

BOOK REVIEW

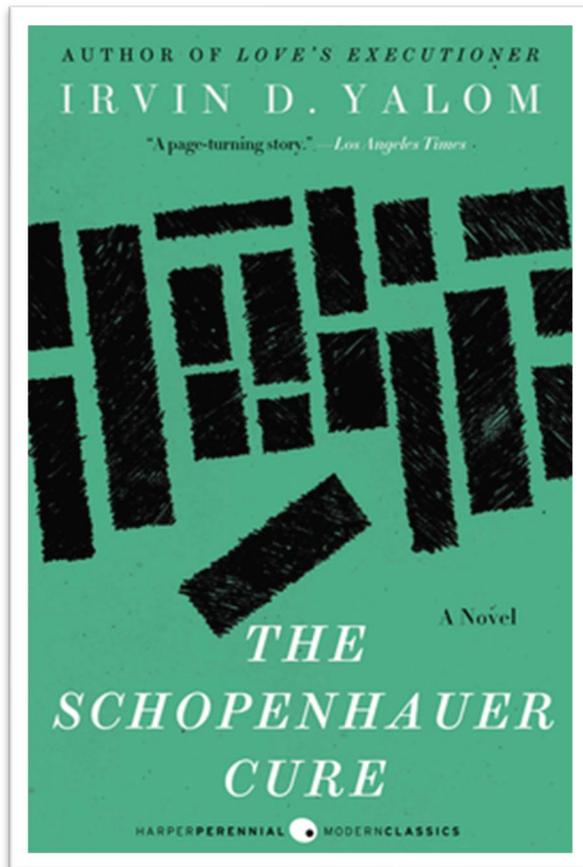


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Irvin D. Yalom: THE SCHOPENHAUER CURE

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I remember how in my childhood my friends and I used to gather to play around the pyramid of sand piled near my house, and each of us did what he or she could to leave a trace on those strangely-changing sands.

When we finished playing, after we had accomplished our goal, I would leave the piece of sand with a beautiful castle or an improved version of some animal figure erected on it, feeling different every time.

There were days when I was happy and proud of my own work. Sometimes I was not too happy and I remember the times when I felt unhappy because I had not managed to make anything, as some older child would not let me play. Occasionally, I would just watch the others work, feeling reluctant to help them in building a sand town, since that did not interest me at all. My friends experienced similar emotions, which often caused conflicts among us.

Life is very much like playing in the sand. People behave the same way, doing what they can, sometimes achieving success, sometimes failing, and after finishing their work, they experience the same feelings and repeat the same actions as the children playing with sand.

There are times when each of us starts to ask him/herself questions about our roles in life. However, we are not always able to find the answers. This can be explained by the fact that life is quite voluminous and the number of those who can tell us the whole truth is very small.

Therefore, it is desirable that each of us should have a safe space, where we would be able to talk freely about ourselves and one another.

Although such spaces are not easy to find, they still exist and one of them is called “group psychotherapy.”

I was lucky to be involved in the work of a psychotherapy group, which was an incredible experience. It made such a difference for me that suddenly I found my life divided into two phases – before and after the group therapy.

In the end, working in the psychotherapy group of eight people proved to be very useful, as I started to see things from different points of view, which was something completely new for me.

At the early stage of the group’s work, I developed ambivalent attitudes toward the group members, which were mainly conditioned by different emotions, which caused some turbulence among us.

With time, the emotions more or less quieted and the atmosphere became more relaxed and friendly, which, however, does not mean that the group members ceased to feel emotions or lost the desire to get together.

The benefits brought by psychotherapy group work to each group member are really significant; however, using those benefits wisely requires certain knowledge and experience. These are the aspects Irvin Yalom, a great American psychiatrist and psychotherapist, addresses in his masterpiece titled *The Schopenhauer Cure*.

This book gives its reader a deep insight, not only into psychotherapy, but into philosophy as well; it is not just interesting to read but also raises questions about the essence of life, about human values and the mission of a human being in real life.

The book contains 42 chapters and it has two parallel plots: the first story tells us about the work of a psychotherapy group in modern times, while the other story takes us about two centuries into the past to introduce us to the great German philosopher and thinker Arthur Schopenhauer.

Dr. Julius Hertzfeld, a successful psychotherapist, takes a routine medical checkup, during which he is diagnosed with the most serious skin

cancer. He learns that he has about a year left to live. When he comes to face the diagnosis of such a grave disease, Julius decides to get in touch with his former patients whom he failed to cure in the past, in order to correct his mistakes.

Among such patients, he finds Philip Slate, the man he treated twenty years ago. When he meets Slate, Julius learns that the man has practically solved his problem with the help of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy. “Schopenhauer made me aware that we are doomed to turn endlessly on the wheel of will: we desire something, we acquire it, we enjoy a brief moment of satiation, which rapidly fades into boredom, which then, without fail, is followed by the next ‘I want,’” Philip tells Julius, adding, that the only way out is to get off the wheel.

After that, Philip decides to use an unusual method of treatment, which must help him to become a psychotherapist. In order to achieve his goal, Philip asks Julius to become his supervisor. For his part, Julius doubts that Philip has managed to solve his problems by that new method.

Nevertheless, the two men strike a deal: Julius agrees to his former patient’s proposal on one condition: for six months, Philip should attend the group therapy sessions conducted by Julius.

Since Julius is well acquainted with the specifics of group therapy, which is based on the following principle: if you work in a group, or conduct group sessions, or try to help your clients build relationships with other people, you cannot avoid maintaining relations with them, the main, motivating aspect of his deal with Philip becomes clear.

Julius believes that there are two stages in the work of a psychotherapist: the first one is forming a relationship, which is often emotional, and the second stage is making sense of that relationship. It is through alternating the one with the other – experiencing emotions and making sense of them – that psychotherapy works.

The author of the book tells us about the group members and by revealing their characteristic features, he demonstrates their personal growth

and the changes in them, which help them overcome doubts and fears. As a result of their work in a group, they get to understand that “we should treat with indulgence every human folly, failing, and vice, bearing in mind that what we have before us are simply our own failings, follies, and vices. For they are just the failings of mankind to which we also belong and accordingly we have all the same failings buried within ourselves. We should not be indignant with others for these vices simply because they do not appear in us at the moment.”

In parallel with the story of seven group members, Yalom describes the most notable events in Arthur Schopenhauer’s life, demonstrating the personal formation and professional growth of the great philosopher. “Schopenhauer believed that a man of internal strength or virtue will not require supplies of any kind from others; such a man is sufficient unto himself”... “My intellect,” he wrote, “belongs not to me but to the world,” – reading these quotes we get the impression that Arthur Schopenhauer is one of the main characters of the book.

The severe illness that gradually takes full possession of his body defeats Julius morally, although he pretends to be calm. Notwithstanding his grave condition, thanks to the support from the group members and Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Julius still gets the chance to solve his problems and discover a new sides of himself.

“Julius knew the life-and-death homilies as well as anyone. He agreed with the Stoics, who said, ‘As soon as we are born we begin to die,’ and with Epicurus, who reasoned, ‘Where I am, death is not and where death is, I am not. Hence why fear death?’” As a doctor and a psychotherapist, Julius has often used those not too cheerful truisms to console his dying patients, which he considered his duty. However, he would have never imagined that he would have to apply them to his own life.

The book offers us dialogues of different opinions about death. “Spinoza was fond of using a Latin phrase, *sub specie aeternitatis*, meaning ‘from the aspect of eternity.’ He suggested that disturbing quotidian events become less unsettling if they are viewed from the aspect of eternity,” Philip says to Julius, looking into his eyes, noting that such an attitude might be useful for someone who is in serious danger, like Julius. These dialogues make Yalom’s book a kind of personal therapy that can help the reader to finally overcome fear of death.

Despite the sadness we feel after reading the last pages of the book, the readers still get the feeling of satisfaction because they have already understood, with the help of Irvin Yalom’s wonderful book, how people can make their departure from this world easier and how they can learn to love life.

