think a lot about it and exchange it for something else, a miracle may happen”, „Please, give me one more year and I will...”, „I will do whatever you want if you.....”. We can also bargain with other people, like the doctors or family members. Kübler-Ross (2015) writes about a woman who asked her doctors to give her drugs to be able to live one day without pain so that she could attend her son's wedding. Whether we make a deal or not there is no difference. Even if our desire comes true, the given person is not satisfied and asks for another „deal” because it is just an attempt to postpone accepting the reality and that's why another edge behavior. According to processwork, people have different responses to the edge which can change also in time or due to the situation.

4. **Depression**

The next stage is called depression and it is manifested by extreme sadness, withdrawal, hopelessness or even suicidal ideation. Bild and Gómez (2014) describe that this sadness is a normal reaction in the process of dying. It is something other than depression and that's why we cannot treat it the same way. It is preparatory grief which helps us to prepare ourselves for the end. The person is confronted with their approaching death. Usually we cannot watch such sadness for a long time and we have tendency to say to those people that they should not be

sad or we try to derogate it. (Kübler-Ross, 2015). Their behavior edges us out and our reaction is just a natural edgy reaction. When talking about dying we often connect to all things that we do not want to lose from our relations, everyday activities, health to our everyday identity or life and it logically brings a lot of sadness.

But how can this person see anything positive about dying when they are grieving over losing everybody and everything they had and getting isolated from things they like? In this stage, also a reactive depression may appear accompanied by despair, shame and guilt from the loss (p.e. losing their ability to work, to take care of children). (Kübler-Ross, 1992).

I remember this state with my grandfather. As our family was visiting him often, from certain time he started to speak less. Although we were all chatting together he was not able to follow and often remained silent. What was more important than talking for him, was our presence. When he spoke, he talked a lot about his pain, tiredness and his feeling that his life is going to end soon and how terrible his life is now. He also often talked a lot about other people suffering from serious illnesses and their destiny. He felt he was suffering more than anybody else.

Acceptance

If a person has had enough time to go through the first four stages and enters the fifth one, the acceptance stage is characterised by withdrawal from social life, when silence replaces communication, calmness and accepting the fate come. It is not a happy state because it is connected with pain and sadness (but not as intense as in the previous stage). The person can understand that death is inevitable. (Kübler-Ross, 1992). I can understand it as being realistic about our life and future. For example, if I hope that something may happen and I will be suddenly healthy again or if I want to be successful in my job even when I am not able to work, that does not belong to acceptance. The acceptance means focusing on what is important for me right now, I accept what I am going through and I focus on realistic goals

like meeting my family and enjoying their presence. It does not mean that I do not want to live anymore but that my life is slowly coming to the end. Acceptance is an ideal state but not everybody can reach it. Kübler-Ross (2015) stresses that although the person slowly disconnects from their social world, they can still feel the presence of their loved ones. There is not much we need to do, presence in silence and touch can be enough.

Sometimes, it looked like my grandfather just enjoyed our presence and wanted to have us around. A few times he felt he needed to say good bye to us in case we would not see each other anymore. It appeared to me that he was not so sad, he looked calm and kind. Another week or even another day strong sadness and envying other people was more present. Sometimes, it looked like he was back in the angry state. Blaming everybody around and feeling betrayed by the doctors or even by us. To be honest, I do not know if he was able to connect with the acceptance, maybe it was just me who wanted to see that.

What I like about Kübler-Ross is her awareness of the importance of focusing on our own reactions and feelings (as therapists). After each interview, she met students and discussed their own reactions (having tender thoughts or difficulties) when meeting a dying person which helped them be more sensitive to their needs. Getting to know ourselves better around the subject of death, our reactions, edges, feelings were as important as the sessions with the dying people (Kubler-Ross, 1972).

The model of Kübler-Ross¹² was very popular and started to be used also in other areas, not just with dying people. Cameron and Green (2015) explain that the people facing potentially catastrophic change face the same stages as a dying person. They apply this theory also to

¹² Perlman and Takacs (1990) modified this model in a medical organization and Schoolfield and Orduna (1994) combined this model with other models for hospital oncology unit and many other reserachers used her model in relation to organizational change. Read more in book *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, Kearney, Hyle 2006.

management of change. It has been used as a method of helping people understand their reactions to change or upheaval.

From my personal experience and also from my work with clients, not only dying people go through these stages. Actually, it is typical for each of us, it does not have to be a life threatening issue. It can be any kind of grief like breaking up, losing a job or suffering from an illness, when our pet dies or we have to move out, because our flat was flooded. From my point of view, every unintended change or sometimes even a change we wanted (a wedding, having a child, changing a job), may cause edgy and grieving-like experience because we feel we are losing something. We can feel we are losing our safety, relationships, habits or our identity. I remember getting lost in a forest in one island on the border of Burma and Thailand with my husband. It may have taken us 10 minutes to realise that we were going wrong direction, not to our apartment. But we were already deep in a jungle and could not get back because of the flood tide. At first, I did not want to believe it and did not want to accept that we might be lost. I was looking around, trying to recognise something I know, I convinced myself that something would happen and we would get back. Of course, it did not happen. Then anger, sadness and disappointment came. I could not believe this had happened. I was angry with myself, with the flood tide, I was angry with the island about having this road, with the fact that nobody lived around. There was no signal and our phone battery was low. I was angry with myself for not having charged the phone before and for not having come back before the sunset. A little bit later, together with my frustration and anger I started to talk to myself: „If only I could fix it“, „If we get home now I will not try any other road from now on“ – I promised to myself and waited for a miracle. This stage was quickly replaced by sadness and despair. And then again, the anger came for a while and then the sadness again. We had been walking for an hour and although we started to have an idea where we might be it looked like we had to walk for another 2-3 hours to get back home. I was fighting with the

reality, trying to find another solution to get home but nothing worked. I got angry with myself again because it was almost midnight and we were not able to find the way out. Then, in one moment, I realised that I could try as much as I wanted but nothing would change and I just gave up. Letting go of trying to control the situation and doing something I just accepted the reality. We came back to our apartment at about 2am, tired and exhausted.

Such losses are a part of our everyday life and it is not really possible to avoid them. It also means that each day we go through those stages although we do not have to be aware of it. They may last for a really short time (sometimes even for a few seconds). We can also say that something in us dies every day because we have to give something up.

10. RELIGIONS

Even death can be seen as a universal experience. The way we look at death is strongly influenced by our belief systems and therefore also by our belief in something higher. Death is a mystery for all of us. I think everybody, at least once in their life, has asked the question what will happen to us after we die. As nobody has actually been able to really die and come back to life we can only speculate what will happen afterwards and what is the thing we are actually afraid of. Mankind is looking for these answers since ancient times and many people find the answer in religion.

Religion is considered by many people as their main source of strength when meeting death. Many nations created their own belief in something beyond us, something that gives order to our lives and our purpose on the Earth. Being a part of a nation also means (at least partially) taking its collective identity which determine which language used, the way we behave and relate the norms we respect but also how we think and feel about ourselves. Our personality is coupled with the groups to which we belong consciously and unconsciously. It is clear that religion gives us an outline of how we can understand humans' relationship to death and its role in our lives. I have always been asking myself about the role of religion regarding our fear of death.

I know a few people who speak quite clearly about their belief in the past life or afterlife and they openly say that death does not scare them at all. What surprised me was, that they do not even want to think about dying because they see it as a meaningless topic as they are sure about what comes next. I started to ask myself, „Is that it? Is this „the acceptance“ of our death and our mortality? Or, can this also be a kind of defence, an edge behaviour when a person is not open to talk about death and avoids this topic?“ Then, I remembered Yalom (2009) and his theory on using religion as a defence mechanism protecting us from facing our

own mortality directly and decreasing the anxiety. This made me curious and I started to search for more information.

In reality, there have been many (most of them Western) studies elaborated around discovering the correlation between death anxiety and religionity bringing conflicting and confusing results. Some of those¹³ found positive correlation (p.e. Wen, 2010, Richardson et al., 1983; Suhail & Akram, 2002), some of them found negative correlation (p.e. Templer and Dotson, 1970, Spilka, Minton, & Sizemore, 1977), and others found no significant correlations (p.e. Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2009). And some of them brought just partial discoveries. For example, Duff and Hong's (1995) found out that participants who attended church (or other religious rituals) often had lower death anxiety level. It looks like the relationship between religion and fear of death can differ from a context to context. For some religious people, it can have positive effect on their death anxiety and others can feel very anxious despite their faith. Also, atheists who usually do not rely on religion when confronted with hard times or awareness of death may sometimes become more interested in believing in some higher power after going through a difficult period of their life.

While reading about all the researches I felt that although it is not clear how faith (believing or not believing in something) determinates our fear of death we cannot deny that it has strong influence on what role the death plays in our life. It does not matter how strongly we belong to a certain religion, our main world religions have great impact on our culture. As they accompany our culture for hundreds or thousands of years, they influence our traditions, our belief system and rituals around death and dying. Although there are some cultural differences, most of the rituals are around us since the ancient or even the prehistoric times.

Funeral practices, beliefs around the end of life and traditions around grieving are deeply ingrained in each culture and we are often not aware of where we get them from. They have

¹³ Jong et al. (2017) made a systematic review and meta-analysis with 100 studies in this area with negative, positive and neutral effect. They also brought a theory of „U“ curve that the death anxiety is lowest among very non-religious (atheists) and very religious individuals and the highest among their less certain counterparts.

great impact on the view of our body, our expectations from others or traditions the others expect from us to keep. In other words, these beliefs, rituals and traditions basically support and prolong our collective primary process, keeping our identities fixed. Different changes, strange or new receive negative feedback in order to keep the current situation “status quo”. I will shortly introduce our 5 main religions from that perspective.

Reverend Garrett-Cobbina describes Christian religion as coming from death (of Jesus), so it is an important part of our life. *„Grieving gives people a chance to acknowledge what has been lost, and then to assign that loss to another dimension of life, so that the community can reconnect with what is living. This is how resurrection happens, and it's the purpose of funerals and memorial services.“* (McMillan, 2015 p.1). When a person dies, a funeral is organised within a week after their death and it is usually accompanied with a praying ceremony. Reading Scripture, singing hymns and reminding ourselves of our own death when we finally all meet God and our loved ones. From my own experience with Christian funerals, only close family members are allowed to see the dead body because it gives us space to say our goodbye. The funeral is a time when people come together and offer support. After the funeral, there is great emphasis on community support.

Rabbi Corey Helfand describes that for the Jews, each human being has a body which comes back to earth and a soul which goes to heaven after their death (MacMillan, 2015). Death is a natural process even if it happens at young age. An interesting Jewish ritual is ripping cloths in the moment you hear about someone's death as a symbol of somebody having been torn away from us. The scarf will stay there forever as a reminder of that person. To show respect to the dead person, the body is never left alone until the funeral which should be organised in two days. On the other side, people are not allowed to see the body during the funeral because it is seen as disrespectful. During the time of grieving, the family receive big support from

others. About a week after the funeral, people come and share stories, bring food and create space for their feelings.¹⁴ (Bell, n.d.).

On the other hand, when a Muslim dies, the person must be buried within 24 hours, wrapped in a shroud consisting of three pieces of clean, white cloth without sewn seams or knots. There are special prayers when a person dies when everybody stands up (nobody bows down like Muslims usually do when they pray). An interesting tradition for me is that Muslims cannot use any writing or building on top of the grave. A grave can be only marked by a stone (IQRAA, 1995). There are no formal rituals after the burial but it is recommended to visit graves to remember death and the Day of Judgment.

In Western religions (and also Islam), God creates each human and death is a transition to another kind of life, the „afterlife“. In the moment of death of the body we give up our lives and everything we had, our hopes and desires, including our old self related to the Earth no longer exists. Our death is a moment of ultimate justice when we will be rewarded or punished for the way we lived our life. Even Western religions understand death as a transition, funerals are usually connected with seriousness, sadness and pain and the purpose of mourning is to show respect and comfort for those who are grieving.

On the other side, Eastern religions consider death the end of one life after which the person will be reborn into a new life (reincarnation) depending on how they lived their previous life. Through reincarnation we purify our past as we head to enlightenment.

Buddhists want to reach enlightenment as Buddha did. Death is an important moment which gives them a chance to learn to give up the materialistic world with its pleasure and to be reborn. The dead body is perceived as just a piece of trash because when we die, the mind detaches from the body and continues living on. After a person dies, there is 39 days until the body comes to an intermediate state from where the body transforms into new life. During

¹⁴Jessica S. Bell, in the article presented by University of Kentucky, explains in more details the attitudes and traditions in Judaism.

that time, people often pray for this person to have positive rebirth. There is not a special ceremony for each person but everybody can come and pray for their family member. Buddhism is not actually a religion because it does not have any God, it is more of life philosophy.

Buddhists do not think about death just when it happens because it may happen anytime. Looking directly at death and illness is just a part of the nature. Meditation on death is one of the oldest traditions and something we all should do. Dalai Lama (2002) explains that if we are not aware of death, we will not be able to take advantage of this special human life. Buddhists created many different rituals around death awareness to let go our fears which are latently present in us. One of them is a death meditation. *„There are two common meditations on death in the Tibetan tradition. The first looks at the certainty and imminence of death and what will be of benefit at the time of death, in order to motivate us to make the best use of our lives. The second is a simulation or rehearsal of the actual death process, which familiarizes us with death and takes away the fear of the unknown, thus allowing us to die skilfully. Traditionally, in Buddhist countries, one is also encouraged to go to a cemetery or burial ground to contemplate on death and become familiar with this inevitable event.“* (Hawter, 1995, p. 1). Whatever one experiences in consciousness during their life is the same as they will experience in the afterlife. More awareness will bring more peace around death. Buddhist meditation practice called Phowa (the practice of conscious dying) learns to eject a person's consciousness at the moment of death and connect it with the mind of Buddha. Phowa practice can be used also when we are next to a dying person (Reiss, 2004).

Unlike Buddhists, Hindus see the body as important, consisting of five elements (earth, water, fire, air, void). Death is a natural process of giving up the lower tendencies of the previous stage when the body returns to the Earth and the soul follows a new journey. The

unwillingness to face our fear of death is present due to the emphasis we lay upon our body and the fear of loneliness due to the loss of people who were close to us.

When a person dies, the body is cremated and the soul gets salvation or starts a new life. The first nine days, the soul is still connected to the body and during the other 4 days the soul is going through a process of reviewing the mission (McMillan, 2015). Sabir (2010) says that it is auspicious to immerse the death body in the sacred Ganges River or to cremate it on its banks. Many rituals are associated with the cremation ceremony which is organised by the eldest son.

A friend of mine, who is a Hindu and lives in India described to me an interesting ritual in their culture. If a man never got married, after he dies, a wedding with a knife is organised. The knife becomes symbolically his wife. He does not know the reason, he is just following the tradition. In Hindu traditions, when a woman is getting married she has to carry a knife since the day of the engagement to be protected from the evil spirits. This might have a similar meaning.

In general, all our biggest religions keep a strong belief that from the time we are born, we start creating the fate of our soul after we die and we also influence how we will be treated afterwards (heaven, reincarnation, etc.). Each of our religions also promises a dream of “not ending”, “everlasting” life, „eternal“ life in a different form/way of being. What is important to point out is that we cannot hide behind the religion and be able to face our death and our emotions around it. What is important to point out is that we cannot hide only behind the religion but we need to learn to be able to face our death and our emotions around it.

Besides, there are many other religions (ancient ones or not so well known ones) having quite an interesting and different attitude to death. I have always been fascinated by the Vikings and their attitude to death. Death was just an entrance into a better, less painful place. If a Viking

died during a fight he went to the realm of Gods called Asgard and met their God Odin in Valhalla where everybody had a chance to fight all day and night long forever. It was a place just for heroes. This belief made them the most courageous men of their times and maybe also so cruel. According to Ellis (1968), others, who died differently, also go to Asgard but do not get to Odin. So, each person had a chance to meet their love ones there. Death was present everywhere and it had an important role in communication with Gods. The Vikings are known for their human sacrifice when accompanying a dead person to another realm or as a part of a sacrificial ritual for Gods to get something back in return for the rest of the society. The human sacrifice was the most valuable one. At the same time, the time on the Earth was well accepted even it was painful or cruel because the real life starts after our death only, not before. From my point of view, a conviction like this can be treacherous because it sends a message that life does not have a bigger meaning or value and that's why we do not have to really invest into it. But on the other side, I see it as one way of letting go of the control of our life. I can imagine that this kind of belief might have made it easier for them to accept anything that happened to them. With this attitude a part of me would see death positively and maybe that part of me would look forward to it (or even wish for it).

There are many different traditions around the world which seem very fascinating for the rest of the world because they approach death differently. I would like to introduce some rituals or attitudes to death which amazed me.

A long time ago, I read about a very interesting traditions of the Toraja culture in Indonesia, a Christian minority group living in the highlands. Firstly, when I randomly found an article with a title that sounded something like: „*Crazy ritual of making pictures with zombies, death relatives*“. At first, it scared me and I did not know if I even wanted to see the pictures. It looked disgusting and I was asking myself why anybody would do such a crazy thing. Taking the body out of the ground and making pictures with them. When I started to read more about

their traditions to understand it better I started to see it as a very beautiful way of relating to death and dead people. When their people die, they leave them in their houses for a long time. Those dead people are still a part of the family and they are treated as if they are ill or asleep. Sometimes, the dead person stays there for months or years until the family saves enough money for the funeral. It is quite a long time for everyone to have enough time to grieve and let the person go. The funeral can take a day or even a week and it is accompanied by dance and celebration. So, it is not a sad ceremony like in Western countries.

And here is the most interesting part. Every few years, during a festival called Ma'nene, they clean the graves and lovingly exhume their closed ones, wash them and dress them in fresh clothes (Adams, 2013). Kelli Swazey (2013) explains, this is also a time for one's self-awareness: „who am I ?“, „What is my place in this world?“¹⁵. This tradition has become one of the main attractions for tourists. For some of them, it is a crazy and strange tradition, for others it is a nice way of engaging with death. Life and death are all the time together in a very natural way. Those people show that there are different ways of meeting our mortality. I am not sure whether I would be ever able to experience or practice something like that but I love this attitude of letting death live next to us as a part of life.

Something similar exists in Madagascar. During one rite, people organise a second funeral, years after the person was actually buried. They take the dead out of the grave and dance with them as a symbol of gratitude. People are celebrating, dancing, eating and drinking. Larson (2001, p. 123) describes that: „*the most apparent purpose is to honour the departed ancestors by regrouping them in the same tomb and rewashing their bodies with new winding sheets to ensure their remains are not dispersed into unidentifiable dust.*“ Emotionally it is usually a very intense ceremony when they confront their own death and also remember their loved ones.

¹⁵ An antropologist, Kelli Swazey and his wife of Torajarian describe during their TedTalk (Life that doesn't end with death) more deplee the view of death in this culture.

For some people, those traditions can be seen as disrespectful to the body. It seems that they have different attitudes towards our body than we have. In our culture, the body is seen as sanctified and therefore it needs to be treated with honour and dignity – we should not manipulate it, only the close ones can touch the body during the funeral to say goodbye. It is expected that the funeral will be organised within a few days after the death and after that moment we can just see the urn or visit the cemetery. As I go to funerals in Slovakia, I notice that there are more and more people avoiding touching or watching the dead person. The focus is more on the grieving person than the one who died. Some people come to the funeral to support the grieving ones. Grieving and rituals around death are created to give a person space to grieve over losing temporary connection with that person and for the others to provide care. (in MacMillen, 2015). I would like to mention one more interesting tradition in Mexico called Santa Muerte (Holy Death). It started in the mid-twentieth century as a cult and became quite popular past ten years. Santa Muerte is a folk deity who personifies death, portrayed as a skeleton wearing long dress and holding a scythe and a globe. She represents a power of death but also positive change and growth. She is invoked for protection from brutal death, enemies and prayers ask her for strength, good health, employment, love (Oleszkiewicz-peralba, 2012). She can bring miracles as a favor in return for the faith. Worshiping the Santa Muerte does not mean asking for our own death but for the death of ugliness, extremely difficult or hopeless situations.¹⁶

From the perspective of those „crazy“ cultures we might be avoiding death too much and do not allow ourselves enough time with the person and for full grieving. It is interesting how close those people are to their relatives even when they are dead. All the rituals around funerals and relating to dead people, regardless the way they look and whether they are

¹⁶ The cult of Santa Muerte is detailed described in book *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* by R.A. Chesnut.

religious or not, are here to help us meet our loved ones for the last time and say goodbye.

I think we should look at them this way.

11. SHAMANISM

„The only thing that is real is the being in you that is going to die.“ (Carlos Castaneda)

I would like to introduce you to another way of looking at death and our identity, the Shamanistic view which is also one of the basic roots of the processwork. Eliade, in 1964, recognized patterns that are common for people across the world and called it Shamanism (Charing, 2015). But Shamanism, as a spiritual tradition, has been practiced in many different ways for more than 30 000 years, amongst many tribes and societies (Green, 2001).

According to Horwitz (2001), a shaman has different roles in different cultures. In some cultures he takes care of the whole community from healing practices to transferring the soul of a dead person to the other side, or they take care of initiations into life (birth), adulthood or death. In general, shamans are holders of ancient techniques that are used to take care of the well-being and health of themselves as well as the community by maintaining personal power. (Harner, 2010).

Lévi-Strauss (in Wolf, 2002) saw shamans as the first psychoanalysts because they also need to go through and survive their own transformation in order to become healers. This is something that also a therapist has to do. A shaman is a person who is able to cure themselves by experiencing psychological death and that is why they are able to understand and heal others more effectively. While analysts use free associations, interpretation and analysis to discover other „realms” and to lead the old parts to die, a shaman uses altered states of consciousness, spiritual journey and other techniques. A Shaman is also similar to a processworker. They both need to develop the ability to notice unusual signals or processes (also altered and extreme states) in order to support it in themselves and in others during the individual journey. At the same time, it is inevitable for them to learn how to move from an unusual state to an ordinary reality with awareness. Shamanists believe that these journeys where we die and are reborn again bring transformation and healing and processworkers use

different ways of reality (CR, dreamland, essence level). This is the focus for both of them. Among the Plain Indians of North America, this experience is found in their vision quests; among the Siberian Yakut a shaman observes their own death by dismemberment (Halifax, 1982 in Wolf, 2012); among South African shamans, the ancestors transform a person from their old form into a new one (Lambrecht 2015). In this chapter, I will share views of some of shamanistic cultures to bring more insight into the relationship of shamanism to death.

Shamans see a very close connection between our consensus reality and the spiritual world. Actually, there are 3 realms we can visit and experience with our senses: Upper World (the realm of our ancestors and spiritual leaders), Middle world (the actual world we live in) and Lower World (the home of spiritual power) (Charing, 2015). We get into those realities through going into altered states of consciousness. Harman (2010) points out that we cannot say that just one of them is real and the others are not. Our perception through our senses defines our reality wherever we are. A shaman is able to travel between those worlds and to get power, necessary knowledge or an important message. Green (2001) sees as central to all shamanic activities the shamanic visionary journey: when one travels away from our consensus reality (the one we all agreed on) beyond one's body and goes into other realms. In those new realms, a person perceives spiritual reality where it is possible to communicate with spirit helpers who are here to support the persons on their journey.

This is very similar to processwork view of 3 levels of reality. When moving into another realm, we often have an experience outside of our identity. Leaving the consensual reality, diving into another worlds (dreamland and essence level), connecting with some kind of wisdom and taking the information from there back into everyday life. Gary Reiss (2001) point out that shamans and process workers assist people in developing different tools to negotiate with those worlds without getting lost in them and trying to bring all three worlds together and move between them. Non-ordinary worlds are very special because they connect

us with the nature, creativity, spirit world, inner experiences and with the deepest parts of ourselves.

Shamans perceive death as a part of our life, it is not possible to separate it really. Death is present everywhere. (Horwitz, 2001). Frešová (2011) explains that in Shamanism there exists the big death and the small death. Big death is what in our society is called the „real“ death or death of our body. Then, there is the small death which occurs when we are going through bigger life changes that transform us, our personality and our identity. It is death of our ego (transcendence) or in other words, the sense of ourselves the way that it is no longer running our lives. (Charing, 2015)

From shamanistic point of view, If we want to understand the small death at first we need to understand how our ego or our identity works. If we do not see our life as a wholeness we will have a tendency to divide it. This leads to dualism and suffering because our ego starts to judge, hate or go astray resulting to rejecting of some aspects of our lives (Charing, 2015). Some things become weird, inappropriate, or too hard. When our ego believes in its separation from the other parts, it does not want to give up the ordinary life (Wolf, 2012). We will be held in our identity and everything behind it we will see as danger. Our identity then, is something we could get rid of.

Little deaths are something that processwork explains as the result of crossing the edge. At first we have to confront the „darkest“, sometimes even terrifying unknown parts of ourselves. Our primary identity is seeing it as it is something new, unknown and potentially dangerous. We will get to an edge which can last for a long time (sometimes, it can accompany us our whole life) and hold even stronger to our identity. Everything behind it is seen just as danger and unwelcomed. This edge is called long-term edge. When discovering and unfolding new, potentially valuable information in it, there is a transformation happening. Some part of our primary process dies and we integrate more unknown part of ourselves into our identity.

Carlos Castaneda (1996) writes in one of his books that if we want to „eliminate” our identity we need to let go of our personal history, forget our own importance and stop living mechanical way of living. Identity is not a real thing, it is just a creation of our memories, emotions and thoughts. Our personal history holds it all together and its feeling of importance prescribes us how we need to act and what should be happening around us. If we free ourselves and let go of our personal history, of our feeling important and we leave our life full of habits, we will be able to connect with the present moment which is according to Castaneda actually the goal.

Jung brings similar thoughts related to our identity and deaths. In his book *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (Charing, 2015) writes about his own experience with shamanic initiation. Based on his experience with shamanism, he believed that in our society we have lost our soul which leads to spiritual plight. Death is an important teacher in the process of diminishing our „crappy thoughts” (our identity), so that we can allow space for new things. If we ignore our death, we cannot use it as our advisor and its wisdom. But if we become more aware of it, as well as of our fear, we „free” ourselves from the identity. (Horwitz, 2001) There will be no identity limiting us and we will have freedom to experience the things behind it. In processoriented terms, we will jump over the long-term edge and will be able become anything. We will gain the freedom to create some unfamiliar identity. We will be able to become anything.

Experience of losing our identity is a beautiful illuminating moment but it can also be horrific because our ego wants to protect itself and it creates fear as defense mechanism. (Charing, 2015). It can be also hard because we often feel very attached to some parts of us and the fantasy of losing it might make us feel that we are losing something very valuable to us.

This is a very interesting concept which actually says that the more we are attached to our old ways, the more painful and scary it may be. If we let go of all of this, then we can be reborn again and the way we look at things will change. I understand it as it is all just about the way we look at it, there is no objective reality. We create our own reality as well as the fear and we make decisions driven by fear but we can also be with the fear, welcome it and learn from it. If we see it as an enemy, we will feel threatened by it. On the other hand, if we become „friends“ with it, we will become fearless and get to know our true self. We cannot scratch or beat the fear but we can face it through accepting our death and then we will experience something else instead, something deeper. We can choose whether we want to be a limited person or to become unlimited and to welcome our different parts. Our identity is not real, it is just a shadow which never really existed. We can choose what reality we want to see. Wolf (2012) saw it very similarly to Jung's individuation or Campbell's hero's journey. Charing (2015) nicely compared this process to shedding our old skin by consciously destroying our old one. The new skin then is our new better us.

The fear of death often brings the idea of separation and is strongly connected to our emotional and physical identities. Usually, experiencing the "small death" get us on an edge which feels very scary and unpleasant but if we meet our fears we can let those parts die, the fear disappears. It is just death of the old ways of thinking and doing things we do not need to do anymore, of non functioning relationships, beliefs or our losses. So there is no reason to be caught by the fear, we just need to become aware of it and invite it.

This kind of approach has attracted many researchers and other specialists from different fields. Some experts are interested in parallels and commonalities shared by shamanism and near-death studies (Green, 1998; Halifax, 1990; Harner, 1980; Ingerman, 1991; Kalweit, 1984, 1987; Peters, 1990; Ring, 1989, 1990; Walsh, 1990; in Green 2001) and they found that people share similar experiences like going through a tunnel with light but we do not have to

wait for our death because this kind of experience is available anytime through the shamanistic journey (Green, 2001). When looking at life and death from shamanistic perspective, each significant change in our life brings death of a part of us. So, we can die or practice dying every day.

Horwitz (2001) highlights that everybody, whether it is a shaman or anybody else who wants to work with dying people, needs to connect deeply with death and their own fear of it. Shamans teach us how to become aware of death in a more natural way, to be more aware of death around us from the cycle of changing seasons to death of a person or our own death.

What I like about shamanism is that they do not try to say that meeting death is a pleasant and just beautiful experience. Many times, it is a painful and life threatening experience when we are not sure if we can survive it or not. But the attitude of confronting ourselves with death and our fears instead of trying to avoid it or to suppress it is actually an enriching experience. There is nothing more to do and at the same time, it is enough.

12. DEATH AS A COMPANION OR ALLY

While reading about various psychotherapeutic approaches to death or even different religious attitudes, I felt most of them are trying to find a kind of meaning in death. The awareness of our finality helps us not waste our time on the Earth and it even makes our life special and better or it can symbolise the end of one part and the beginning/creating of something new. Other approaches avoid this topic and for them, death represents a symbol, information about something more important and if we focus on it we can see something deeper behind our feelings towards death.

Of course, I can agree with all of the mentioned above. I like the attitude of trying to see also positive aspects in something that looks negative, unpleasant, scary. But on the other hand, to be honest, I have no idea if I can completely agree with this. What if, maybe, it is all just a bunch of different defence mechanisms around the edge, just helping us decrease our fear of death and nothing else? Do not misunderstand me, I am very thankful we have these ideas and I can strongly relate to some of them. I perceive them as an important source that gives us a sense of safety and stability, as well as challenges in our life.

At the same time, I feel like they all are more focused on this positive side and kind of neglecting the one that brings all the heaviness and other strong emotions around it. This is just my feeling and perception, maybe you have a different opinion and I respect that. I feel that we (in this modern Western society) focus on this negative part only in case it is too heavy... When we are too scared or anxious and do not know what to do about it. I do not know many people who would be just curious about death and who would want to think about it if they are not pushed there by serious circumstances or emotions.

We all learn about our sexuality (and sexual life) since our childhood, the topic seems even more accurate at the age 12 or 15, or later. Our parents often talk to us, explain to us how our body and relationships work since we are kids. Then, when the times comes, we can

understand what is going on, and we are able to go deeper into it. We have time to prepare for it and our emotions do not block us. Why do we want to see death when it is really touching us only? I believe that to use the same approach to the topic of death as to the topic of sexuality is important. This allow us to learn how to accept our own feelings and that is where the journey from denial to acceptance starts.

As a student of processwork I have started to explore my own relation to death more closely. I was aware that thinking about death brings unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety or hopelessness. My original aim was to get rid of those feelings somehow, by taking some energy from my „death experience“. But when I went into the experience of „dying“ or „being dead“ during the inner work or during my therapy sessions, I hit the edge quickly. I was feeling even more unpleasant emotions. It just did not work. It even made it worse. I felt helpless, I wanted to get away from it. I did not see anything positive in „death“. One of the important things that processwork taught me was letting go of my own control over a situation, just being able to accept and to be with the awareness with whatever is happening. This was a very difficult and long journey to make just the small steps to let go of the control (let this part of me die) and welcome and be open to whatever is on the other side. I found curiosity there and more peace about whatever is happening to me or around me. I have been learning that through taking different roles emerging in my dreams, from my acute body symptoms, my long-term symptoms or even from my relationships or altered states. This learning of letting go of the control also helped me to be more open towards death when I could feel there was no control at all.

What I have learnt from processwork is looking at the secondary energy with curiosity and to believe that there is always something potentially useful. And with death I have learnt that it does not have to be always and only pleasant (some fear and sadness around dying still remain). I also got to know my edges more closely and I understood my belief systems that

creates the fear. I realised that the more known something is, the less edgy it becomes. It brought more fluidity to me to enter the „death like states“ (the essence level) and to be more open to whatever is happening. I used the attitude of deep democracy which means welcoming all the parts, even the marginalised ones that are present.

Now I would like to talk more about the importance of dealing with the issue of death even if we do not see the urge to do it. And I think it is really necessary, especially when we are in a helping profession and we meet people having „death issues“.

Thinking about our own death provokes feelings like rage, mistrust, panic, confusion or even vulnerability. Culkin (2002) notes that even if we do not think about death, just facing a dying person brings anxiety in us. Many doctors and nurses working with dying people can feel guilt that they have something (life, health, relationships, etc.) the dying person is losing. It often leads to avoidance of the person or conversations around serious topics (for example turning difficult topics into a little joke) which is a sign of being edged out.

For some of us, these emotions can be buried somewhere deep inside of us. Anxiety or fear usually occur when we are aware of death just passively (which gets us to the edge again) instead of facing the reality and dealing with it. By denying or not being in contact with this feeling we actually do not get to know anything about them and they may surprise us and overwhelm us when something strong happens. We do not have any awareness around it. It can be death of somebody close to us, an illness, fear of death, an accident but sometimes it can be also something not directly connected to death which pushes the button. Because of this, we will not be able to be real with the person with death „issues“ but instead of that we get imprisoned by our own (confused) feelings. The more we deny this part of ourselves, the less control we have over it. From my own experience, the attitude of an observer, just watching whatever comes, can give us freedom (from the edge). This is something that processwork also taught me. If we allow ourselves to welcome all the thoughts coming to us

with kindness and appreciation it will be much easier. It requires willingness to let go of what we have and who we are and get detachment.

I would like to write more about therapists now and their important role when talking about death. Of course, this is something that can be applied to anybody, no matter what we do and who we work with. When working with a client's death awareness, we might not be able to handle our emotions and block (protect) ourselves. As this is a very vulnerable topic for the client, with this kind of behaviour we might abandon the client in the moments they need it the most. McKittrick (in Culkin, 2002) highlights that we need to be aware of the countertransference (the emotional reactions of a therapist to their client) and do not let our fears and inner conflicts interfere with the therapeutic relationship. He names 3 potential negative results of countertransference:

1. the therapist unwillingly supports the patient's denial of death by avoiding the issue.
2. the therapist regresses to a helpless position in doing therapy with the patient.
3. the therapist engages in an anxious avoidance of the patient and his concerns.

It is also important to mention a processoriented term of „dreaming up“ which appears as an unconscious reaction to a missed client's double signal. Julie Diamond explains the dreaming up as: *"responding to some unintended signals in communication without being aware of the communication that caused this reaction. This experience lasts while we are in the presence of the double signals of this person"* (2004, p. 45). By getting to know our own reactions and relationships to death better, we can recognise more easily when dreaming up is happening and we can consciously use it for the benefit of the therapeutic process.

So, before we start to work with a person on this issue, at first we need to work on ourselves and our relation to death to minimize the effect of our attitude towards death. The work with such clients does not start with building a relationship with them but building our

own relationship to death, dying or grieving. This can help us notice the dreaming up more easily.

In one interview Yalom said something similar (2008). These days, therapists are not encouraged to focus on death anxiety and that's why they do not see it when it occurs or they may misinterpret the situation. Only those therapists who are able to focus on the patient's death anxiety are able to help patients with their relation to death. Once a therapist demonstrates his own personal equanimity around death, their patients will be able to bring the topic more easily (and it will also happen more often). He believes that such clients are seeking for authentic emotional connection and relationship which makes them feel less lonely and may show them their problem in a more useful way.

For me this is something else than looking for the positive aspect of death. Being with the presence of death each day and welcome our positive and negative emotions we have around this issue. My experience with being in contact with death is: the more I talk about it and the more I explore this topic, the calmer and more respectful I feel around it. But I will talk about my experience more in the next chapter.

13. MY JOURNEY OF DEATH

Death has always been a mystery for me. When I was a child or a teenager I was sometimes thinking of death. I was asking myself what would it be like to be dead and what may be the truth amongst all the beliefs other people have around death. I did not know and I felt I did not want to talk about this with anybody because they could just share their beliefs but not the reality. I did not care much about the process of dying. The idea of dying was quite clear for me. You can die quickly or slowly, with pain or painless, with people around you or alone, so there was nothing else interesting or mysterious about it. But I was very scared of losing myself. I had a fantasy that the death would put an end to my awareness. My belief system was that when a person was dying there was still an identity and awareness. When the moment of death comes you lose it and you will never get it back. I was thinking what might come after death and if there was anything at all. And as I am often critical and I have a tendency not to believe in anything just because somebody said it but I often questioned near death experiences and the afterlife. So, I also accepted the possibility that it would just be the end of myself in any form. Just thinking about identifying with some kind of afterlife feels like lying to myself and looking for ways of how to protect my „self“. I do not have any belief about what is going to happen and I am not looking for the answer anymore as I accepted that nobody can truly answer this question for me.

When I was younger I understood dying as something like not having any identity when nothing can perceive myself, who I am. And maybe, I am not sure, perceiving nothing at all. It was a rational decision and I was fine with it. Sometimes, when I imagined what it would be like to die and went on with my fantasy into the experience I always felt or saw darkness and myself disappearing in it forever. This all was also a part of my belief system. The feeling of the blackness when imagining being dead was creating anxiety in me and I did not like it. I always used to get to an edge which was manifested by not being able to focus on the

experience deeper, together with confusion, criticizing the experience, feeling anger or helplessness, escaping into rationalisation, feeling stuck and a need to get further. I used to go into this experience once in a few years, just checking if the feeling was the same. And it was. As nobody around me was open to talk about death with me I just kept it for myself and I did not feel the urge to search for somebody as I felt nobody could help me. Maybe it is connected to one experience that I had when I was 7 years old and I lost my consciousness after I had been hit by a car. It was the first experience in my life when I realised I could die. I do not remember the accident, just the moment when I saw (kind of visually) the blackness and nothingness for some time (I do not know if I was connected to it for a millisecond or for minutes) and there was no meta-communicator around (somebody internally who could talk about the experience at that moment). Then suddenly I started to hear a voice speaking to me, and to feel pain in my ear and leg while lying on somebody's hands in a car. Just then, I was able to realise the blackness and emptiness I had been experiencing before and my primary process evaluated it as something unknown and strongly dangerous. Actually, I was not hurt seriously but it was a strong experience for me. Sometimes I used to talk about the experience of being hit by the car and about the consequences but I did not share the experience of blackness and nothingness with anybody for more than 15 years. This was a really strong edge for me to explore the experience of losing myself totally and I just wanted to forget about it.

When I entered my training I was aware that my relationship to death was a little bit undealt with and I felt I wanted to open and confront myself with it. I guess I just hoped that I would find something very positive there and the unpleasant feelings would just disappear. This is something I was not aware of consciously but I can see it now when looking back. A part of me dreamed that I would figure out that it was just my mind making something up and that death is not such a scary and serious thing at all. And that I might find some information

about the afterlife that would make sense and would change my belief system. I had an edge to connect with those unpleasant feelings and I did not want to accept the way I could remember it.

Connecting with death during a therapy session

I remember a therapy session when for the first time I expressed my desire to explore my own death. It was perfect that my therapist was open and willing to support me to go into this experience. It was 5 or 6 years ago but I still can remember the feeling of going into the darkness, slowly dissolving which actually was not so scary. I felt I do not have to do anything and just rest. I felt like being split into million pieces which was happening in the proprioception channel and I was becoming a part of something like space. For some moments it was a kind of visual experience (but mostly on an inner feeling level) and for the rest of the time it was without connecting to any senses. It was not as scary as I expected when I was a child. But then, I realised that I should be there forever and nothing would ever change. Staying there forever, like in a prison. This was the end. I knew I had hit an edge but I just was not able go over it. It was too strong, too much. I was talking to myself: *„Ok, I am not here now and I can deal with it but this moment will last forever. I will disappear forever in this and it will never change“*. It was like a torture for me. I had tears in my eyes and I felt very anxious. I was not able to move from that place. I was stuck and for sure not open to accept such a situation. I was resistant to any intervention that my therapist made. I even started to criticize the experience or even my therapist in my hear. I just was not ready to jump over the edge. Then, the session finished.

I left this topic for a year until I started to have those experiences with losing my attention or presence (which I had already described in the chapter about identity). It looked like the „death“ experience from my therapy session came back in a different way, even stronger.

These experiences were quite terrifying because I was not able to control them and I became aware of them (I was able to realise them) only after they had finished. I was able to remember it but I was not able to be aware of it when it was happening. And I did not like having no control over something that I did not understand or why it was happening. My mind (the primary process) perceived it as a threat. It was like experiencing some kind of form of dying every day. I just suddenly disappeared from my body, from my senses and from everything I ever identified with. I knew similar experiences only from the moments when I was sick and passed out a few times in my life or when having a very high fever. But this time it was not caused by my health condition, I did not suffer during the experience and I was actually able to get out of it easily after noticing it (even I felt I did not have any control over it). I just did not know how. I was surprised I was not aware of such experiences before and I was thinking that maybe for some reason they just appeared now. I started to create various terrifying scenarios about why I was having such experiences now like mental illness, physical problems, etc. It made me confused and I wanted to avoid it which actually was not possible completely. Later on, it reminded me my „death experience“ and it encouraged me in my curiosity around death again. In fact, I realised that it would be easier to explore it consciously when I have some control and can get out of the experience if I needed. As processwork is saying, if we avoid or repress something it will come back through a different channel or a different experience, even stronger. So, I decided to focus on it more consciously. This partial feeling of control helped me gain the courage to cross the edge and support my curiosity around it. This version of a kind of „small death“ became a part of my everyday life and I learned how to accept it and sometimes even welcome it.

My early childhood dream

I have a feeling that the topic of death has been around me through all my life. My first childhood experience I can remember is the last memory of my great grandmother when I was 3 years old. It was the last time I saw her before she died, as I had already mentioned earlier. One of my earliest dreams is also related to death. I was around 6 or 7 years old when I was dreaming that I was going home from somewhere. I remember myself walking on the street at night. I came to our house and I could see it is on fire. I was standing on the other side of the street watching our house burning and knowing that my whole family is inside there. According to processwork dreams and memories from the childhood often carry a pattern that also appears in our present life. I have been working on this dream many times, taking different roles to understand it better. One time, I connected with my feeling of helplessness and being frightened when watching the fire. Being stuck and paralysed, not being able to move from the place, filled inside with nothing but strong fear. Such intense feelings in proprioception when you know you cannot control or escape from it but at the same time there is nothing you can do about it. It is too much and you just hope it will end soon. But it does not and you just are there with all the emotions. Being on the edge because you cannot let go of it because it is too important for you. It is a repeating pattern I know very well in my life when facing something I cannot control and at the same time it is very important for me. Or at least I used to know it in past. My reaction to death could be one of those when my life was in danger as if waiting for tsunami. And when I dared to cross the edge and let go of control over something I cannot control, I discovered freedom, relief and easiness.

Other times, I connected with the quality of the fire or death. The uncontrollable and unstoppable wild energy that is just following its own nature and does not care what affects it causes. Even hurting somebody by taking someone's life. That is something very secondary

for me but at the same time it is very energising when connecting with the quality or energy of it.

The only thing I have never experienced was becoming the role of my family dying in the house. Actually I never thought of the possibility of exploring the dream from that part in the past. When writing this theses I felt it could be a special opportunity to try it. I connected with the dream and with my family in the burning house. I went there in my fantasy. The first image I had was horrible fear and a need to fight for my life (the same feeling I had when watching the burning house). The same quality also repeats in my present dreams. I often dream about some people who are trying to kill me or hurt me and I am trying hard to escape, to fight them and just do as much as possible to save myself but they always find a way how to get back to me and I have the same problem over and over again all night. As well as in the child dream also in my present dreams, I feel I need to do my best to safe my life. When feeling it I realised that it is a kind of identical experience I had when being the child watching it all from the street. It was the same edge coming from different angles. All the emotions, the huge desire to do something, to fight but feeling too weak compared to such strong powerful energy. When becoming the role of „my family“ in the dream I could feel my head was starting to hurt, my muscles were tense and I felt weak and helpless. It was as if I was going to jump out of my body but not being able to move. Then, after a while, when I was feeling very tired having tried everything but nothing worked, I just gave up. I accepted that I was going to die and just waited, I let it happen. I went over the edge. I did not picture myself burning, I just let myself give up and die. I had an image of some light in the centre of my body slowly disappearing until it disappeared completely in the darkness. Then, nothing else was left there. And what was there then is not easy to explain in words but it was something about quietness and presence. In other words, there was actually nothing there. It kind of scared me and I was not able to explore it further as I had a feeling that I did not feel

myself anymore. I hit an edge again and my primary process started to judge and criticise the experience.

Later on, when I was older, I actually faced that fire. I was working on a Greek island (the same time when I experienced the earthquake and the possibility of tsunami) and there was a big conflagration and as the summer was very hot and dry, the fire started to spread across the island. It was getting bigger and bigger but I was not afraid as it was far from us and there were planes flying every day trying to stop the fire by pouring water. Then, one day white ash started falling from the sky like snow and I received information that the pilots had not managed to stop the fire using water yet and it was like 5 kilometres from us. Many people were evacuated from our hotel that night but I stayed there because as an employee of the hotel I was responsible for some clients there. At first I took my passport and all my money to be ready to run if necessary and went to the beach with my colleagues to watch the fire. It was so strong, so powerful, so lightening. I felt the same way I had felt in my dream when watching the fire. I felt as if my worst nightmare came to life. I was just terrified and paralysed. Then, something changed in me. I actually cannot remember how I did it and maybe it was also the adrenaline inside of me but I was dancing and having fun all night while watching the great glow behind me. I was able to connect with the secondary experience. I was ready to leave if necessary but it was not on the top of my list that night. Besides the fear I suddenly could feel freedom and joy. It was an incredible night I will remember forever also due to the presence of death around.

Facing the real dying

Another strong experience with dying was the death of my grandmother. It was the first close person in my life I watched dying. I mention this story because I can feel it has influenced my relationship to death in some way. My grandmother had a cancer and we knew that it had

been discovered too late and it was not possible to operate on her. She was getting worse and worse every time we saw her but we hoped her condition would stabilise for a while. On her 74th birthday, I went to see her with my brother and father. When we entered the door into her apartment I had a very strange feeling I had never had in my life before. And I remember telling myself: „death is around here “. It looked so irrational so I sent the thought away and did not say anything to anybody. It scared me and I thought I was being stupid and paranoid. There was no reason to have such crazy fantasies. I entered the living room and waited for my grandmother to come from the kitchen to greet her. When she finally entered the room and I looked into her face I had a very strong feeling that I was not looking at her. Instead of her I was looking into the eyes of death. I am not a person who believes in some supernatural creatures and I had never thought of death as a person. I am not saying that the real death came to the earth either and entered her body. But that moment when I was looking into the eyes of my grandmother it was a very intense look and for a few seconds I did not see my grandmother there. I felt shocked but there was something peaceful and compassionate around in the atmosphere. Something about the relationship was touching. I was aware of it but the fear of something I do not understand, what does not make sense and sounds strange, was much stronger. It scared me and I felt nervous even when writing about it now. It was such a strong experience. And I have a feeling that this was the first time when I truly faced death, metaphorically and truly as well, because she died 3 days later. It is not easy to write about such an experience because I am criticizing myself for writing this story. A part of me is saying that it was just my reaction to death and maybe some kind of unconscious fear I had because I had never been so close to a dying person. It was the well known rational part of me trying to make it more understandable and therefore less scary. I guess that maybe my fantasy of seeing that was just exaggerating. And another part of me that was present in that experience is saying that it is not important how rational it was. I was fascinated by the power

of the experience and the connection with death (it was happening in relationship channel) that was created by the experience. There was my fear but also the compassion and kindness those aspects of death.

This kind of a positive experience supported me to become even more curious around death. I watched more horror movies, started to read books where authors wrote about death like Jung and Castaneda. It was not rational, I surrounded myself with death and it created the fear again. I was exposing myself to the edge consciously and repeatedly. I was experimenting and keeping the acceptable level of my fear (I needed to feel some control) so I could have some curiosity around it. I also decided to do innerwork about death. I was curious whether the experience I had at the beginning of my training would be the same or whether something would change. This time, I was ready to stay with the experience no matter how unpleasant it would be.

My Innerwork

When going into the experience of dying and imagining I am dying I started to feel dizziness (edge behaviour). I did not follow this body signal but I focused on my breathing and got more into the body experience. I was imagining that I was experiencing my last breath and I was disconnecting from myself. Some feelings of disconnection. There are no thoughts anymore. I do not even feel my body, or any body limitation. I feel some kind of concentration of something in the space. Not inside of something but everywhere. In me, around me, through me because I do not actually feel any boundaries of myself. Nothing is touching me because there is no connection with anything. It is a kind of fine feeling, but it is not pleasant. I do not enjoy it but it does not disturb me. It is not pleasant and there are no emotions to feel.

There is nothing important, just some presence. It is like being in the Universe, because there is no movement, no speed or other qualities. In this state, a thought comes saying: „*you do not feel your body, there is something wrong when you do not feel yourself*“. But when I let the thought go and go deeper into the experience, all of that is not important. There is some kind of sensing of something like pumping (which is not happening in any channel) but it is not important. I am connecting to the essence level. There is nothing important there. And the way I describe it is not exactly what there is but there are no better words to be able to explain it.

This time, the experience was not so unpleasant but I cannot say I enjoyed it. I would say, I just accepted whatever was there. Then, I had a thought it might be useful to do the same exercise I was going to do with the participants for this theses by myself before I do it with them. I think I must have hit an edge because this thought took me back to the primary process and thinking, rationalising and analysing.

My experience from the exercise

In the experience of dying, I felt I was disconnecting from everything. Like moving away slowly from everything around. I have a similar experience when I go to sleep, when I feel I am still awake but slowly disconnecting and not being able to control it. It is a proprioceptive sensation but in the way of losing any body sensations. There is a part of me trying to follow the experience and I am just observing what is there. There is another part of me saying: „*but when you die there is not even an observer*“. So, I am not sure which one to follow. I cannot recognise if this is my belief system around the edge or a situation that I need to go through as well in order to get deeper. So, I do not know whether to go deeper and somehow try to forget the observer or stay a little bit more there. So, I decide to go deeper and see if the edge (if it is an edge at all) comes back. I am trying to leave even the observer

behind. I am slowly leaving my identities and just quickly saying goodbye to them. It is very easy and I am leaving all of them together. I let the experience unfold and it was something I knew very well. Being something, not seeing anything, it is like in a dark place, not hearing anything, just feeling the presence of something vibrating. I cannot say if it is in me or around me because there is no I or clear boundaries. I am a part of the environment. There is no time, it is some kind of undefined space, no senses, no body, no me. I do not see it, I do not feel it, there is just some kind of perception. Just somebody observing it all (without sensing it). There is some kind of presence.

Then suddenly, there is a critical voice saying there should be some fear or sadness about losing everything but there are no emotions and that is strange. And real dying would bring stronger emotions, so maybe I am not really in the experience and I did not truly leave my identity. This critic in my head speaking from my belief systems takes me back to the edge. At the same time I can feel that when I go into the experience of being dead, nothing like this (any identity or leaving) is important there anymore. I feel angry that I cannot feel it more intensely and it is so easy to be there. Again I feel some anger around it. It is a big thing for me at that moment. And I realise I have some expectations around dying. I accept them and just let go of all of them. Just connecting with the experience but it is not possible to stay there. Some thoughts and anger keep coming back.

I am noticing that I was not really perceiving my identities and I am thinking that maybe I did not fully let them go. There is still this voice saying that I avoided or neglected something. No real emotions, fear or tension of leaving my self. Nothing. It looks like a part is still present there and it comes back. I am not sure if this is the result of working with this topic so much or if there is really something that needs to go away. As the edge it is coming back again, I decide to go back and connect with my identities and leave them one more time. So, I am slowly leaving the material things, my relationships, my desires and goals. And the deepest

identity is a part of me that is holding and protecting everything which I feel I normally keep strongly in my everyday life. I go into the leaving with more awareness and let it go slowly, with patience. I can feel something very touching, kind and calm. I can feel inner tears when imagining leaving my relationships and everything that is important for me. My goals and desires are now easy to let go of because when there is death, nothing is important. And finally, I am leaving the holding part. Appreciating and saying goodbye. This was a very strong experience for me. I felt something that is hard to describe. There was strong sadness, relief, love and kindness. It was a very special moment, a very energising experience. Like when dancing next to the fire on the Greek Island. It is hard to explain in words. A very deep experience with presence of death. Awareness that all of that is not important anymore, it has no meaning. It is relieving and beautiful and full of tears. A special moment for me. Then, I allowed myself to go into death, into the essence level. There everything just exists, nothing else. Nothing else to say and to explain. Deep connection with everything and nothing at the same time. No words are suitable here. I stay with the experience and after some time I come back to myself, to the ordinary reality. That night I had a night dream that I should do the dying exercise every day.

My actual relation to death

After all the experiences described above I feel my relationship to death has changed. I still feel some respect and some kind of fear when I think about my own death or death of my close ones. I can imagine that I would fight as much as possible if I met something that would endanger my life. I am a fighter. At the same time, I have learnt how to let go and accept whatever is happening when I cannot change anything and the relation to my „small“ deaths has changed rapidly. I accepted it as something inevitable and as important learning.

Sometimes, I am even able to let go my memories, friends, my identity and just stay with whatever stays there, something stable, something behind my self.

Despite the fear of death I notice I have more curiosity around it now. I am still not very curious about afterlife. I can say that I am not curious to search for an answer at all. That is something that I do not want to know as nobody can know the truth. And I will not believe it anyway. What has started to attract my attention are the experiences before death. I lost two of my grandparents in the last few years and I had a chance to witness their life and death journey. I see those moments as very sad, scary and magical. And I would like to know it more even if it is connected with negative feelings only. In some way, it is very enriching. I integrated this new part and started to be more interested in the real situations when I meet death. Sometimes I talk to my partner about our funeral and death. I am also more open to talk about my own relationship and fear around death with the others and people are getting used to it (some people feel unpleasant and they are just able to listen but not to think about their relationship). I see that people in general do not have space to speak about death. As I was working a lot on my own relationship to death I can feel I have more freedom when working with people who are afraid of death and I can give them space to talk about it openly. I also have participated on the bereavement training and I am interested in working with dying children or people who are losing or have lost somebody close to them.

My desire is to really explore the subject to the extent that is possible during my life and not to create just some beliefs around it. I want to get to know death in my present life. I do not want to wait for the special moment when it happens to me. Before, death experiences were happening to me. Now, I would like to let them happen or even face death and my own mortality consciously. It gives me more freedom, curiosity and acceptance. Acceptance of the fear as well as of the fact that I realise I am not a magician or superhero who can control death and I believe that my fear is actually more useless than beneficial even it is just a mass

of negative and unpleasant feelings. I am writing about this because I want to describe how those experiences change my relation to death and I might this way encourage you to leave your comfort zone.

14. PRACTICAL PART: EXPERIENCES WITH DYING AND DEATH THROUGH A FACILITATED EXERCISE

14.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The topic of death seems to be quite a taboo in our Western society. As I mention in the previous chapters, I have a feeling that there are just some specific situations when it is accepted to talk or write about death: when a person is dying or has recently experienced a life threatening experience. When somebody is naturally talking about death and expressing some fear around it, such person is often perceived as imbalanced, needing psychological support or we expect something unpleasant is happening to them.

There are many researches around death focusing on palliative care or on influence of death on the dying person or even on interest in the afterlife. This thesis does not focus on any of these. From a role of a person who is interested in death and dying, my aim of this practical part is to open the topic of death and provide non-judgemental space to speak about it openly and to relate to it as to a natural aspect of our life. Though maybe scary and unpleasant, it is something that touches all of us every second of our lives, not just when we are dying. As I mentioned earlier I have a feeling and it is a tendency of all of us to avoid negative feelings. We dream about and we have a tendency to search for a happy life without any physical or mental pain. We are more focused on just finding and surrounding ourselves with positive things only, people who make us happy, pleasant feelings and we only support those states. My desire was to give enough space to any state that will emerge in the moment of dying and allow whatever it will bring.

When speaking from the role of a processworker, I think while exploring our relationship to death, it is important not just to talk about it but also to allow ourselves to have our own „death“ experience which connects us deeper (and allows the secondary aspects arise) instead of just using our head and talking about it (when our primary process is in charge). When

exploring the origin and meaning of our attitudes, our fantasies created by our past personal experiences or adopted by our society, it usually limits us in our perception too. We often experience something new and much different or even more useful when going into an experience as our belief system often determines our relationship to death and blocks any potential different experiences.

When creating this practical part, I could feel a lot of curiosity while designing the exercise (I will describe the exercise later in this chapter) and I listed my research questions:

„What are some different experiences people have when connecting with a „death“ experience?“

„Are there any similarities people have around going through „death“ like exercises?“

„In which channels do people have the experience when dying and becoming dead?“

„ If there are some near death experiences from the past, does the exercise bring anything similar?“

„ How does one’s belief system relate to the experience of “dying”?“

„How does an individual experience of connecting with death change their life if a person integrates it?“

At first I thought that I did not have any expectations but when doing the exercise myself I discovered that I had some assumptions around it. My hypothesis were:

H1:

Most of people will experience some negative emotions in the moment of dying and many of them will hit an edge.

As I understand death being the biggest disturber in our everyday life which threatens our identity I expect that it is difficult to let ourselves die and different signs of edges might arise

such as strong emotions, switching channels, critical voices, fear, change of energy, avoiding something, confusion, going away from the experience, etc.

H2:

Some participants will have difficulties to leave some of the aspects of their lives which they are identified the most recently with.

I expect that not everyone will be able to go fully into the experience of „death“ and for some of them it will be difficult or impossible to leave some aspects of their life behind, let them go because they create a strong part of their identity and therefore a strong part of their primary process too.

H3:

There will be a connection between ability to let go in everyday life and to attitude to death.

In the practical part of this thesis I mentioned that changes in life often require letting go of something. In other words, the need to let some things or even let some parts of ourselves die in order to give space for something new to be born. If a person perceives death and dying in a very negative way and has strong emotions around it I expect that there are similar feelings towards letting go in general.

14.2 RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample used in my research consists of 14 people (9 women and 5 men). All research subjects are Slovak, living all their lives in the Western countries. The age of participants varies from 23 to 50, with an average age of (approximately) 37. The most represented group is the 30-year-olds. The research sample is not specified in any way. The only condition is to live and come from the Western culture to create a consistent sample (as I

do not have enough opportunities to do the exercise with other cultures' representatives). All the participants participated in the research on a voluntary basis and anonymously.

14.3 WORK METHODOLOGY AND METHOD OF EXAMINATION

For the purpose of this research, I met each participant for an hour session. Each session consisted of 3 parts. The first part was an interview where I was curious about their relationship to death. I always asked these three questions:

1. „What brought you here?“
2. „What is your relationship to death and what do you think about death?“
3. What is it about death that makes you the most anxious?

My aim was to understand the belief systems better: faiths, beliefs, thoughts, fantasies, interests or any near death experiences or real situations when facing death that the client brought to the session. All of these gave me some information about the primary process which was built over years, determining the attitude and fear around death and keeping any other secondary processes out.

After talking, everyone went through an exercise where they had a chance to go into the dying and death experience. The original idea was to let people have a contact with their own mortality and uncover various experiences around death and the connection to their beliefs, near death experiences and fantasies.

All the data were collected, transcribed and translated from Slovak to English by one researcher. The research itself was conducted from December 2017 to March 2018. The participants were contacted personally so each participant I had already met at least a few times in the past. I consciously chose the clients I had met before. One reason was that I expected there had already been created some level of trust and relationship between us which could support deepening of the experience. The other reason was my own need of confidence

that the client had some skills or that there were possibilities to take care of them in case the experience was very strong. I informed each client about the process of the exercise and about the aim of my research and the way I am going to transcribe the session. I also informed everyone about the anonymity and voluntary participation. I asked for their agreement that I could use the transcript in the way I wrote it.

I perceived using a processoriented exercise about dying as the best method for this thesis. As it is a qualitative method, it gave me a lot of information about the participant and understanding of each personal experience. When doing this exercise, the participants had a chance not only to talk about their thoughts, beliefs, fantasies and fears but also to allow deeper connection with the experience of dying, letting go of their life and their identity. I perceive this exercise as a very useful activity to be able to meet our edges, crossing them if possible and more or less connecting with the experience of the end of our life. And last but not least, this exercise allowed us to connect ourselves with the essence level that is behind death and to integrate that quality into our everyday life. It also gave me the opportunity to compare and to understand the differences and similarities between the participants.

The exercise used with the participants was facilitated by myself and it went as follows:

- 1. Get into a comfortable body position. Take a few minutes to settle into this position and to drop out of the world. When you are ready bring your awareness to your body. Feel your body. What sensations are present? Let yourself feel whatever you are feeling. Notice whatever arises.*
- 2. Does your body feel heavy, tense, light, electric? Feel even more whatever you are feeling.*
- 3. Focus your attention on your breath. How does your breath feel? Experience each breath. Focus on the inhale and then on the exhale. Make the exhale longer than the inhale. Feel relaxed.*

4. *Now take each breath as if it was the last one. Experience each inhale as if it was the last one. Experience each exhale as if it was the last one.*
5. *You are dying. Take a moment and stay with everything that is present. Let go of your identities, let go of your body, of your thoughts and of your breath. Do not hold on to anything. Let yourself die. Let go of fear, let go of longings.*
6. *Is there anything in you that is against this? If there is, notice what is against it and give it a name. When you have experienced it and given it a name, let go of it too. Dis-identify with it. Open yourself to death...*
8. *Let yourself be. Experience whatever there is right now. (Take your time here). And give it a name or express it by a gesture, a picture in your head or a song.*
9. *When you're ready, focus on your breathing again. Now focus on your body and let it move.*
10. *Ask yourself, how could you integrate this experience of dying in your everyday life? What does it bring you? What would you have more of and what would you have less of in your life?*

The participants had a chance to speak about their experience while being in it or they could just stay with themselves without talking and share afterwards (just one of them wanted to interact during the exercise). In both scenarios, I was asking every participant to share their own experience from the exercise afterwards. I was interested in two important experiences in particular:

1. What was happening with the participant when I said to them to experience each exhale as if it was the last one and watch themselves die? I was especially interested in their reactions, thoughts or feelings around it as it was a moment when we were meeting our own finality and it often brings us to the edge. This is also related to the hypothesis 1 and 2.

2. How would the participant live with the new awareness (experience of dying) from now on and what would change in their life? (on the level of attitudes, behaviour, perceiving, body sensation....). By asking these questions I wanted to explore the particular changes that the experience with death would bring them into their everyday life and in which way it would enrich them.

In the theoretical part I talked about „real“ death and „small“ deaths or about death of our identity (or ego) which often appears in our life. Big ones when having some difficult times in our lives or small ones as a part of our everyday lives. As one of my hypothesis (No.3) was that there might be a connection between being able to meet death and letting go, my last question for each participant was: **How open are you to give up things, to let go?**

Below, I present an analysis of different experiences of the participants when going into the experience of dying and I watch the similarities and connections that arise from the experience itself and how it is connected to the belief systems, near death experiences or any kind of meeting death in past.

14.4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this work I used narrative analysis to find and track the common and different elements in experiences of the participants from the exercise and their relation to their belief systems, experiences with death from the past. I proceeded in a few steps. Before collecting the stories I wrote down all my expectations, opinions or prejudice (together with my hypothesis) that could cause mistakes in collecting, analysing and interpreting the data obtained. After that individual “stories” were collected face to face or via skype video calls. Most of the time, I had no chance to intervene or to get information while the experience was happening. The participants were sharing their experience with me only afterwards (except one of them who partially described the process also during the exercise) which could bring me just partial

information as the person was no longer deeply in the process. After collecting all the stories I did the analysis but first of all, I explored each of my hypothesis.

H1: Most of the people will experience some negative emotions in the moment of dying and many of them will hit an edge.

Analysis of the 12 stories showed that the process of dying really brought some intense negative moments. The participants perceived it through emotions, body reactions or by not being able to let go of some of their parts. They used words like: *...„I felt very sad“*, *...“ I could feel fear“*, *...“It hurts to imagine I could throw it away“*, *...“I started to shake, I felt panic and wanted to run somewhere or jump“*, *...“I did not want to let go of some parts“*, *...this part was disturbing in some moments...“ I felt very sad and sorry for not being with my daughter and with her future children“* *...“ I needed to hold on to something. There was a lot of sadness around“* *... „I also thought of the things that are just waiting for me in my life and I do not want to die without experiencing them“*. The experience of dying could be partially connected with something positive (pleasant feelings, leaving the things that I do not like and I want to get rid of) but the moment of letting go of the last part that belongs to us was followed by unpleasant feelings in different channels and probably attached to an edge.

There are different moments that can be seen as edge behaviour. Some participants expressed strong body reactions (proprioception) when going into the experience of dying such as: *„I started to bite my lips, it was extremely strong power“* *... „I wanted to let my head roll over the floor, just let it go (but I could not)“* *... „My whole body was shaking, vibrating, even in my hair ends, tension in my body“* *... „I felt paralysed“* *... „in some moments I felt I could fall asleep but I did not“* *... „my body wanted to move so much, it was like energy of life. I have never felt so much energy in my life“* *...*

In many stories it was expressed in the relationship channel: *„I might cause pain to the others“*..., *„(tears) I did not want to leave them“*..., *„it would be very difficult to die now (to let go of my daughter)...it is touching me even now“*..., *„There was again something I was attached to so I could not be really free and really die“* ..., *„My belief around it is that if I died I would leave him alone, abandon him“*..., *„I had a feeling that I will cause terrible pain to her which is hard to even think about“* (tears)..., *„I could not let go of how I behave from the outside and what I believe in....“*

In other moments the edge appeared in the visual channel: *„one of the hardest things that stayed with me which I did not want to let go of was my bubble around me. I knew somebody should sneak into it but I was holding to it very strongly“*..., *„I had an image where my son was knocking on me as if searching where I am in my body“*... (also a relationship channel), *„the masks were going one by one. I did not want to leave them really“*....

And sometimes, even in the auditory channel: *„what was disturbing me were my thoughts about what I will do after I finish this session or what I was doing at work today. It was not completely easy to stay just with the experience“*..., *„There was a strong thought in me saying that I promised him that I was not going to leave him“*... (also relationships channel).

It looks like most of the participants really experience some degree of unpleasant feelings when connecting with the experience of dying which often appears in the relationship and proprioceptive channels. There are different manifestations that suggest an edge as tears, body sensations, sudden emotions, change of the energy, wanting to go away from the experience, not being able to let go of something, etc. The moment of letting go was not easy and sometimes it was not fully completed – it was not possible to let this part die.

H2: *Some of the participants will have difficulty to leave some aspect of their lives they are identified with the most recently.*

For almost every participant, the moment of dying brought a moment of not wanting to leave something. The moment of letting go of something held them there and it was not easy to move further. Just few of them could feel that they were totally able to leave every part of their identity they felt attached to and dive deeper into the experience. In fact, most of the participants expressed that they were not able to let go of a particular part (or even parts) and this part was present during the whole exercise even when connecting with the „death“ experience. Just putting it aside for a while helped them to focus on it less. We can assume that leaving this part definitely would bring them to a strong edge. For some clients, only the realisation that it is not a real experience of dying supported them not to hold to it so strongly and allow something new to appear. For two of the clients, the part that they felt attached to at that moment was so new and attractive that they preferred to stay with it rather than really going deeper into dying and they focused mostly on relation to it (exploring leaving different masks or being extremely energised in their body and connecting to life) which did not allow the client to go deeper into letting go of it.

It is interesting that there are some similarities in qualities that stayed there as the last ones which were at the same time the most difficult to let go of. None of the participants mentioned any difficulty to leave material things, their career, their professional life. Most of them even mentioned that it was the easiest thing to let go of and for others, thoughts of work did not appear the whole time. It looks like some other things were much more important. Around 7 participants were having difficulty to let go of relationships with their children, mother, future partner (the chance to experience a new relationship) or their social identity in general. Especially mothers had a very strong edge to leave their sons (mainly the younger ones) and the role of a mother as they felt strong responsibility to be with their children, to take care of

them and to protect them. Five participants expressed that the hardest part to leave was „*life*“ or „*things that I am going to miss if I died now*“ or „*leaving each unique moment*“. One of them even named particular characteristics and qualities that they enjoyed the most in their life as „*enthusiasm for art or beauty*“. It was connected to positive and pleasant moments that their life would bring them if they stayed alive. For one participant it was such a strong experience that it felt like this was his second chance to live his life fully and truly and challenged him to change some aspects of it. Two participants had difficulties to leave their faces. It defines their identity, who they are and who they are not. The connection to the masks could even bring a feeling of safety. Leaving this part would mean for them losing the last part of themselves for good, disappearing into the unknown.

Only one participant did not describe any difficulty to leave everything behind and die. In this experience, there were just few moments when the mind brought some thoughts and once there was even a voice interrupting the dying experience when saying: „you are kidding, it is not your time yet“ but this person expressed ability to let go of the thoughts and to allow the experience to develop fully.

To summarise it, all the participants did not want to leave some parts that they had a very positive relationship to. It was surprising for me that most of the things that were hard to let go of were connected to relationships. Some participants were surprised by the things that stayed with them as the last ones, not wanting to let go of them. For some of them, those were not the parts they usually identify with or even realise they have them while other things that they feel strongly attached to in everyday life did not seem so important (even some relationships, p.e. with their parents or a partner). Some participants expected that other relationships will be difficult to leave as they feel strongly attached to them but in fact, there were strongly attached to just one particular person (a child or a parent) which they feel a need to take care of in some way. I would say that this hypothesis was not really confirmed as

not everything that we identify with recently seemed important when „dying“. Sometimes, a special bond appears and we are often not aware that it is so strong or we are even surprised we have it.

H3: There will be a connection between ability to let go in everyday life and to attitudes to death.

As I already mentioned above, one of my expectations was that our ability to handle „small“ deaths in our everyday life reflects in our attitude or relation to death. If we have difficulty to leave some things or parts of ourselves, it should be also difficult to let ourselves die because in that moment we lose it all. When doing this research, I started to doubt this assumption as my question was asked too generally without exploring it more deeply (my critical part appeared). I realised that it can be very different how we let go of some material things, our relationships or parts of our identity. Also, it is hard to express our relationship to death just as positive or negative. There are many shades of it. The participants' relations to death often seem to be influenced by their past experiences with death of somebody close, near death experiences or any form of transcendent experiences (sudden feelings, meditation, drugs...) which become a part of their belief system (the primary process). When exploring it I realised that it is also interesting to look at it from this perspective - How the different experiences influence our view of death.

Regarding to this hypothesis, participants gave me different information about their attitudes to death. Some participants talk more about the relation to their emotions when somebody died, others about their faith and the transcendent experiences and about their fears they sometimes have when they actually think about their own death.

Many participants expressed their strictly negative relationship to death. Death was seen as bad, scary, connected to pain and suffering. Most of them at the same time expressed

difficulty to let go (especially of relationships, responsibility, things they invest some energy to or evaluate them as important). Some of them even expressed the hardships to let go of anything, even the irrelevant little things in their lives.

On the other hand, there were three persons who expressed a positive relation to death (they welcome it in their life) but at the same time it is not easy to let go of other things in their lives. One person explained the difference in a way that death brings freedom because we do not have to try to keep all of the things from our ordinary life as it is not important eventually anymore. And only death cuts this connection off. One participant expressed a positive relation to death (welcoming it in their life) which appeared after their own strong transcendent experiences when visiting a seminar and opening to let go of any belongings. Another person also had a very positive relationship to letting go and a negative one to holding. This person expressed that letting go is a strong part of one's life and the experience of holding to anything as limiting. At the same time, this person felt strongly attached to their health and fulfilment of life. It seems as a fear to hold something in order to let go parts that I am attached to.

What I found interesting was that many people expressed their relation to death but the experience surprised them because it did not match the expectations they had before. Some people expected it will be a very unpleasant experience and were surprised when it was not as strong as they expected and others believed that dying must be a very pleasant experience and were shocked when it was unpleasant. Meanwhile, for the others it was more about some particular fantasies that must accompany death or about the power of the experience (the effect it has on them) which was not met. Sometimes even a critical figure appeared and judged the experience as a not relevant one, not worthy to accept it as a „dying“ experience as it did not meet the original fantasies and expectations of what was going to happen when we die. It seems like the judging part did not die. Some people expressed sadness and

disappointment as they had expected something more positive or stronger or that it would be a moment of meeting a figure with a scythe who would say it was our time when dying. An interesting discovery for me was that everyone who had a negative or unclear relation to death had also difficulty with letting go in their ordinary life. I think that this hypothesis needs more focusing on in the future in order to get better understanding of the potential interconnection.

„Are there any similarities that people have around going through „death“ like exercises?

When comparing the stories I was curious about what the participants or their stories have in common. One interesting fact that appeared in each story was that everybody thought of death as of a kind of continuity in a form of becoming something bigger or in a form of transformation when a part of us (or energy) stays but transforms into something else. Even the fantasy about afterlife was not clear, words like: *“being in something essential”*..., *“becoming a part of some bigger energy”*..., *“connecting with the wholeness”*..., *“after I die I will understand things I was not able to understand during my life”*... or *“being in some other form”* suggested that each person expected that death was not absolute and it allowed some parts of us to move on. In other words, in each belief system, there was a fantasy that even after death we will not disappear totally but some part of us will remain even if in a different form. It was a very fascinating discovery for me and it brought up a question whether this might also be a part that we do not want to give up and is strongly rooted in our identity.

Some persons expressed more fear and tension around pain and suffering than the fear of their actual death (edge to the pain). The fear of death was then connected with the pain that might accompany dying or a moment of death (*“suffering, dying”*..., *“such strong pain that will bring you to the grave”*...). Two women who experienced giving birth some time ago compared it to the moment of death. They had a fantasy that dying could be a similar

experience, a very painful one. Suffering of their relatives in the moment of their death was also one of the biggest fears the participants had (to know we would make somebody else suffer). The fear of pain and suffering seems to be strongly present in our beliefs around death (also in our society) and it creates quite a strong edge. Also, our expectations around what death should look like design our willingness to get more in touch with death or wanting to avoid it as much as possible. As I mentioned above, many persons expressed (some before, some after the experience and some even noticed it during the exercise) their expectations of how a person should feel when dying, what could the experience be in the moment of death and after we die. When the real experience was very different from those expectations, a critical role appeared and judged it – it brought an edge and then it was very difficult to explore dying deeper with curiosity and without prejudice.

Also, 13 participants brought their own personal experiences with death to our interviews. Around 11 of them could remember the strongest ones that had influenced their attitude to death when I asked what their relation to death was. For two clients, it was a sudden proprioceptive experience shortly (1-3 nights) before our session (by which they still felt touched) when not feeling well mentally, not having control over their body and worrying about their own life. It is interesting that those experiences happened just few days before we were supposed to meet.

There are many similarities between the stories but each of them brings its own special way of looking at and experiencing death. Now, I would like to point out some differences that drew my attention.

„What are some different experiences people have when connecting with the „death“ experience?“

As the opportunity to talk about death and personal experiences, attitudes, worries and fantasies is very rare and limited, I did not have much information about others. I was doing this research with a lot of curiosity and fascination around different perceptions, beliefs and experiences that people can have around death and dying. It was much easier to connect with my beginners mind.

For some participants it was easier to leave all parts of their ordinary identity, for others it was more difficult or even impossible in that particular moment. The ability (and interest) to dive deeper into the unknown experience also varied from a person to person. Sometimes, some parts of the process of dying became so fascinating or important and therefore it was hard or impossible to let it go. Some felt stuck and stopped by the edge to let go. Often, there was a lot of “why can’t I do this” around (the belief system protecting the edge). Sometimes only the awareness of the fact that this was not the body dying allowed some distance from it for a moment. A few participants also said out loud that if it had been real dying it would have been very difficult to leave. When realizing that this was not “for real”, they were able to release the grip or their attachment to it. They managed to cross the edge and to allow the secondary experience to emerge.

In general, many participants expressed their doubts whether they had really been able to leave this part behind. They felt it was still somehow present there or it influenced them and they still felt touched by it when going further. From some stories, it looked like it was a little bit easier to leave everything behind and to go into dying. And sometimes, something stopping the experience (the edge) came back later again. As I mentioned before, just one person could feel that nothing was really stopping them from dying and even when some thoughts came it was easy to let go of those.

Another interesting aspect that appeared in the „stories“ was a tendency to have everything completed before death. There were at least two people who expressed their need to feel that there was nothing left unsolved or open (especially in the field of relationships). One person was hesitating whether a recent conflict of theirs had really been solved or the person could still feel some anger which made them feel attached to it. Another person described a belief that it was important to have forgiveness from and also for everybody and to leave the world with „clean conscience“.

It was also interesting to read about different experiences people remembered around death from their past. Frequently, people could remember their feelings, thoughts or fantasies when somebody close to them had died. The participants repeatedly talked about a parent or somebody around the same age who died and it had a significant impact on them. Four of them felt deeply touched and they perceived it as a negative experience. The participants used words like *„I was exploring the relation to death when one of my parents had died... it attracted me strongly... Now, I am thinking whether there is still some fear or not...“*; *...when a friend of mine died...my reaction was so strong that I was not able to go on his funeral. It was the first time when I was thinking about death deeply...“*, *„During the funeral, I was thinking more about my own death. That was very unpleasant...“* or *„ ...when my step-parent died, it was very tangible...“*. For a period of time, their main focus was on death (also their own mortality) which they often avoided in other times. It looks like the confrontation with death kept the person around the edge and brought up a different kind of edge behaviour, strong emotions, not being able to attend a funeral, not being able to avoid thinking about their own death, etc. One person even remembered strong fear of being close to a dead person: *„The fantasy...It frightened me. I felt scared that the dead person might hurt me....“*. Two persons brought their recent experiences when they were worried about their own life: *„...When having those symptoms, I was worrying about my life. Rather than going to see*

a doctor I preferred not knowing ... I am thinking about the fact that I could have a serious illness and I fear I might die...“ and *„Last night... I was very worried about my life... I felt I might die... having no control over what was happening with me... created anxiety in me because I just could not change it...“*. Denying any possible life threat or trying to have control over our life were used to handle the experience and to reduce the level of fear which was hard to handle. Accepting potential death was far beyond what a person was willing to identify with or to recognise.

On the other hand, there was quite a big number of participants who had some pleasant experiences around death. For example two participants, when going to a funeral, experienced: *“ I felt a deeper connection... something loving...“* or *„... I realised I was smiling... I could feel her presence somewhere in the room... This experience helped me to see death as a better place“, ...“it was a very nice, touching moment... Those are things I usually do not think about but during the funeral I was and there was something beautiful around...“*. Those experiences had an influence on their belief system around death because it made them believe that because of the positive experience, death should bring similar feelings. One person experienced going into a moment before their birth when reading a book and another one, when losing their grandmother, realised that: *„it is important that death is here... death is not an evil creature as I used to feel before.“* One participant often met their unborn brother when meditating and was able to create a special relationship to him.

Expecting the moment of death to be a positive experience makes people see something nice in dying and be more open to accept it in their life. The fear is not so powerful anymore. A very strong experience for me personally was to hear about accompanying a dog through the dying process: *„when she was lying in my arms and leaving the world slowly, I was thankful for everything we had experienced together... it was a very sad and sacred moment...I realised that it was like training for my own death and I wished to feel the same when dying“*. I was

touched by this story because it described death as a moment full of opposing inner feelings (something sad and beautiful and scary at the same time) creating somehow a very deep and special experience.

Even there are some similarities in some groups of the participants, each person perceived their own process of dying in their own special way. I think it is important to highlight also the uniqueness of each experience and not just generalize it as belonging into a group of people with similar experiences.

„In which channels do people have the experience when dying and becoming dead?“

I would divide the experiences with “death” when some participants connected with the essence level into 3 groups regarding the main channel they appeared in. The most represented channel was the visual one (*“I saw my body floating in the air”...*, *“I was watching the room”...*, *“something going out to the sky and connecting with something that reminds me of a space rocket...”*, *„Walking towards warm light“* (probably also proprioceptive experience)..., *„Seeing my own „I“.. light changing colours“...* or *„Becoming a ball and watching the centre“*) which does not surprise me much because it is the primary channel that people of our culture use the most or in other words, the most common way of perceiving our world. The presence of the visual channel also pointed out presence of an observer who appeared in 6 experiences. The participants identified with the role of the observer who is watching, observing all of it or just being aware of something. *„I became an observer and just watched the room“...*, *„ I just could see my own „I“. Just observing it“...*, *„The observer was able to see it more clearly“*, *„I went into the role of an observer... just like watching the situation but not being touched by it“*. The role of an observer helped them get detached from the parts we often feel affected by.

In two situations the visual experience was accompanied by the auditory channel (sound of water, hearing different sounds). The other group perceived their experience mostly through the proprioceptive channel (*„I could feel passivity in my body“*.., *„feeling slowly disconnecting from the body“*, *„I could feel some kind of presence here and now“*..., *The feeling like being wrapped in the bathrobe. Feeling of something pleasant“*...). In some situations, it was more towards slowly disconnecting from the body than actually connecting to it more. Then there were participants who seemed to have some proprioception experience but did not perceive it thought their body as their felt they did not belong to their body anymore. They were saying: *„I feel it“*, *I felt hot when there was no body“*, *„there was no body... just some kind of awareness“*, *„„I could not feel myself inside my body... more feeling of oneness...calmness“*. It seems it was all happening on the feeling level but not thought the physical body. They usually expressed that there was not real perception through their senses, but more being in something that was beyond our normal identity. Saying it with my own words, something being aware of it or just knowing it was there but no senses could notice that (and were not present). It is a level of feeling which is quite different from the one in our ordinary life. I am mentioning it separately because I feel it should be named and not connected directly to the proprioception as it is also something more transcendent even the person is using proprioceptive wording.

When connecting to the essence level, qualities like lightness, detachment, emptiness, pure presence repeated in many experiences while other ones like passivity, freedom, safety, unconditional love or stability were not mentioned so often. For each person this particular quality seemed more important than the other ones and it gave a meaning to their experience. From another perspective, it may just be seen as a different description of the essence level. Eleven persons described one of the important moments in the essence level, becoming a part of something bigger (*„I was like a whole universe expanding and then getting smaller again*

like breathing or pulsing“... „I became a part of the Sun“..., I connected to bigger self awareness“...). Some of them even described it as: *„feeling it around but also being a part of it“... „it was a part of me but also around me“ or „feeling like being a network of the universe and also a part of it“.* It was very fascinating to listen to each special way of connecting to it, especially when they felt they had never experienced something like this before and I could be a witness of it.

„ If there are some near death experiences from the past, does the exercise bring something similar?“

Only three near death experiences appeared in the interviews. When looking at the first one of them, the participant had an experience of something calming (proprioception) and a light appeared there (which seemed to be in the visual channel). When comparing it to the „dying“ exercise, there was no experience of the light being present but the exercise brought qualities that were named emptiness and calming (in the proprioceptive channel). As we do not have much more information about the near death experiences and the person was not really interested in exploring the „dying“ qualities deeper there is not much to compare. I can just say that the calming experience appeared in both moments and the person used the same words when describing the quality.

The second participant experienced no fear, giving up and letting go while being under the water. The near death experience finished with his sudden appearing above the water when giving up. When looking at the experience, the qualities that appeared were love without conditions, embracing love and safety. It seems that both experiences were happening in the proprioceptive channel. It looks like there is no other obvious connection between those experiences. We can assume that the feeling of no fear also created feeling of safety but this would be just an interpretation and the participant could have perceived it differently.

The third participant had an experience of giving a birth when suddenly feeling as an observer without any connection to her emotions, thoughts or even body which had been in terrible pain before. The experience was mostly in the visual channel and had qualities of disconnecting. The exercise brought also feelings of detachment from their feelings, strong emotions but also passivity and lightness. The person was „ *just watching the situation but not being touched by it*“. Both experiences were in the visual channel and seemed to have very similar qualities.

To summarise, the near death experiences did not always bring something similar to what the exercise did but in two situations we could find some similarities. It would be interesting to have more examples in order to get more information and to understand if there is any connection.

„ How does the belief system relate to the experience of dying? “

The relationship of a belief system to an experience of dying is very individual. Some participants were experiencing many aspects of what they had described as their beliefs while others had a totally different and new experience. As I already mentioned before, when the experience was further away from a participant's beliefs or expectations, more often some critics, doubts and disappointment appeared as well as more probably the person got to an edge (as it was more distant from the primary process). I would like to bring a few observations regarding this question.

Some convictions people feel strongly identified with (like understanding the purpose of life or experiencing something unique), were suddenly not important in the process of dying. Even some relatives the participants felt strongly attached to and expressed fear of losing them or letting them experience their death, did not look so important when experiencing dying and death. At the same time, some were surprised by the strength of their attachment to

one particular person who they did not want to leave (a child and in one situation the mother). They did not expect such strong reaction when leaving them and did not realise how strongly attached they felt to them.

Two persons believe that it is easy to die in the old age but when it is a young person, it is not their time yet and the person often fights for life and suffers. As they are in their 30s, they identify themselves as young (not ready to die) and the experience of dying was very difficult. Both got stuck when leaving their little son alone and they were strongly holding to the relationship. Feeling not ready to leave their son because it will hurt him. Relationships seem very important to their (our) identity. One person even mentioned in the interview that when somebody close dies, it is as if a part of our own identity died.

Not everybody who thought that the experience of dying must be negative experienced „dying“ as something unpleasant in reality. Sometimes it brought relief of letting go of things we do not like or others who do not have such importance. One participant who usually identifies with having a lot of emotions around death and being touched by many things related to death, had a sudden experience of disconnection, no emotions and calmness. *„I experienced some overview, lightness and disconnection...and surprisingly, it was not touching at all“.*

Another participant expressed very strong emotions around death during the interview and a desire to never die. *„If there is a chance to survive I will do all my best to avoid death until it is possible... I will not be ready to leave the world“.* This strong attitude appeared also in the work when the body started to react strongly and he felt *„paralysed“* and *„stuck“* which does not allow a person to experience the essence level more deeply. A part of the person did not want to die and wanted to fight. For a moment, the person was able to go over the edge, let it go and connect with something else. The person became an observer and watched everything which brought easiness and freedom when all the worries and needs for fight did not have

space (or was not needed). This was a very strong experience which the person commented „*For the first time in my life I felt so relieved*“. I would be curious if this experience influenced the person's belief system in any way and their relation to death as the participant's last words when describing the experience were: „*...there were some images of what I would regret in the future and it was like having a second chance to do something*“.

Another participant expressed a positive relationship to death but also to life and the need to feel that their life is lived with fulfilment. In the experience, suddenly the life energy appeared when entering dying and it was so strong that it was not possible to leave the body and die. The body started to go against it with even more activity. „*I felt strongly alive, I felt like doing anything, moving, dancing...*“. As if the opposite of dying was happening (edge). This experience allowed to have a greater overview, connection to all identities (and not being touched by them), bigger self-awareness and also disconnection from anything around (the essence level). Suddenly nothing from the ordinary life was important. Although the person did not go into the „dying“ experience, something new and deeper was approached. It would be interesting to discover whether the real dying would bring a similar or totally different experience.

A few participants experienced exactly the same qualities that they had named at the beginning of the session when fantasising about what death would be like for them. The real experience and the feelings around it were something they could not have predicted and what touched them deeply. „*There was something perfect, completed. I was surprised by it... I cannot find more words or another way to express it*“.

Many participants believe that life does not end with death but something else continues and after they die, they become a part of something greater. A similar experience was also described when „dying“ (which I already mentioned earlier). In their own ways they

experienced a connection with something beyond their ordinary identity and their existence continued within this quality.

I was writing a lot about how the dying experience was similar or different from the belief systems. But when the moment of death came and the person connected to the essence level, all fears, expectations or attachments did not seem important as each person just experienced the connection with its quality and energy. Somehow, something else was more important than our ordinary life.

„How does the individual experience of connecting with death change their life if a person integrates it?“

Each participant was able to find answers for this question even though in some moments it was not easy and sometimes it was necessary to take more time to get to an answer on how the experience would change their life if they lived the quality more. There were some similarities in what the experience would bring into their life which I divided into three groups. The biggest group consisted of seven participants who described that those qualities would bring them more independence from the outer environment, more freedom from expectations from the others and feeling of responsibility. *„I would stop and relax more... switching the mind off and letting myself relax properly... nothing would stop me...“*; *It would bring me more steadiness and stability into my life when facing the outside world... less disturbed by different situations at work and in relationships“*;... *„Making bigger distance from the unspoken expectations“*; ... *„Not thinking what is right, no need to feel responsible...“*, ... *„I would be less active, enjoy the things I like but also just lie around and be“*, ... *Something like taking care of myself... and feeling the environment should not have any influence on me“*.

Connecting to the quality of the essence level would free them from the pressure of internalised outer social and cultural expectations and bring them more calmness, lightness, more space, relax or even passivity into their life and feeling just gratitude for their life as it is. The word responsibility occurred repeatedly as the most difficult part to let go of which does not allow us to follow what one really wants and there is an edge towards it (less activity, taking care, relax,...). The bond to the others and expectations from the environment determine one's own actions and together with the sense of responsibility it holds them in the relationships to others and blocks the relationship to themselves. While the first group talked mainly about feeling attached to their relationships, the second group focused mostly on the proprioception.

Four respondents noted that if they brought the quality into their life more, they would pay more attention to their bodies and themselves which would bring them more joy of the present moment, more happiness and more energy. On the other hand, it would cause less thinking and worrying. *„It is about being connected with myself and being more present in „just being“.“; to be more connected to my body and with the energy... following my impulses....“; not thinking and just being...“.* One person found this message also in relation to death: *„...if we could be more connected (with the body)... when I die, the body will be more supporting or helping with what is happening, not going against it“.* In this group the relationship channel did not play such an important role but connection to their body and the presence „here and now“ (letting go of the mind) seemed to be secondary.

The last group (three respondents) described these as the main qualities: love and acceptance towards themselves and others. If integrating this in their lives, it would bring them less fighting, seriousness, criticizing and more connecting with their own energy, understanding and accepting others and themselves (the relationship channel): *„to bring more love and easiness...those qualities would energise me“;... “it would bring me another way of looking at*

things and at myself... a kind of protection and shield“;... „understanding that everything has the same importance“. It was about accepting differences, imperfections and the way we are, accepting our nature. It brought another way of relating to others and to ourselves.

CONCLUSION

When I was finishing this work I had a dream in which the fire from my childhood dream came back. In this dream I bought a hamster and I wanted to put it into a cage. The hamster started to fight very strongly and did not want to go inside. I was not able to manage it. After a while, I gave up and the hamster created a fire and the whole house started to burn. I was not fighting anymore or trying to save the house. I am not sure whether I left the house or not but the calmness and not feeling touched by what was happening was very present. In fact, the fire was with me in a form of a fever, higher temperature, the whole time I was writing this thesis which was a very fascinating process for me. My fantasy around it was that I was having my head permanently in flames so while writing this work I was strongly in contact with the energy of the fire. I am very curious about this part that has been burning and dying in me recently. This experience sometimes got me into an altered state of consciousness from which I was extracting new ideas when writing the work.

It was quite a challenge for me to choose this topic and I think I crossed a big edge when I decided to work on this topic for my thesis. Nevertheless, I do not regret it, as I have learnt a lot through that. Firstly, I gained a deeper insight into other approaches and the way how they understand the concept of identity, death and fear of death. Secondly, I have got deeper understanding of the processes around death from the processoriented perspective, for example in which moments of dying edges appear, what the biggest edges people have are when letting go of our identity or what channels or experiences in the essence level are experienced around death. Furthermore, I hope that the way I wrote the analysis and shared my thoughts will give you a chance to gain this understanding too.

The purpose of the study was to investigate different attitudes and past death experiences and to bring more awareness around the concept of death, to offer different ways of looking at death and to explore the connection between various experiences. My attempt also was to

allow the participants to get in contact with the process of their dying experience and to connect with its qualities. I hope I managed to bring deeper understanding of the process of „dying“ as an existential but also as an everyday experience.

In my research I discovered that „dying experiences“ bring almost each person to an edge of letting go of a part of their identity (many times connected to the relationship channel). Hitting the edge was accompanied by different unpleasant feelings such as body reactions, fear, sadness, tensed holding to it, etc. I was not surprised by that as it also was my hypothesis. The parts were not always something that the person strongly identifies with in their everyday life but in that moment it had great importance for the person. For the participants, it was more or less difficult to jump over the edge, to let go of everything and to step into the unknown and be with whatever is there. It varied from a person to person.

I also expected some connections between the ability to let go and the attitude to death which did not bring clear answers. Some participants who had difficulty with letting go expressed negative relation to death. On the other hand, others perceived death as something which allowed them to let go easily because when death came, eventually nothing was important anymore. Many respondents who described positive relationship to death could also feel they were able to let go of other things easily.

One of my main investigations was what the experience of „dying“ brings into an individual's life after integrating its qualities. Everybody was able to get some answers on how this experience can enrich their lives. Death suddenly became an advisor for a moment. I would be happy to see those qualities integrated in their lives as they were bringing their focus on themselves more. If they let it happen more, they would focus more on what they want and need instead of following expectations, they would be connected with their body more and would express more love towards themselves and the others.

Each participant was able to, at least for a minute, connect with something bigger which was amazing to witness. I also found out that most of the „dying experiences” were happening in a relationship, visual or proprioceptive channel while connecting with death was happening mostly in a proprioceptive and relationships channel. Some participants were able to connect fully with the essence level and with the wholeness. One of the most enjoyable parts of this journey was to explore individual experiences and their special way of relating to death.

I was surprised by strength of the memories people have connected to death and the honesty when talking about their thoughts, feelings, desires, near death experiences and the openness to go into the „dying experiences” and to share it with me.

I believe that this thesis can be a contribution to the processwork community as well as to anybody who desires to explore the topic more, as processwork provides interesting tools to access the experiences of death, more than just talking about it. I realize that this work digs deeper into the very essence of death and let the participants have their own experience of dying.

I believe that we all need to work on our own death first. In fact, we are all in the same position as anybody who knows that they have only a certain amount of time on this earth because death can knock on our door anytime. Taking a few minutes each day to reflect on this topic, letting us die and noticing what will happen or emerge makes death a friend of ours. Watching how a part of our identity dies, learning how to let go in order to move forward and to integrate some new parts. All of these can contribute to a healthy relationship to the dying and support us to grow, to go towards individualisation.

We can decide whether we want to perceive death as a cruel creature or as a transformational power by having more awareness around it through connecting to our mortality, our feelings fears and uncertainty. Connecting to it, even if it scares us sometimes, confuse us or it is potentially painful, may allow us to discover the essence realm when we are in contact with

something that is above us. It is a kind of experience that we cannot verify, just experience it and connect to its energy. Every time we experience death through fantasy, imagination or a „dying“ exercise, we can say that we also practice our dying. We just need to welcome it in our lives and break the meaningless taboo. After all, life is filled with major and minor preparations for death. In other words, we should not wait for the death to come to us but we should start to practice it every day.

I can feel this is just a beginning of the journey and I hope this experiment opens the door for further research concerning application of processwork to bring some clarity into the fogginess around our relationship to death and dying.

“When you start to worry about security, fear knocks on the door. Fear is a powerful adversary, because the unknown ways frighten you even when you use clear vision. You are afraid that you will be injured, killed, or that you will be hit by a car: Fear usually comes hand in hand with loss of your own identity. When security starts to be significant for you, it means that you are afraid to step into the unknown. Here, it helps to delete the personal history that brings you the recognition that you are far more than just your own identity. Getting rid of yourself for a short time is not the worst thing that may happen to you. You may even be relieved by it.” (Carlos Castaneda)

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APPENDICES

Respondent 1

This topic is interesting to me because death is present in my life at the moment. A member of my family died before Christmas. It was a very nice, touching moment. Inside of me I am looking for my own position regarding death and I am trying to find my own perception of death and spirituality. What I can identify with and what I can not. What touched me recently was watching a funeral in church and listening to the priest. Somehow it was a very special moment. Something touched me and it still resonates. These are things that I usually do not think about but during the funeral I did. And there was something beautiful about it. I do not have any concrete belief in afterlife. I believe that there is some kind of spawn from where a person appears like a mushroom. But that is kind of all so far.

What is really hard are the emotions that the others feel. I usually feel the loss through the emotions of the others. So it is not directly connected with the person who died. When an old person dies, I feel it is natural and beautiful. In general it is not easy because it is definitive and irreversible. But what makes me is the reaction of the others. When it is a young person, it is not easy because I see all the things they could and do in the future but they can not do them anymore. I feel it was not his or her time yet. When something is definite it has a deep meaning to me and I cannot really connect with it deeper. When it comes to my grandmother, I feel her inside of me and what I believe is that she is part of me. But then, the other part of me says that it is definite. I am asking myself how I can feel the person after he or she dies and where I can find the qualities of the dead person in this life. Where does it all go to? It is all more rational. I do not feel any emotions indeed. I know only pain when I feel the pain of others who lost somebody.

I do not think about my own death at all. I have an attitude that somehow there is no reason to think about it because it is not so close. At some periods of time I felt it through my little son.

I feel that there is somebody that needs me but in general I do not really attach to my own death. If I think about my death or death of my husband it is more from the rational perspective, „ Will the one who stays e able to take care of the family?“

At the beginning of the excercise I felt there was a lot going on in my head. I felt some pressure in my head. It was all about the relationships to the outside world. While focussing on my breath, I felt I wanted and needed to be attached to somebody. I need to be here for someone. When I was supposed to die, I felt that there was a visual image of the claws holding on something. Saying like „not yet“. Some kind of bond. I needed to hang on something. There was a lot of sadness around me. I was watching it all from the perspective of somebody being outside. And I felt it as somebody is leaving that my son will miss. It was hard to focus on myself. What took my attention was the relation to my son. I realised I am (tears) cutting my lips with my teeth. Methaforicly, there were also some teeth in my head. Actually, I did not feel it in my body but in my head more. Then, I started to cut my lips. It was some kind of extremely strong power. Everytime I heard my son speaking it was even stronger (my son was around during the excercise). I had an image when he was knocking on me as searching for me, searching where I am in my body. This is the reason why I need to be here so much. I was very sad for that. Even now it is sad to connect with it (tears). Like the role of somebody who takes care is dying. And this, one I was not ready to leave. I had mixed feelings. On the other hand it is very pleasant and easy to do it but there is some unsatisfied need from the outside. The feeling that I am needed here. When I imagine myself going, there is a physical pressure in my troat.

Then, when I was supported to leave it all, I forcily opened my mouth and all the pressure went into the head. My body was calm and relaxed and the head was activated by the pressure, it was not possible to relax my head. I had some kind of fantasy that I am kneeling before something. Some part of me was against it. I did not want to feel humility or accept

that I do not control it. It was not pleasant to have my head bowed but I could not hold it because it was too heavy. If I did it even more, my head would just drop. I think I would cut it off. Then I realised that I am not kneeling before somebody. I want to let my head roll over the floor, just let it go. The head needed to be cut off, and die so that the body can be free. Then, just my body would be there, the easy one without the heaviness of the head. Then the body was floating, it was light. Like a steam floating with chest up. It is more a pleasant experience comparing to my head turning down and holding it. And it is light. The lightness in my life is normally controlled by my head. But there is still this feeling of heavy head that is disturbing me. The difficult feelings come from the head. Something is trying to enlarge slowly. Something that takes more space. The pressure in my head and troath, the tears need to go out to relieve it (tears). Like it goes throught something that is stopping it, something firm, like a stone. There is a tension going against it and the pain happens when they both meet.

Then, when I was supported to stay more with the quality of lightness I perceive it deeper. The experience of lightness is different. The sensation of flying is more like a tai chi – there is no need to push. For me it means not getting stuck into a concept that somebody needs me or it should be like this. But to use something silimar to the quality of tai chi.

I am asking myself how much is the rationalisation creator of the ego. The floating is very close to me but at the same time there is this heaviness of the head. If I could integrate it more I would rest more. But I am always postponing that and I say to myself that I will do it when I have more time, and after that I would allow it more. But it is not happening. If I could allow it more now I would live my life more like during the first few months when my child was born. More sun in my life, I would allow myself more, take more space for myself.

And I think I can use it also with death. When I get stuck with something for a long time, I can release the grip. For example when I start to visualise why somebody died and what he could experience if he stays alive and what the person missed. Taking the quality would mean

to realise I have such thoughts and do not support them. Just notice them and let go. And I am aware that this can be applied into other aspects of my life.

Respondent 2

Recently, I have had having some physical problems, insomnia, inner stress, vertigo, terrible headache, I suddenly feel hot and then cold without reason. Having those symptoms, I was worried about my life. I did not know what was happening to me. Rather than going to see a doctor, I preferred not knowing and understanding what was happening to me. What if it is something dangerous. As I cannot experience stress because of some abnormality in my brain, this was probable the reaction of my body. These days, during the night, I am thinking about having some serious illness or I fear I might die. I do not really want to die but if somebody would tell me that I am dying I can imagine that I would accept the fact. But if there is a chance to survive I will do all my best to avoid death until it is possible. The idea of dying freaks me out.

I have very negative relation to death. If there was any possibility to live longer, I would do anything to get it. Even become a vampire or zombee. Really anything, just no death. I can even imagine to live at the expense of someone else to survive. I want to have a productive life, be able to be aware who I am and not get into the ground. Just thinking about being buried makes me shake off. Something about going into the ground terrifies me. I am sure I do not want to be buried. It is not rational and I cannot explain it but being buried into the ground is the worst image when it comes to death.

I do not want to disappear in any form I want to stay the same as I am. I believe in ghosts and those who are not ready to leave the world they stay with us. I am sure I will become one of them. I will be not ready to leave the world. There is something fascinating around this topic at the same time and I expose myself to those unpleasant feelings consciously as I am ready to do today.

During the experience focusing on my body it was a very unpleasant experience as I perceived opposing sensations, haaviness in my legs and hands and easiness on my chest

and my hands were strongly shaking because I felt it is finally relaxed after long and tensed day. Then when I was experiencing the last breath, my nose as if it narrowed down to my eyes. When there was a moment when I was supposed to die, something about it made me smile. I did not know what it was but I noticed it. I thought something like „wow“. Then, I started to shake, felt panic. I wanted to run somewhere or jump. Every part of my body wanted to disappear into some different direction. It was the strongest and worst experience I have ever had. My whole body was shaking, vibrating, even in my hair ends, tension in my body. My toes wanted to shrug but I was not able to do that. I was thinking about what I would miss today if I die now. I would miss my date today, I was hesitating whether I have settled with one person after the recent argument, if it was enough or the person is still angry with me. Some things are not finished yet and what now? It was like a wave of thoughts like watching millions of pictures on TV coming from the background to the front. When the picture went away there was darkness until another picture came.

I was shaking and wanted to escape. I knew I cannot run away, I felt paralysed but some part of me wanted to escape as fast as possible. The shaking was like parts of me wanted to move and not being able to. Even those toes wanted to run but there was no way back. That part which was against my dying, felt like a voice saying: „It is too late, I do not want to“. It was interesting that this sound was not so intense as I would expect as watching the pictures. Just the body's reaction was so strong. It was like being paralysed.

When I let everything go, almost everything else was easy but my body. Then I felt my legs were burning and I felt like I am separating from my body and I stepped out. I became an observer for a moment and watched the room. It was the strongest easiness I have ever experienced, in my life. Freedom, no worries, no thoughts. I hoped this would be the end and I would stay with all the pleasant experience. But then, when I focussed on what there was, I came suddenly back into my body. I felt stuck inside of the empty body, arrested in the

body, I knew I was dead. I did not have hands or legs. I was dead. I felt my muscles were solidified. I saw myself as a white line in a black environment and I screamed: „I want to get out“. I was like in a ball and everytime I wanted to go out I touched the same black surface and came back. Like a fish in an aquarium. There were no other thoughts, no worries or regrets. No possibility to do anything. Just the desire to get out of the emptiness and blackness. I felt loneliness and the darkness around me. The longer I was the light line or ray, the more it was getting darker and darker. And I came out of the exercise just a moment before I disappeared. Maybe I would not be able to disappear really, I would just jump out. I do not know what would be behind it. It was a terrible experience but I am happy that I perceived this. It is fascinating. First time in my life I felt so released. I would stop finding excuses.

If I could integrate those parts into my life, I would less think of others. I would not be a hotline for them as I normally am. I would think finally more of myself. I would be less active. Not just enjoying things in my life but also just lie and be. Switch off and just be. If I integrated this into my life, I would live more free, I would not care about what has to be done, that I can do whatever I want. I can do anything but I do not have to. It is peaceful. What is also important that I experienced myself in such a difficult situation and I think I can use this in the future when I feel I panic. I can connect with myself in the same way. I also notice that there were some images of what I would regret in future and it is like having a second chance to do it.

It is very hard for me to let things go in general. When there is something that happened and I should let it go I am not able. I remember it even years later. When I get angry and I know I cannot change it or even it is just a stupid thing I can be angry about it and keep it inside of me. When I make a mistake, I can remember it forever.

Respondent 3

After I agreed to come I was asking myself „Why did I agree so quickly to have such a session?“. And the reason is that there hasn't been anything hard or negative related to death until now. I feel I have a different relationship to death than other people. I can openly speak to people or even children about death in general. It does not scare me to talk about this topic. Sometimes, I have to go to see kids whose friend attempted a suicide and it seems natural to me. I do not have any blocks to do it like my colleagues.

I am not a religious person. Regarding to my own death, I do not think about it much. Last time I was thinking about it consciously, I was a teenager and it ended up with a conclusion that I do not know but there is something and I leave it there. So, I do not think about death much. When I was a child, many people died in my family (suicide death, sudden death, older people died...). And it fascinated me how other people were not able to handle it. My perception is that it is irreversible, finite so I do not ask questions like „why did it happen?“, „why him?“, „How could this be avoided?“ and other similar questions. In those moments, I thought that when a person dies on a purpose he knows why he had to do it and if the person did not wish to die and it just happened, why to think about it more. The only death of a person that touched me and I think I am still not ok with is my grandfather's death. He was very close to me. Even though he was an old person, it surprised me and I had a tendency to look for a culprit. And it was very easy to find a culprit. I was asking myself why it had to happen and why it had to be him. Even in the present time, when I feel sad, sometimes I think about him and ask myself why him and perceive it unfair. He was in coma and the first day when I saw him lying there in coma, I understood that he would die and I perceived him as a dead person already. Those few days I was visiting him until he died, I felt that he is dead anyway. Last night I had a very strange experience because I was afraid of my life. I was not feeling well, something like getting ill and having no control over my body. And I felt I might die.

And I felt I cannot do anything about controlling it. Everything I did was pointless. I did not have control over what was happening to me. Nothing worked and it did not matter if I wanted to slow it down, make it faster or intervene in any way. I felt I needed to or I should do something but I did not know what and it did not even make sense. It was so strong, so intense and created anxiety inside of me because I just could not change it. It was like happening in different reality when I do not have power to get there. It is far away and I can just watch it.

In the exercise, it was very easy to let go different parts of myself and one of the hardest things that stayed with me which I did not want to let go was my bubble around me. I knew somebody should sneak into it but I was holding it very strongly. My bubble is a kind of symbol of protection, safety for me. I let go different parts of myself. I was surprised how easy it was with the rest. There was a voice inside of my head that I should not let it go so easily. It should be harder and more painful. But it was not. I let it go and everything was away except my face and the bubble. I was very attached to my face and it hurt imagining I could throw it away. The bubble was against letting it go, it did not want me to die. It said: „at least keep the face“. Despite the face there was also some image of a lizard next to my body which I did not understand but I felt like this is not part of me. It made me confused what is still me and what is not anymore. That made me stick to the face even stronger. Then, I realised that the lizard is just somebody witnessing it. I was not exploring the bubble or the lizard in a deeper way. While focussing on my face and the bubble, the lizard became small and disappeared slowly. I was not part of it. I was somebody watching it all, from above. Then, I let the bubble go, but did not allow the face to go away. For me, the face is the first and the last contact with reality. If I leave the face, then there will not be any boundary between me and the world around me. By throwing my face away, I became part of something else, there was no me anymore. I felt that now I am really losing something. At the same time there was

a voice present that was commenting all. The voice said: „Look how many things you let go and you cannot let your face go?“. It was like a support for me and it was easier for me to go through it. It said: „Interesting that everything was quite easy for you but you have problems with your face. So, now you cannot loose it?“. I realised was true. That made me feel more open to let my face go. When I did it, I saw some warm light and I was walking towards it. I was not myself but I felt there was still some part of my identity present, maybe some energy. There was a though that how can I feel hot when there is no body. It was unpleasant sun going against the place where I should have my face. It hurt. I felt it was happening to „me“, but I was not afraid anymore. I went into the centre of the sun. A yellow warm entered me and I became part of it. Then, it was pleasant, I was warm but it did not burn because I was the source of it. Being in the middle I felt there is no me at all, no energy of mine, anything. It was very pleasant. I was observing and feeling it, turning around and watching if there is a door, a window or anything different where I should go. Nothing else I should follow. I felt, there is no other direction I should go. This is the end. Than a voice came and started to ask what I was doing there. Suddenly an answer came: „I just am“.

The message from this place was that it is important „do nothing and just be“. Something about taking care of myself. I can just be and do what I want and feel and the environment should not have any influence on this. It was like me going in one reality and the enviroment in another reality and it cannot touch each other. Watch it, maybe react but it does not get me out of my way. It gives me sense in different situations, at work, with my parents....

It is not easy for me to loose things. Some months ago it was even harder, it was terrible but I feel I made some progress in this since then. Before, even if something was not imporant I was trying to hold it and try to fight for it. Even it was nothing important. Now, I am more aware of things that I am holding. Like a voice going with me and saying: „Look, again, you are holding it and cannot let it go without fighting“. This voice is some kind of support for me

to „let go“ and I trust it. Similar voice to the one I heard when I was dying in the exercise. It is something new for me. At the same time, I do not have control over this voice that's why it is not easy.

Respondent 4

I perceive death as a part of our life. I mean, when the life finishes, the death starts. I do not feel any emotions around death. When I imagine my death I have an image that it can be a pleasant thing. It is just my feeling, nothing special. I cannot even explain it. I have a fantasy like when hugging somebody without words. This feeling comes when I think of death and I fantasise that it could be like this around death, as well. But I do not have any present real emotions. It is more in my head, in my thoughts.

I do not think about death in general. Before I was thinking about death and had a lot of fears around. I was afraid if there is something after it and I was asking myself what will happen to me when I die. Before, I was hearing different beliefs and fears from people around and I internalised it. Now, I feel those worries are not mine. I was working on this issue by myself because of my fear of death in the past. And those experiences helped me to see death differently. It is based on a „theory“ that focussing on understanding our thoughts about death creates negative feelings around death. The negative feelings are only connected to our inner beliefs which create emotions. If we notice those emotions and search for the beliefs and thoughts behind them we can work with them. Because of this, I feel that my attitude to death has changed.

I have some nice experience with the topic of death. I have an unborn brother who is a very close person to me somewhere inside. I have never met him in my life. In my meditation practice he, as a being was communicating with me and it was beautiful. He can also bring important messages from there.

The only thing that makes me worry is being alone when everybody I like dies. That would not be pleasant and I would not enjoy it at all. But there are no any emotions around it. It was just the first thing that came to me when I asked myself If there was anything I feel afraid of.

In this exercise, I felt it like full of light from the beginning till the end. When I imagined myself dying I perceived light inside of me. I saw there is some light coming from me. When I was leaving my parts, my identities, it was like a black hole sucking another planet. I saw it like flashes of the light just coming to it and disappearing in it. I enjoyed it and I was just observing it. When having my last breath, there was light everywhere and when I made another breath in, there was a voice saying: „you are kidding, it is not your time yet“. It made me laugh that something knows it is not real now. Something inside of me, I think the mind, created some kind of construct and said: „you will be fine there, there is your brother already“. Then, I replied to it, that this is my moment, it is not important, go away. And did not pay any more attention to it. It was not coming from something deeper, just from my mind. I was aware of it. Then, there was even more light. I became part of the light. It is hard to explain it with words. Everything I say about it is not enough, is bullshit. It is like seeing my own „I“ without communicating or being attached to it. Just observing it. I do not have words to describe it. I was just looking at it with fascination. It does not need anything, it is perfect and safe. There is really not a connection to it, I am just observing it. There was no time but something was happening there. I was observing the presence of something, my real „I“. It was some light changing the colours and shape, but not in the time. There are no feelings, no body, nothing but I felt very pleasant there. There is something perfect, complete. I was surprised by it. I cannot find more words or other way to express it, I can just connect to it and that is all. It is like pure awareness. There is no mind or thoughts, there is just some awareness and an observer.

I am not sure if it is possible to have this more in my life. It is expected from the society that you will stand strongly on your feet and create something because creating is something essential in each life. If we stop creating, we will die. Maybe, if I have everything, I will not need more money and other things which have to be done and what is expected, I will stop

and relax more. Nothing would stop me, no boundaries, scruples around me, letting the mind go. Switching off the mind and letting myself quality relax.

Respondent 5

When I was a child, about 10 years old, I was very scared of death. I felt anxious and had thoughts about what would happen after I die. I felt helpless about having no control over it. I imagined that I die and I will stay in the darkness alone. Also, when I saw some detective movies, I was imagining myself there with the dead person, it frightened me. I felt scared that the dead person might hurt me. Logically, the dead person should not be dangerous at all but I felt more threatened by the dead people than by some living person.

Later on, I was reading a lot of books about this topic and I believe that the life does not stop when we die and there is a soul that continues even we are not here. This is something I strongly believe and I do not have doubts about it. When I die, I will become some energy that is connected with love, safety or something like this. That is what books say and I accept it this way.

I have very strong experience with death when my dog was dying. When she was lying in my hands and slowly leaving this world, I was thankful for everything we have experienced together. It was very sad but it was also a sacred moment that I can be with her in her last minutes. I was giving her to something beyond. It was a beautiful, touching and loving moment. I realised that it was like some training for my own death and I wished I would feel the same while I am dying one day. I would like to experience somebody's last moments. I would like to know what it is like to be with a dying human being. Few years ago, during one moment, I was just imagining myself dying and the awareness leaving my body. I believe it will be like this when I really die. To be honest, even I believe there is something behind, I am still afraid of pain while I am dying. I was reading a lot about it and I discovered that death itself is not painful so it is not scary anymore. I am still afraid of having a lot of pain before my death. If it is not painful, I will look forward to it because it could be a positive experience. I think I will feel something amazing in this exercise.

This exercise was not such a pleasant experience as I expected it to be. While having my last breath in and breath out I was saying to myself: „finally, it is here“. I am excited and curious what is going to happen now. I was leaving the world and I felt strongly that my daughter is there too (tears). I felt very sad and sorry for not being with her and with her future children. It was a very strong feeling. This was the only thing I could not let go. It was easy to let my son go. It is interesting because I feel he is the one that might need my help not her. She is fine without me. But, it was about something else. Her and her children (tears). Something like she was attached to me or maybe, I was attached to her. As if I did not want to leave them. There was such a strong connection. I was thinking, I am dying and I will not be with them. Then I had a thought that it is not for real now and I will die after many year and then, it will be fine because we will experience a lot things together until that time. To die now, it would be very very difficult but then, after many years, it would be easier as I will not regret that I missed having more time with them. It was touching and it is touching even now (tears). Everything else was easy to let die. I am not sure if I totally let it go but I was able to put it aside. I went on to „the other side“. I felt I was expanding and becoming a ball, some energy with gold and with edges. I felt expanded and I was permanently observing my centre and watched what was happening there. I was a ball and everything was part of me, even my family and my daughter and her children. I did not feel anybody and I was still watching the centre. And there was still the thought present that it is the same like in life. That even here I have to look at my centre and hold it because if I focus on somebody else I also give energy to it and it can take me away. The voice was coming from the centre. But it was more natural here. I felt lightness and love. Normally people care too much about unimportant things but here I was in easiness and love. I could not separate from the centre and something was forcing me to look there and realise it all. There was actually nothing to see but a spot. You could not see there anything but at the same time you could see there is something that you

create. I was the creator who can make anything what he wants. There was also a part that could analyse and watch everything from my past. And I knew that this was something that everybody on the earth should do because it would bring easiness and love. I was creating these feelings in the ball and something was helping me to create that energy. I was able to do anything with the ball, but everything what was behind I could not influence and at the same time it was not important and it was not part of me. I felt I could not stay there for a long time and I would like to be born again. It is some kind of intelligence. The goal of the ball was bringing the qualities from there to life, qualities that would energize me. This is also a message for me into my present life.

Letting things go in my life is not an easy thing for me. When something is happening to me, I can quickly adapt to it. I know I cannot change it so I just accept it. But when there is something that I need to let go I am afraid if the other part will be hurt by it or whether the person can handle it. With relationships it is very difficult, with material things it is very easy. The more I have experience with it, the easier it is. I tend to find partners who are dependent on me in material way. Maybe some part of me is afraid of being alone.

Respondent 6

I have quite positive relationship to physical death, I think. I am very curious about what is going to happen after. Death is like a new journey or trip to me. Somewhere, where I am allowed to go from this reality. Like getting free from something, for example my body. I imagine that my presence will be different after I die. I am looking forward to things that I will perceive and also new way in which I will perceive things. I will be free from social statuses, responsibilities, norms. I feel limited and I have a dream that death is more free, there is more awareness and overview. It is like growing, fuller dimension of me.

What I am afraid of is pain or „slow dying“. Death means more freedom to me. I am afraid of being limited. It would be easier for me to die quickly without pain and suffering. It is my biggest fear.

When imagining my last breath, there was a voice in me saying: „Finally“ and I was looking forward to it. Then, I let myself go. I was not able to leave some of them and at the same time I did not want to let them go. The strongest ones I was not able to let go were enthusiasm of art or beauty or the feeling when I create something which is very nourishing moment for me. I felt fear because there I realised that I was losing also things that I like. The things that I like about myself or qualities that are important for people around me. Not just things I want to get rid of. That was very difficult and I did not want to leave it. This is something unknown to me. It was a new experience for me. It was hard to leave it. It was much easier to let other things go. So, I was not afraid of letting my body go but things that I like about me. Firstly, I felt fear around it but then I accepted it. Being aware of it made it a little bit easier to let it go. But I was also afraid of leaving the fear behind. I noticed it and let it go. It helped me to move on. During the whole exercise I experienced something like water plopping.

When I had an experience of dying it was not easy because I was aware that there is this observer that is still present there. So again a part of me arose to witness something. There

was again something I was attached to so I could not be really free and I could not die really. Again I needed to let something go. It is like an onion when you take piece by piece. Then when you watch or observe something, this is just a peace that needs to be taken off. Something that I should let go. When there is a part that you need to let go, you are still not dead and free. I am not really sure if I really left this and I was able to go really deep enough. But in the experience, I felt that water. It was very slow. It does not have a consistence of water. It was more like some energy. It could be also the air but there was this sound of something plumping. It was a feeling like becoming of bigger space that was surging and flowing. I called it peace and calmness. It was pleasant to be in it and with it. I felt connected to it. It was part of me but it was also around me. I was part of something bigger. I felt that I did not feel my body limits. I felt that there were no real boundaries. It was all vibrating or plumping. Something like when fingers are going up and down, pulsing and plumping. I did not feel myself inside of my body. I was feeling oneness more.

I feel that space and calmness are something that I dream about all the time. It is something that is covered behind my fear. Many times, I am so afraid that I do not get over it. The calmness and space are something behind the edge, far away and it is difficult to connect to.

I am having troubles regarding to psychological death, or loosing things in life. It is more difficult for me than physical death. It is part of my life. It often happens to me in my life but netherless it is not easy. I have some expectations, responsibilities that make it more complicated. There is more fear because I do not know what is going to happen. My comfort ezone is disturbed and I feel shaked up. Not stable, having no control over it. Than, it is hard to have open mind. On the other hand, when there is real death, it is more free because none of those things are imporant because when there is death, my „little“ me is not so important anymore. There are not so many things so interconnected. Somehow, death brings more

freedom. What is more important than my „little“ me is joy, the feeling of freedom. I dream of having the attitude of calmness and space when dealing with „death“ every day.

Respondent 7

This topic is not very pleasant for me. It is a little bit scary, unknown. I think that being around death will be a negative experience for me. I am questioning myself „What will happen after I die. All the religionistic views I perceive just as metaphors. I believe I cannot know death during the life so I think it should not influence my life as nobody who is alive knows what is after death. I believe that after I die, there will be some energy that will become a part of some bigger energy and maybe one day, it will come back to life in a form of reincarnation or just split into the space.

For me, death is part of my life. I have experienced someone's death at some moments but nobody close to me has died yet. The first time I was seriously thinking about death was few years ago. A girl in my age that I knew because she lived close to me was killed by somebody. It was a strong experience for me because I was talking to her two days before her death and then, I found out she had died. During her funeral I was thinking more about my own death. That was very unpleasant.

What I am afraid of is that my death will be very unpleasant and painful. I do not like to hear about serious illness and long-term dying, that is something that I do not really want. I am worried that this might happen. And it is not just about me but also all the people around who will be influenced by that and become sad and they will suffer for a long time. It is even more difficult to know that I can negatively influence others.

In this exercise, when I was focussing on my last breath, it was not easy to connect to death because I felt the breath out and immediately after that another breath in came. It reminded me of sentence that between your breath in and breath out is your whole life. First time you breath in you are born and last time you breath out you die. Breathing in was the thing that was against dying. Death was being stopped by „life“. So, when I felt the breathing I felt I was alive but then, when I started to focus less on my breathing and put it aside I was more

relaxed and able to let it go. While letting my identities go, I had a fantasy that I am one of those people that I meet in my life and vice versa (people that I meet are me). It was not easy for me to leave my social identities. Maybe I have got some distance from it but I did not leave it completely. It was just not possible. I could not let go the way I behave from the outside and what I believe in. I felt it as part of my life and could not really let it go.

When I gained distance from it, I was watching what stayed there and there was a quality of curiosity. I had also a visual fantasy of a column. It was something like my „self“ The curiosity was situated around it at the bottom. And higher there were some other identities that I did not explore more. It was very dark everywhere. The visual image was in 3D. Different images started to appear and it was hard to catch any of them. They were just fluttering and moving very fast. Then one image appeared. It was coming from the black background, a colourful image of a bottle which poured some liquid into the glass to come. It was the only movement happening there. And I was the glass and the bottle at the same time. Like it is all part of something bigger. I felt this also around the column and all its parts. I was there as an observer and watched it from above and knew that everything that was happening was about me. The quality of this experience was something like what Buddhists do during the meditations, a throat singing or a very deep long sound „uhm“.

It was very soothing and there was something like „it is like this“. It was the quality of something permanent, not changing, stable. In normal life there are a lot of things happening and everything is changing all the time and here it is stable. If there is a change, it is very slow and independent from the outside world. Just being in the darkness where no light gets from the outside.

When bringing this quality into everyday life, it was not easy as my experience was very abstract. I felt it should be connected to the experience that brings me feeling of stability, constancy and independency from the environment. It would bring me more steadiness and

stability into my life when facing the outside world. I would be more satisfied and I would be less disturbed by different situations like work and relationships. Being distanced from the effect of the environment and being able to gain energy from there and from there being able to interact with the world.

For me, letting things go is easy rationally but at the same time, on some level I feel I do not let it go completely. It is still somewhere there and comes back of in some moments. My belief is that some things come and then go but in reality, I do not really leave them and they stay within me in some form anyway.

Respondent 8

Death is quite an actual topic for me as I am going to have birthday and I am in the second half of my life. I have a very special relationship to death since I was 30 years old. People often tell me that for sure I have to be afraid of death and I just do not realise that. I do not believe them. I even think I could enjoy my own death. What is before death is maybe not so pleasant. But death itself is nice to me. Once when I was reading a book about other lives, I had an experience of going into a moment before my birth. And it was a very pleasant feeling that I would like to feel anytime. And I believe I will feel something similar when I die. Some feeling of freedom.

It is important for me to live my life with the feeling of fulfillment. Sometimes I just say: „Now, I can die because I experienced what I wanted and nothing holds me here anymore. It means that I feel fulfilled. I perceive life a little bit different (laughing) from the others. When I die, I will be finally myself in something essential. The death is not the end, I can imagine different ways of continuity. I think after I die I will experience something similar I perceive at some moments of my life. I mean some concrete states that I have experience with but this time I believe the states might continue permanently. It is a state when everything dissolves, different state of mind.

I remember the moment when my grandmother died and it was very nice experience (laughing). I felt connected with her which I did not feel during her life. But during the funeral I felt a deeper connection like when I was a child and we were very close to each other. Something loving.

I have a fantasy that I will be healthy until my last day and one day I will just not wake up. And maybe I will even know that I am going to die as some people have such experience. As I am never ill I cannot imagine that I would be sick. Being sick and self-sufficient is something that I do not want and it also does not relate to me. I am convinced that I will live

my life without health problems. As I am getting closer to my 50s, there are sometimes some hesitations about it. There is a voice asking: „are you still sure?“ In general, I know that even if I am sick, I will be able to get healthy again. I believe that if I am connected with myself deeply and have the right setup, I will live a satisfied and fulfilled life. I do not even have thoughts about illness. And I believe that with this attitude the body does not have a reason to be sick. I think everybody should be like this and others have indicated thoughts that it is normal to be sick and old. I am contacted with thoughts about healthy fulfilled life and this is the right attitude for me. I have such experience from the past so I believe in it. I know some nations that are able to live this way and die at the age of 120 without health problems.

I feel it is important to build good and deep relationships with people and nature. Connecting the community and bringing eldership is part of healthy fulfilled life. As it is not easy for me to build those relationships, I am afraid I will not build them so I might lose the sense of fulfillment. If I lose the fulfillment, I will become ill and have health problems and be dependent on others. I do not want to even imagine that.

In the exercise, I felt very pleasant. I feel disappointed now because I felt it should be interesting for you and I think it is not because nothing special happened there. At the beginning there was some kind of dissociation because I was more focused on sounds around me than on my body. When I focussed on the breathing I connected with my body. I felt connected with my body and I suddenly went to the other pole. My body wanted to move so much. It was like energy of life. I have never felt so much energy inside of me. It surprised me. Normally when I feel such thing my body is restless but this time it was different. I felt strongly alive, I felt like doing anything - moving, dancing... The movement would be just happening itself. The energy of the body was very strong. I was just watching it. My spine started pulsing. There were 3 particular parts in my body where I felt it but the spine was pulsing everywhere. There was also something about making the therapist disappointed

because I strongly connected with life and the energy wanted to wake up, disconnect from the body and leave. Not to die. I felt this is not dying, this is not what others expect that should happen.

At the same time, I felt also palliation or mollification with the feeling of energy. Just being and not being. I know the feeling of palliation because in my everyday life I use it as an escape from something when there is too much tension around. I was kind of disappointed that something morbid should happen around death but it had not. But the feeling of energy was new for me.

Having last breaths or leaving identities was without any fear. There was nothing special, no reaction that I am really dying. There was just bigger self-awareness. I had a feeling that I am even more connected with my identities. I did not feel I should leave anything but I did not feel attached to any of them. I really did expect some feelings about dying. It was a similar state to being in reality but nothing was important there. Just lying and noticing the energy. I connected deeper with the energy, but I was not connected with the body much. The palliation, perceiving space, extended perception of time. I was not willing to follow anything that came to my mind. Some thoughts appeared but I did not follow them. Simply there was nothing going on. I still perceived the pulsing on the level of heart and pelvic. Some things appeared from the past, but it was not important and I did not attach to it. I did not follow anything and I was just there. Like I was not connected to being, more with the energy and palliation. And some kind of presence „here and now“.

I expected it would be something more connected to death like feeling of heaviness, tiredness.. Something black, unpleasant and having narrow awareness. Like extreme depression when there is no power even to open your eyes. But this was different. It was not like this at all. It is expected from the society and I felt I should feel like this. But in the experience I did not care. When I think about it now, I realise that it was actually something that I can connect to death.

Something not about switching off but about energising. I think I have read about some people waking up from coma and feeling strong energy for the last time, connected for the last time to energy before it totally disappeared.

To have more of this quality in my life, I should be more connected with my body and with this energy. Following my impulses so the life can be more joyful and pleasant. I would have more relationships. Thinking less, worrying less.

I feel I let things go easily. I do not want to own anything, to have any property, a car. I do not want to hold on anything because then I do not feel free. It limits me.

Respondent 9

I am interested in death because I had some near death experience some years ago. Also, recently I was fascinated with the role of death as an interesting aspect of life which appeared during one seminar. My near death experience happened some years ago. I fell off the bike while riding wildly across the forrest. I was rolling with the bicycle and suddenly there was some darkness. Then in that darkness some light appeared at one moment. I do not remember whether it was coming to me or I was going towards it but it was a very calming experience. I did not feel bad ther., It was a very beatific state. In fact, I was there for a few seconds or maximum of two minutes and then I woke up, I did not have any serious injury. Anyway, it was a very strong experience. It sounds like a cliché but it is what I experienced.

I am not sure what death means. It is not very clear to me. For some people it is terrifying a skeleton with the scythe. I have never thought about it. I do not know. I might need more time to think about it. I have one experience when my godmother died I had a very good relationship with her. And I remember a state when at one moment during the funeral I realised I am smiling. I felt her presence somewhere in the room, saying: „Do not worry, everything is fine“. It was releasing. Death does not touch me so strongly because I do not see it so tragically. This experience helped me to see death as a better place. I have a fantasy that we all are just like waves in the ocean and when we die we just go somewhere else in the ocean. Sometimes, I say to myself: „We all die one day“ which helps me in the situations when I feel helpless. People often hurry for something. When I connect with this essence, I do not. I do not know if I die tomorrow or next week, so I do not hurry. Then everything relativise and it is more releasing.

I do not think about death often but now, when I think about it... What scares me is dying with pain. I do not want to die for a long time, painfully and slowly. Also, I am afraid of taking care of somebody for a long time. There is a lot of helplessness around it for me. I have

a story of one budhist monk who was in a coma and all the family members were going to see him and greived. He was in a coma but he felt fine and he felt disturbed by them. That is something I am afraid of experiencing. I want to die forgiving everybody. I am not sure if it is possible but I wish I woud solve every relationship. I would like to leave with clean conscience. I also want some things to be said to my parents. This might have some influence on my afterlife if everything is not solved, if I owe nobody and nobody owes to me. I am questioning if there is a carma and what happens when a person takes his life by himself. Part of me feels it is a sin and it will influence the carma but the other part feels that nobody can judge things. Or euthanasia, is it ethical to kill somebody when there is too much pain? Is it a sin? I have many questions.

I am also curious what experiences people working in hospics have and what they perceive or see when a person dies. And I am also curious about their rituals after a person dies. If there are any magical moments, if something happens, if they believe in ghosts. What does dying looks like?. Maybe I would get more information about death by answering those questions. In general, It is a tabu and nobody talks about it. It is a hard job to be with a dying person. I am thinking of how I would be able to handle these things with my beliefs and attitudes. How could I be compationed with many grieving people for a long time?

During one psychedelic experience I experienced all people on the earth connected with a net, also with a Universe all the time. And there was also a time line lasting for thousands of years. I wonder if there is an older soul and if some people can meet together. This is how I think about death at this moment.

In this experience at first I noticed that different parts of my body were in different states. My legs were cold and my breath was still fast. I felt like some parts of me were going out of my body. Then, I realised that I am connected to my body stronger than ever. Before, I perceived my face having many wallpapers. Everything was easy to leave but the wallpapers were there

leaving slowly. It was like blasting a calendar. I was surprised how many of those identities I had and what I carry pointlessly. I felt it heavier, my face was tired and it was like my muscles remembered different roles I had since my childhood, during my studies or professional path. I did not see it I just felt my face was getting lighter, like having a peeling. What was disturbing me were my thoughts what I will do after I finish this session or what I was doing at work today. It was not completely easy to stay just with the experience.

I felt a real curiosity about what kind of things I have on my face and I wanted to discover it so much. I did not really want to leave this. I was like: „Wait, wait a moment. What else is here?“. I was curious like an archaeologist. I did not want to leave them really, I wanted to explore because there were so many of them, it surprised me. It was interesting, releasing and calming. At some moments, I felt I could fall asleep but I did not. And I was wondering what I would dream about at the moment. I think I did not leave all of the masks as I did not explore them completely. They were leaving very fast one by one. I could go just one by one but could not see them all or skip any. I considered it to be useless to have so many of them. In fact, I often feel that my muscles on my face are tired. And I did not know where I feel tensed muscles and I was asking myself. „Who is the one tensing the muscles?“. At the same time I felt I can switch them off. It was all releasing.

Then I felt some emptiness. No tension, just releasing. And it was making me feel sleepy. I was aware of the contrast very strongly. At the beginning something like a soul was leaving me when I went into dying and then the heaviness of the face as a contrast to it. The emptiness was pleasant but the thoughts were disturbing it. I felt handover, lightness, my thoughts were not so strong in the emptiness anymore. It was calming and more releasing than I normally feel when I relax in general. I wanted to fall asleep to find out what will happen. I imagine I would surrender and fall asleep so deeply into the darkness and wake up refreshed and something new would come out. I think I will make a billance of the masks before I go to

sleep. That is really interesting for me. It is switching from an identity that tries and wants to do that and then there is a different one when you stay with the emptiness. It is some kind of net of the Universe and I am a part of it. I am bringing the awareness of myself, not holding in some spasm. I am part of some 3D net in the Universe. It is unique but at the same time something bigger.

If I would integrate it somehow, I think I will do such rituals more often. I would like to explore the masks more. Let the ghosts leave the body and be in touch with the body.

In general, some things are not very easy to leave but I am trying to learn what the good things about leaving them is. It is harder to leave something when I am attached to something.

I feel it needs time because each second the memory of it disappears slowly. This helps me.

Respondent 10

For me, death is a very strong topic. In a way it is also connected to transformation and death of our identities when some part of me needs to die. That is something that I have recently perceived it was happening to me in my everyday life. Something has already died and something is maybe still dying. I perceive this as some attachments which would be interesting to look at more deeply. And this activity can give me some new information. This is something that attracts me at this time of my life.

But I am also interested in real death. In my past I was exploring my relation to death when one of my parents died. This is something that attracted me strongly and I was focussing on death in that period of time. I wonder if there is still some fear or not. A part of me would say that I am not afraid anymore but I think that other part of me is still attached strongly to some things and does not want to leave this world. At the moment, the fear is not so strong as before. Thinking about dissolving completely from this world used to scare me a lot. Now, I can identify myself with something that is wider, something behind my own identity. I feel some part of me does not die but continues. Maybe nothing from myself now, but some other form. Maybe there is something about karma and maybe some souls meet later. At the same time, there is something criticizing it inside of me, judging and evaluating. Maybe, I lived somewhere before with somebody. But it is not really important for me to know if it is true or not. By connecting to something bigger, I am more free when I imagine myself dying. The awareness of something bigger that includes us created that change. I had an experience of it and I feel connected to that. It brings great trust and even something behind the trust. When connecting with this, the fear of death is not so strong anymore.

I believe that even if I die some awareness will remain. Maybe not my awareness. There is some moment when I disappear as a person and what is after that I cannot imagine. I believe I am able to have contact with this part too, but it is not built yet. It was the time when I fell in

love. I let the love involve and then I was in great love and wanted to disappear. This gave me the answer that death is also like this. I used to make jokes about it before and evaluated it as not strong enough to have some fantasies about what the stronger, deep connection to it should look like. I have some connection just with the shadow of it but I have never fully felt it. I have a problem to believe in my own experience. I did not trust it and acknowledge it even because it was not full enough. Now, I see this experience is very important for me.

My biggest fear about death is that my mother or my sister and her kids will die. This touches me. I feel sadness about it and I am afraid that I will lose them. It is emotionally hard for me to connect with it. I feel that there is something like they are creating my identity and if they die, a part of me dies too. It is touching. At the same time I feel it does not matter but there is this emotional connection to them.

When leaving and dying in the exercise, I did not really contact with any special parts of myself. At first, I was criticizing that this is not really death because I have some fantasies what death should look like and it was also different from my dreams about death. I was able to let the part of me that I think I am attached the most go. The other parts did not seem to be important to me. Leaving this part was kind of true experience for me. Even I was aware I am here I felt exultatory. It was not a strong feeling so there was a critic that I did not leave it fully. Some mind was present with me all the time. I remembered that I had read somewhere that when a person dies there still the mind is present for a while. Also, in this experience, the mind was there. It reminded me a repeating dream when I fall into the light. I often quickly go out if the light, I do not want to let it go and hold it. The experience I have perceived now did not happen deeply but this is how I imagine death. I also felt I could not leave because of the pain that I might cause to others. And I also thought of things that are just waiting for me in my life and I do not want to die without experiencing them. Like experiencing one more

time love from somebody else. But I think I should let this part die. It was a strong moment for me. But then I realised that It should be like this and I need to accept it and let it go.

Then I partially opened my eyes, which allowed me not to fight with what is true and what is not true. I was perceiving myself and also the experience. Then I felt free.

When I was dying the observer was more present. Then, I was able to partially disconnect with my mind. I somehow appeared in the middle of the thoughts. There was emptiness. I felt released, connecting with some deeper awareness located inside of my heart or even behind. Some kind of being was present and even now I feel released. I was more aware of where my own mind is and where the awareness is. There was a very tinny border between those two parts. In this experience it was clearer to recognise where the mind is and where the awareness is. It is usually not so clear. The observer was able to see it more clearly. I discovered that the awareness speaks the same language as my mind does but the source is somewhere else. When I connect with my mind, I feel tension and connecting to awareness is different. It is coming from inside, from my chest, from my heart. Even from something behind all of this. I was deeply connected to myself and to the present moment. I felt more free, happier and emptier. My awareness was „at the moment“. No connection to any senses but just being even more aware of the sounds and the body.

Before I entered the exercise, I had some expectations of what such an experience should look like even I was not consciously aware of it. I thought it should be stronger, like when you are on drugs when you cannot be aware of one reality and you aren't in contact with another worlds. But in this experience I was aware of myself all the time. I felt my body, heard voices... If it is not like being on drugs. It does not exist for me. So, I have some expectations of what something should be like and if it is not like that, I just do not pay attention to it. It feels like nothing is happening. This evaluator did not allow me to go deeper into the experience. I think I did not let this part go. It was a very subtle, hard to believe

experience but I am able to accept it now. The experience was about empty mind, feeling the space inside of me, which actually is not a limited space. It is an infinite space inside of me. At some moments, I was an observer but then I connected with the beingness and there was not any observer. You just are. Actually it is quite a strong connection even now. It is not so subtle as I explained it before. I feel strongly connected to it when I am aware of the evaluator. And it is even deeper now when I am talking about it. There is something like If I am able to leave this evaluator something very important will happen. Thinking about the experience disconnects me from it. So, it is about feeling and not thinking.

If I have of this quality more in my life, I will be more in contact with this experience which will bring me happiness. It is about being connected with myself and be more present in „just being“.

Letting things go is something that used to be very hard for me. I am still learning it. It is not easy for me to accept things that I do not want in my life. If there are things that could bring me something nice in my life I just cannot let them go even in my fantasy or symbolically. The more I do it, the easier it is to let them go and do not hold on to them just because they are nice.

Respondent 11

I do not consider death to be a big topic in my life. About 10 years ago, a friend of mine died and my reaction was so strong that I was not able to go to his funeral. It was the first time when I was thinking about death strongly. He was almost my age and I realised that I was really displacing that experience. Something like living my life without thinking about my death and planning my life as if I am going to live for 100 years I avoid focussing on death. Once I was talking to a hinduist who said that he will be fine if he dies tomorrow. I did not believe him. In general, there is something unsolved about this issue for me.

I do not believe in God or heaven and hell. But at the same time, I cannot imagine there will be nothing after I die. My fantasy is not clear. I just know how I do not see it. This week, my partner's grandfather died and we are going to the funeral tomorrow. Now, I am thinking about death and afterlife more. I do not know if there is some awareness that is able to look at people who were important in life or if you just die and connect to something bigger without being connected to the world and „your people“. So, I wonder how much the awareness is present after a person dies. I cannot imagine the end of „me“. And if the „me“ dies I do not see a reason to exist anymore.

I have a near death experience when I was swimming once and a water vortex took me under the water. It surprised me that I was still under water. There is some time that I do not remember but I know I was not afraid at all. So, the closest experience with death I was able to get was without fear. At that time I did not have children. There was nothing I could regret. I did not feel panic and I said to myself that it just was not worth trying to survive and I will just give up or let it go. And then, suddenly I was above the water and it is important for me to remember this positive experience.

From my point of view, when an ill person dies, the person often longs for death because there is a lot of pain. The others are suffering more. But as a young person, I feel that this

instinct to survive is so strong. I know that it is hard for me to give up anything. It is interesting that at that moment of drowning I gave up. But I do not focus on death more because I am afraid. I start to think about death, the existential fear will be stronger, it will be more present. This is something I want to avoid. I am terribly afraid that something will happen to my son. So, it makes the fear even stronger now. Before I was not afraid to do more risky things but now I do not want to do anything to put my life in danger and cause the fact that my son will stay without mother and will suffer because of it. I have a friend that is an orphan and I can see how strongly she is influenced by that.

In this experience today, it was quite easy when leaving my breath. I liked the part when I had to leave everything. It was a very nice feeling. Like parts of the „to do list“ are disappearing. I did not care about my diet, if some dress is appropriate for some occasion or not. I left things I have to do, my problems. It was very pleasant. I realised how many thing I have in my head. So many things that I need to do and take care of. Now, I did not have to think about any of them. There were so many things.

All my identities were easy to leave except the one of being mother of my son. It was so difficult. But then a thought came that if I leave him I will finally have time to sleep. It was releasing. This is something that I could imagine because it is how I think, how I function. Later I felt I was over it, I left everything. Only a voice of a facilitator was calling me back. I did not know if it was about relationships or something else. Then, something happened. It was visual. I moved my head to become more comfortable and I saw some light and it was like a tunnel. There was an idea that here you meet all the people who died in your life. I started to cry. And I had a feeling that my grandfather was waiting for me. At first I did not know it was him. I saw a figure, a siluet and it made me cry. I was confused because I did not know why I was crying because I did not feel anything. I was also critical that it is a cliché to see a tunnel. It is banal. Also in some books, people describe this kind of experience and it is not a special thing. Then I was asking myself why I was crying? I wanted to understand it so much. But then the emotional part took over and I stopped thinking and

analysing. This is something that is very typical for me - to think. Just later, at one moment, I understood that the person was him, my grandfather. I had some memories with him from my childhood but I could not remember his face. He did not give me any advices for my life and there were so many things that we did not have time to experience together. He was my closest person who died. It was almost 30 years ago and he was the man I liked the most. Before I missed him every day and with time I think of him less and less. He is the person that loved me without reservation. For some moments I had a contact to it and I knew how it was to feel this kind of love.

Then, there was this feeling of love without reservation and embracing love coming from my grandfather. It is hard to explain it with words. At first, it was focussed on me. Somebody loves me this way. But later it was just present there. There was something warm around, something very pleasant. It reminded me of the feeling when I was wrapped in the bathrobe. It holds you from all sides, gives you a feeling of something pleasant, but it was much much stronger. Some sort of safety was there too. But just the essence of it. It is not the same feeling because it is not possible to describe it in ordinary words. Some very pleasant physical feeling. It would be a beautiful state in afterlife. At some moments my head came in saying: „Ok, it is you who is creating it but you are not able to do it to yourself that´s why it is coming from grandfather“. But it was just for a moment when I was able to be connected to it deeply without having the head present there. Something was taking me back to my everyday identity and to my thoughts.

I can often imagine what is going to happen and I have some expectations how it should be. But the real deep experience was very pleasant and different. I have often a block to go into something and when I finally try it, something new and interesting appears. Letting this stopping part - my head go, helps me to experience something new.

I thought I should have towards myself that this kind of love. To be more in contact with it. I usually have critical voices in my head and such attitude towards myself would be so helpful. I would have less hidden self-critical thoughts and more acceptance and love without conditions. It is more about the attitude that I want to build in myself. Some kind of protection, a shield. It is also about another way of looking at things and life. And especially at myself. If there is something I feel I should do differently and feeling of responsibility connecting to this experiences gives me access to freedom.

If I think about real death, the sentence: „Imagine that you are going to die soon, is it important or not“? often helps me to understand what is important and what is not. This experience gives me another way how I can do something. It would be interesting to remind myself of the feeling of the essence without thinking about it.

I often do not want to leave a specific effort. I try more and more and harder and longer. And I do not even think of letting it go. It is in many aspects of my life. Many times i try without realising that I cannot do it, cannot get it or I just should give up trying. I also cannot let go promises. It is very important for me to keep them.

For me, death does not have to be just physical but it can also be symbolical. I see death as part of our life. It has to come one day and it is an important part of the cycle symbolically and physically. I was quite close to death as a teenager when my step-parent died. It was very tangible. Also, each of my inner transformations carried death and pain connected to it together with the change of my identity.

I imagine that it is important to give up or open myself to death. Sometimes, people are afraid because it is something we cannot handle or control. I have a fantasy that after death I become a part of something bigger. I was reading the Tibetan book of death and I understand that it is important to be aware of death and follow the light. It is very important to be aware of it that I will not get lost. If I do not realise that I die, my soul stays on this earth. It is like the celebration finished and I should be somewhere else but I am still here. I do not know if it is unpleasant but when leaving with awareness I go somewhere where the soul can grow and increase.

My fear of death is connected to my loved ones. If I die today, I would be afraid strongly how my mother will handle it. I am also afraid of pain and dying in pain. Like having a serious accident and losing my hand or leg, dying painfully.

This was an interesting experience. When going close to death and losing my breath, I experienced gratitude. Some people were coming to my attention. Everybody I was sharing some part of life with. It was amazing that we had a chance to have some time together. I appreciated what we experienced during my life. It was touching. I was thinking what a beautiful opportunity it was to live this life and how beautiful life I had. My life was full of happiness, creating and relating. I saw it visually through my memories. And there was also a feeling of satisfaction. Like when you do a very good job and feel pleasantly tired. When leaving my identities I felt it did not matter because my „self“ still stayed there and the only things which were attached to it are leaving now. The only thing that was against my dying

was my mother. She did not want to let me go. It was very difficult because I felt peace with everybody and I was ready to leave. Nothing was attached to me. I felt I would not ruin or disturb anything by dying. Connecting to my mother, It was the feeling that I would cause terrible pain to her which is hard to think about. That would be a very hard, a terribly hard moment (tears). It was difficult because I was feeling her pain and I was not able to hold this feeling for a long time. I felt so sad. I know that I will not be so sad because of losing her and I just feel her feelings.

When I heard that I could let her go, it was very good and I sent her a message that she has to learn how to be happy differently, not through me. I am not sure if I totally left her. It was so strong and disturbing. It was interesting, to be open to the experience of dying. But my body was not able to do it. It was tensed, like getting ready for something. I started to relax slowly different parts of my body to be able to release the tension. But it was not very easy. The tension just stayed in some parts of my body. The strongest tension was in my spin and chest. I felt the tension all the time but it was not so strong later. The body was frightened of something existential. Something like I will survive this. I will stay alive. Some strong desire to live. I had an image of water, a wild ocean that is very stormy but it calms down slowly. At the end, it was smooth. It brought calming down, peace, acceptance. The body was slowly releasing itself and some parts were able to relax and brought touching qualities of acceptance and peace. And the softness and smoothing were very pleasant things. I do not have to hold anything. I can let everything go. The process of releasing was fine but also the moment of feeling released was pleasant.

I was feeling it all very physically. It was a lot about the body. The releasing was heightening and I think it would go even stronger with time. If I amplify it, I will feel like a handkerchief. I can imagine some parallel to the flower. When it dies, it is releasing or dropping and also opening, giving itself to something bigger. Something about not holding. The body is also

dropping and it is not important anymore like a shell. I do not know what could happen after everything drops.

What I felt and would like to take to my life was the gratitude for my life, for what I have everyday and celebrate those beautiful things and relationships. And something about my mother. Not holding her or not feeling so responsible for her. Some inner leaving, making bigger distance from the unspoken expectations. Letting some things on her.

I feel that I do not need to hold my life so strongly and that it is not so painful to let it go. I was surprised by the interconnection with the body and I think it would be better to have closer relationship with the body in future. I think it would cooperate more if we were more connected and when I die, the body will be more supported or helpful to what is happening. It would not go against it.

Letting things go is not easy when I work on something more, I invest more energy into it or put some effort into it. I can let go easily but I do not enjoy it every time because it brings uncertainty, pain or consequences.

Respondent 13

For me, there is a very tinny line between life and death. Not just because everyone can die anytime but also because of the fact that sometime we can see that the life is not going the way we want it to go. I feel that some people have such a hard life that they would prefer dying and on the other hand, others feel fulfillment in their life and death comes suddenly. I do not know what is better and what is worse. It is quite scary for me to have unhappy life, just waiting for my own death. And another aspect that scares me is the death of my parents. I am not settled with the idea that my parents will die. That is very scary and I displace it because it terrifies me.

I believe that there is a reason why we are on this Earth. That's why I believe we should not kill ourselves. There is something that is holding us on this Earth and when we die, we will find out what the meaning of our life was. I believe I will discover the meaning. If I imagine that I will not, it frightens me. I also think that after my death, I will understand things I was not able to understand during my life. This reminds me one movie called „What Dreams May Come“ which touched me strongly and it reminds me of my beliefs when it comes to death. The man in the movie was dead and he had a chance to save his wife who killed herself. And it was very touching. The message for me was: „When you love somebody, this person can help you also after you die“.

I have not been to any funeral for a long time and I have not been confronted with death. And I am thankful it is not happening and I want to keep it this way. I want to escape even from any fantasy about death. I can imagine only my grandfather's dying. He is quite old and I am not really close to him (maybe that's why it does not touch me so much).

I have some fantasy what death could look like from my near death experience. It is quite pleasant and not scary at all. I had this near death experience while in labor. The baby was not going out and at one moment, something suddenly changed. I felt I understood what doctor was

telling me but I could not do it. My breathing stopped, I became blue and suddenly they had to give me oxygen. When I woke up, I finally felt fine and I imagined that if death looked like this it would be fine. I did not have any emotions or pain at that moment. Before this moment there was terrible pain and I felt like I could not stand the pain anymore. Then suddenly I felt good and there was no pain at all. I was just an observer of everything. I did not have time for any emotions or anything. People were stressed around me, I could see it but I was not. And I was observing it all how the doctors were running around and trying to save me. In fact, the pain is more scary than death itself.

I do not have any fantasy about death. Lying in the grave is very scary. I have some stomach chronic pain and my biggest fear behind it is to be in the grave. Not to die, but lay in the grave. It is claustrophobic, I cannot breathe there, I feel helpless. The fear is mostly about having such huge pain that it will get me to the grave. So, it is more about the pain and suffering than dying. I am trying to believe that when I die, it will be different. I am also afraid of losing somebody close to me. I am not sure if time can help. When I was about 20, a friend of mine who was very close to me died. Even many years later, I still have some strange feelings about not having this person here. Once I had a feeling I saw her walking on the street. The irreversibility scares me and when there is a thought like this, I just run away from it.

At the beginning of the exercise, I felt some heaviness in my belly which made my breathing more difficult. It was hard to breathe in but my hands were free. When doing my last breath in, at first it seemed absurd. I did not feel afraid. It was very natural. No special feelings. When leaving everything for a moment, I felt sorry for leaving the role of a partner. I had an image that I would like to feel this way before I really die. I was not feeling attached to my family at all. In fact, the relationship to them is quite strong but here, it was not important. Nothing was stopping me to die. I was able to leave it all except my son. I thought I was able to leave

everything but I felt strongly attached to my son. There was a strong thought in me saying that I promised him that I was not going to leave him yet and I would be here for him. My son sometimes asks me before he goes to sleep what will happen if I die and this is very hard for me because I feel sadness and I want to let him know that I am not planning to die and I will be here with him for many years. I feel a strong commitment to him. My belief regarding this is that if I die I will leave him alone. I will abandon him. I feel at his age it is important for him to have me (mother) and I do not want him to feel the pain of losing me. It is more important than how I feel or what I want. I would hold with my teeth and nails to it for him. It was all coming in the form of thoughts. Then when I realised that I was not really dying, I let myself put it aside for a while. On the body level I felt the dying and it was very easy. I knew I would come back and I let it happen fully. Everything just disappeared. And I think I allow myself such experience in my everyday life only when other things do not bother me. This is a releasing experience. It reminds me of the situation when I was waiting for an exam. As I have experienced some much stronger stress in my life, it did not touch me and this awareness of surviving worse things gave me the possibility to access the other state. I was able to differentiate what is important and what is not. And I had the same feeling also in this experience when I did not have any strong emotions. Almost nothing was important there. I felt lightness. It was not visual, just some awareness that everything is just releasing and I stay in passivity. The passivity was interesting because it is also happening to me in my everyday life. Some kind of resignation and I judge myself for it. It is disgusting just sitting in front of TV and doing nothing. But in this experience, everything was with an attitude „why not“. And I am shocked now because I realise it is like I am dying in my everyday life. But the experience is actually happening on the physical level. There is a lot happening in the body. In this experience I was not judging it. I was not moving. I did not feel any urge to move. Just breathing and sitting. No need to move, no tendency to move. The movement went

into even stronger passivity. If this went even longer I would go into nothing. Also in my hands it was just putting them somewhere and lying somewhere without any physical movement. In my head, there was nothingness. And I felt just like an observer there. I get into the role of the observer also in difficult moments in my life. And there was also the lightness there. As if just watching the situation but not being touched by it. Disconnection from emotions, from my body, from my thoughts. What stayed there was something like „it is happening like this and it is ok“. Not many things were important there. Maybe just my son. It surprised me because normally I feel strongly attached to others. It was like leaving nothing that I would really miss and I did not feel sorry for giving up something. I wonder what would happen if I went further.

It surprised me that going into dying was not so difficult. If you had asked me before, I would have said that I would be scared and I would resist. I expected it would be really difficult. I thought it would be scary. It was just a thought for a moment.

If I will bring more of the quality (lightness and passivity) to my life other things will not bother me. To see things the way they are not so fatal. I let the feeling of responsibility go. Since I have a child, the feeling of responsibility is very exhausting and it is very pleasant to give it up. In normal life it is not possible to give it up and this experience gave me the feeling of giving up the will and responsibility. It would bring me more releasing. It is pleasant to just feel that I can put the responsibility on somehow. This is something that I would welcome more in my life. Not thinking what is right, need to feel responsible, something childish.

Letting things go is easy when I leave something material but when it is about relationships. I can imagine that it will be hard to leave a relationship even if I am not satisfied with it. I stuck to them despite being hurt or unrespected. I am afraid I will not be able to handle the break up even I know I am able to handle it since I have experienced it before.

Respondent 14

Death is part of my personal myth. I often cry because of it and even now, when I mention it I feel strong emotions. Something about things that are leaving and others appearing, like a cycle and just saying these words touches me (tears). Those feelings are overwhelming. Some sorrowness or the feeling that I will miss something, something unique. Some touching emotions because of something unique that was here and it is not here anymore. And appreciation of something special that I am going to miss. Like looking at the this flower (showing the picture) that is unique and there is no other flower which is the same, just similar. Or some moment that will never come back again. Also missing what I am at the moment and some moments with people I love.

I think I became a friend with death. Sometimes when I walk or drive I just think that this might be my last moment. And this touches me (tears) but helps me to live my life to the fullest and stay with the present moment. For me, death is leaving the physical body. I have a fantasy of something connecting with the wholeness, leaving or coming home and connecting with something eternal.

The moment of dying is something that worries me or disturbs me. I imagine pain while dying. If death is like a labor, it will be painful. It is a special moment that takes you from an ordinary reality (tears). Like when labor is starting, then other things are not important and what is touching me is that it is a very special, unique moment. It is visual for me, like a moment of being in a bubble, protected moment when other things do not push. The everyday reality is behind the bubble. It is hard for me to describe it with words, I just feel it.

What brought me closer to death was this New Year's Eve (tears). My grandmother died some time before and I was connecting to it. When she was in her last days, it was more like not leaving anymore. And everybody was holding her and wanting her to live. But I think she was not so convinced (tears). And it was quite pleasant when death came. I realised how

important is the fact that death is here and sometimes it is fine when death comes at the right moment. And I realised that I tend to say: „Not yet, not yet, it is not the right time“. But also if it does not come, it will be like living life without really living it. I also realised that death is not an evil creature which was the way I felt it before and created in my head but it is some neutral energy that is just doing its useful job.

Two older women have died recently. One of them was my grandmother who I have just mentioned. She waited for her time and people were holding her here in this „world“. She was 92. And the other woman was over 75 and had cancer. And she decided to stop eating and she died quickly. And this is also touching (tears), such a strong decision to die. She knew there were not many chances and her life would be difficult. The freedom and courage to decide how she wants it and not holding to life.

At the beginning of the experience when I was feeling my last breath and two parts appeared. I have already described one of them. It was a feeling of being touched by everything and the one that perceives each moment as unique. This part said: „Wow, it is the last unique moment“. I was ready to have emotions and feel it all. And then, there was the other part which was not attached to it at all, saying: „Oh, you were breathing and it is enough now, it is time to stop“. This one was much stronger at that moment. Enjoying the moment was not so important just because it is the last one. Later on, the emotional part just went back but the second part was much stronger during the exercise. When dying, it was calm. I was able to leave everything very fast. Some awareness went out of the body up to the sky. I saw it like some form going up and it looked like a bubble, something very light going into the sky. The body was suddenly strange to me when I went back there with my awareness to check whether I left everything. It was like watching something that does not belong to me. I was detached from the body. Then, I went back to the sky. And in while, it had wings and looked like a bird. And it was me and I was feeling some form and lightness. The bubble connected

with something which looked like a rocket from Star track. It was silver. When it split with the rocket, the bubble disappeared. It was all visual. I did not expect such experience. I expected some heaviness and crying because of dying but it was very easy. At some moment I was confused if I was already dead or if I needed to go back and die longer. When I went back it did not make any sense to me. I had already left everything, even my relationships, my body, absolutely everything. And surprisingly, it was not touching at all. I experienced some overview, lightness and disconnection. There was a moment of cut and then everything stayed behind and did not belong to me anymore. It was very quick like a shortcut. Maybe when thinking about leaving the relationships, the second part that is attached to life and having feelings, enjoying life, considering it to be special and unique appeared there. But it was there just for a while.

Few times, I heard some voice or the bird (in reality) and I was asking myself: „Will I hear when I die? Will I be able to hear after my death?“. It was interesting because few times I was thinking about some auditory perception. Then, I felt I was the bird as well as the Earth. And I am everywhere. Then I connected again with the breath and something was pulsing. Then I was like the whole universe that is spreading and expanding and than getting smaller again. Like breathing or pulsing, infinite. I saw it pulsing but I knew it is infinite so I did not know how this infinite energy works. I was just it. There was lightness, like out of body experience. Something loving, heart relating, all-embracing, peaceful, without any polarities. Something complete. Like I am all of it and it is all in harmony, made of one material even if it can change. Like a play though.. I can feel it even now. Now, I can fully feel myself and at one moment I get bigger and I am not just in my body but I am something more than it. Feeling big, light and being compassionated towards others, the polarities do not have such sharp shapes.

Integrating it would mean having more understanding of others, fighting less and not taking it so seriously. Understanding that everything has the same importance and there is some overview and attitude that it is all just a game.

I had some expectations of meeting some dead figure, somebody saying: „Now, it is your time“. But nothing came, just the last breath was there and then nothing. When I died, I thought she should be here. I often scare myself with this death figure. It should be a figure with a scythe with a black coat and a hood. But in this experience it was not there so it makes me doubt if it was real dying.

Letting something go is very difficult for me because it touches me strongly. Big moments bring a lot of tears. When it is a small thing which I can touch and say „goodbye“, it is fine. But it is not always easy for me.