

# **An Accomplice's Tale**

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## **Abstract**

Sensitivity to a range of end of life patterns, as well as a range of afterlife patterns, is seen as essential for appreciating what is happening with a particular person who is dying. The question of what we have to fall back on as we lose our attachment to the real world is addressed. Ordinary mysteries—such as the dreamlike state that the dying may enter, the special abilities that they may have, and the special companions that are visible only to them—are explained. The problem of understanding a person's death is discussed, and a set of reminders is offered for being with a dying person in an I-Thou way.

## **Introduction**

Much of the modern literature on death and dying reflects a “one size fits all” approach that is disrespectful and violative of individuals. The one size that is portrayed as fitting for all of us is a death of peace and acceptance. While this is appropriate for some people, for others it would simply be inauthentic.

Consider, for example, William Butler Yeats (1899/1933), an Irish poet known for his indomitable will. The following lines are from his final poem, “The Black Tower”, written one week before his death.

The tower's old cook that must climb and clamber  
Catching small birds in the dew of the morn

When we hale men lie stretched in slumber  
Swears that he hears the king's great horn.  
But he's a lying hound:  
Stand we on guard oath-bound!

What was authentic for Yeats in the face of approaching death was not peaceful surrender.

Consider Dylan Thomas (1943), a Welsh poet known for his colorful and reckless life. The following lines are from the prayer that he wrote when his father was dying.

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas would not have fit in a procrustean bed of tranquility.

Unfortunately, the “one size fits all” approach is now so pervasive in our ideology and institutions that it is almost violative of community standards for an individual to want to die in his *own* way. Because of the ideological and institutional pressure to go peacefully, a person may need an accomplice in order to get away with having his own death.

This paper focuses on concepts and ideas from Descriptive Psychology that are helpful in being an accomplice to a person who is dying. There is *no* claim of universal applicability. The only claim is that with *some* people, there is a point in talking this way and acting accordingly.

## **Relativity Formulations**

Fundamental to Descriptive Psychology is a recognition that there is no “view from nowhere”. Whatever we are seeing, we are seeing it *from* some position. For example, think of how a chair looks to a person standing in front of it, how it looks to a person off to one side of it, how it looks to a person above it, etc. If we took photographs of the chair from each of those positions, the photographs would all be different.

That is completely non-problematic for us, because we have mastered that kind of relativity thoroughly. We know that the chair is the kind of thing that looks one way from the front, another way from the side, another way from above, etc. If we have any doubts about it, it is easy enough to walk around to different positions and see what the chair looks like. The chair corresponds to the relativity set of view/viewpoint pairs.

Similarly, we have to see and describe behavior *from* some position. Think of how Yeats' affirmation in "The Black Tower" might be described by his wife, how it might be described by a fellow Irish patriot, how it might be described by his personal physician, etc. We expect that those descriptions will be different, just as the photographs of the chair are different. "What Yeats is doing" is a placeholder for the relativity set of behavior description/person characteristic pairs.

But there is an important difference between seeing the chair and seeing a behavior. We cannot become another person and see directly how that person sees the behavior, in the way that we can walk around and see the chair from where that person is. With behavior description, people sometimes end up stuck with only their own descriptions. They do not see the human world in all its fullness, in all its dimensions. They are like someone who is seeing the chair in only two dimensions, because they cannot automatically take into account other people's points of view.

The same logic applies not only to chairs and individual behaviors, but also to larger units of behavior. Instead of talking about an individual's behavior, we can give descriptions of dramaturgical units of behavior of any size and do the same sort of reconstruction. The dramaturgical units of interest in this paper are the end of life drama, the afterlife drama, and the whole life drama.

Think of two different people in the presence of someone who is dying. The first person operates only with his own view of the end of life. He expects that another person's view will be the same as his, which is like expecting that the other person's photograph of the chair will look like his. For this person, the

concept of the end of life is *not* the concept of a set of pairs. It is the concept of a pattern that is the same for everybody.

In contrast, the second person sees the end of life in all its fullness. That person automatically takes into account a set of pairs, such as:

- For an Irish poet with an indomitable will, the end of life is a time to stand “on guard oath-bound”.
- For a Welsh poet who lives colorfully and recklessly, the end of life is a time to “rage against the dying of the light”.
- For a Swiss psychiatrist who takes Freudian theory seriously, the end of life is a progression through stages.

And so forth. The second person doesn’t have to do any thinking about it. He simply sees the end of life in all its dimensions in the same way that he sees chairs.

Why does operating in light of the whole set matter for accomplices? Because without that, accomplices probably won’t see what’s going on with the individual who is dying. Without a grasp of the range of meaningful patterns that are possible, accomplices will probably miss what’s happening with the dying person even though it is right there in front of them.

## **Boundaries and Boundary Conditions**

Consider the difference between a boundary and a boundary condition. There’s always something on the other side with a boundary. The boundary may make it difficult to get to the other side, but nonetheless there is something there. In contrast, a boundary condition deals with a limit of some sort, beyond which there is nothing (cf. Ossorio, 1977, p. 57).

The heuristic of “The Tennis Game” (Ossorio, 2006, pp. 399-400) can be used to illustrate the difference.

Jil and Gil are playing tennis and Gil has just served the ball. Wil is standing on the sidelines.

Wil: Why were you waving your racquet like that?

Gil: I was trying to hit the ball.

- Wil: Why were you trying to hit the ball?  
 Gil: I was trying to hit the ball into the opposite court.  
 Wil: Why were you trying to do that?  
 Gil: I was trying to win the point.  
 Wil: Why were you trying to win the point?  
 Gil: I'm trying to win the game.  
 Wil: Why are you trying to win the game?  
 Gil: I'm trying to win the set.  
 Wil: Why are you trying to win the set?  
 Gil: I'm trying to win the match.  
 Wil: Why are you trying to win the match?  
 Gil: I'm playing tennis, and that's how it's done.

Each of Gil's answers involves an enlargement of the context, and so he goes from winning the point, to winning the game, to winning the set, to winning the match. Once Gil has said, "I'm trying to win the match", he has reached a boundary. There are no further reasons *within* the game of tennis as to why he's doing what he's doing. Thus, in response to Wil's next question, "Why are you trying to win the match?", Gil does something different. He identifies the game, a dramaturgical pattern that is logically complete and refers to nothing outside itself.

Because the game is a boundary and not a boundary condition, Wil can start a new line of questioning. He might ask Gil,

- Wil: Why are you playing tennis?  
 Gil: I'm practicing for a tournament.  
 Wil: Why are you practicing for a tournament?  
 Gil: I'm trying to win the tournament.  
 Wil: Why are you trying to win the tournament?  
 Gil: I'm making a living, and that's how I do it.

When Gil answers, "I'm trying to win the tournament", he has again reached a boundary. So in response to Wil's next question, "Why are you trying to win the tournament?", Gil identifies an institution, another dramaturgical pattern that is logically complete.

Because an institution is a boundary, Wil can start another line of questioning. At some point, however, the questioning will end at a boundary condition, a limit beyond which there is nothing. In Descriptive Psychology, a person's total life context—living my way of life my way—is a boundary condition of this sort.

For clarity, notice that death is *not* a boundary condition. Death is an event that marks the end of life, and as such, it is *part* of the way of life. It is like the moment in tennis when the return volley hits outside the line, and it is game-set-match. All four events (ball-out, game-won, set-won, match-won) occur within the context of a dramaturgical unit (tennis), and the unit is the boundary or boundary condition, not the event itself.

As accomplices, why do we care about boundaries and boundary conditions? Think about what it means when we say that death is problematic for people. For the various kinds of problems that we know, there is a structured context within which we have the problem. For example, in the context of tennis, I can have problems like how to return my opponent's serve, or how to drive my opponent from the net. Those are tennis problems that I solve in the context of tennis.

But what about the problem of what to do instead of playing tennis? That's not a tennis problem. In the context of tennis, it's a non-question. I cannot even raise it. To raise that question, I need to be operating in a wider context in which it is a question. That's easy enough with a problem like what to do instead of playing tennis, because there is something on the other side of the tennis boundary.

"How do I want the end of my life to go?" is a life problem, and there's a structured context in which I have that problem. If we think of a person's life as a play with five acts, how I want the end of my life to go is simply the problem of how I want Act V, Scene IV to go.

But what about problems like "What am I going to do after death?" or "What am I going to do instead of living?" Is there a wider context within which we can raise those questions? Or are those non-questions, perplexities being raised at a boundary condition?

People differ in whether they treat an individual's life as a boundary or a boundary condition. There is not one belief about

whether there is a wider context, anymore than there is one view of the end of life. If we want to be responsive to the person who is dying, it is helpful to have a grasp of the range of possible afterlife patterns.

What are some examples of members of the set of afterlife patterns? A few top-level pairs are:

- For a modern natural scientist who takes his science literally, there is no life after life. There is simply nothing.
- For a Christian who believes that we have been saved by Christ's death on the cross, there is life-everlasting, world without end.
- For a person who believes that some people are predestined for hell, there may be an eternity of pain and suffering.
- For a Tibetan monk who is advanced in yoga and meditation, there is an opportunity for liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

And so forth.

In Descriptive Psychology, we take it that a person's total life context is a boundary condition, so where do these beliefs about what happens after life have a place? In the way of life. Believing and acting on what I believe is part of living my way of life my way.

## The Real World

The real world “consists primarily of that structure of statuses which define *what* things are... It is into this framework that mundane particulars of the sort publicly identified and described are fitted.” (Ossorio, 1982/1998, p. 123)

Think of the complexity and diversity of that structure at the height of a person's life, and the richness of a life in which all the major statuses are filled. For example, imagine a young couple who have made a good marriage, have children together, have both sets of parents living, have careers, have a home, cars, pets, hobbies, interact with their siblings, school friends, neighbors, political party, religious community, etc. Their shared structure

of statuses includes all of the statuses involved in all of the areas of their lives and all of the interrelationships between the statuses.

This shared world gives the young couple enormous behavior potential, but it also gives them lots of constraints on behavior potential. People who are embedded in the life and structure of their community are restricted to some degree by every part they play in every dramaturgical pattern in their lives. They are not free to treat things any way they want—or to do whatever they want—because behaviors that do not meet the standards of the community are paradigmatically ruled out.

The life of Dante is interesting in this regard. He was a man involved in the life of Florence in all of the normative ways. He was a member of a good family, a husband, a father with five children, a good Catholic, a member of the Apothecary Guild, a mediocre poet, and a small-time politician. At the age of 37, because of his political activities, he was condemned to permanent exile from Florence.

Expulsion from the life of the community is very close to death, because it wipes out almost all of a person's behavior potential (cf. the analysis of the Degradation Ceremony in Ossorio (2006, p. 269)). But notice that it also wipes out most of the constraints on behavior potential. When a person no longer has a place in the community, he or she is no longer bound by the standards that go with being a community member.

For nearly 20 years after his exile, Dante lived as a wanderer and stranger in foreign lands. With the freedom to do whatever he wanted, he wrote a *Comedy* in a new language he called “Italian”. Not surprisingly given his circumstances, his *Comedy*, known today as *The Divine Comedy*, is a powerful vision of the worlds where we go after death.

Although we may not suffer the magnitude of loss that Dante experienced, we do lose many of the people whom we love as we age. To the extent that our relationships to people are “I and Thou” (i.e., we value people intrinsically), they are irreplaceable in our lives. When we lose them, their places remain empty.

We also suffer the loss of things that we love as we grow older. While they may have little intrinsic value, they are irreplaceable by virtue of their uniqueness. If the books my Mother brought from England are lost, nothing else can take their place.

Why do empty places matter in the holistic structure of our worlds? If the places are not filled, we cannot carry off the dramaturgical patterns that call for the particular people and objects who used to fill those places. As captured in the image, "Putting on *Hamlet*," if the only person who can play Hamlet is no longer there and a theatre company insists on putting on *Hamlet*, it will be a very peculiar performance (cf. Ossorio, 2006, p. 358).

But what if the only person who plays Lady Macbeth is also gone? And the only person who plays King Lear? And the only person who plays Cleopatra? And the only person who plays Othello? As the old Irish saying goes, "When you love more people in the graveyard than you do in town, you know your time's coming."

When we know that our time is coming, we could hardly stay related to the real world in the same way anymore. Just as when we're approaching graduation or approaching retirement, we begin to lose our attachment to the world that we're leaving before our time there comes to an end.

## Reality

That raises an interesting question. If more and more places in our world are empty, and we start to lose our attachment to the real world with its unique importance for codifying our behavior potential, what do we have to fall back on? What could be more fundamental than the real world?

Under most scientific ideologies, the answer is "Nothing." The ordinary real world is all that there is. But in Descriptive Psychology, we have the pragmatic notion of *reality*, "the boundary condition on our possible behaviors".

What is the difference between the real world and reality? Consider two individuals with different ways of being in

the world. The first individual is aware of what's around him and what that enables him to do. If he looks around and sees that there's no one there to play Hamlet, he doesn't try to put on Hamlet. The things that are around him provide him with possibilities and set limits on what he can do.

The second individual is focused primarily on what she wills to do, and only secondarily on whether she's able to carry that off. "Being able to carry it off might reduce to the question of 'Did she have the right objects around her?', but it might not" (Ossorio, 1977, p. 294). Her question is simply, "Can she carry it off in any way whatever?"

For the first individual, there is a systematic framework in which he has a place, and all the objects, processes, etc. he observes have a place. His place in that framework is given, and it is his relationships to the objects, processes, etc. around him that provide him with possibilities and limitations. We will call him the Relationship/Status Man.

For the second individual, there is "*nothing* that is a priori given" (Ossorio, 2006, p. 294), neither her place nor places for objects, processes, etc. Instead, she is like a playwright writing a play. She is maximally free to create any set of objects, processes, etc., that will give her an embodiment of the pattern that she has in mind. We will call her the Dramaturgical Woman.

(Reading this, it would be natural to think, "I'd sure rather be the Dramaturgical Woman. That poor Relationship/Status Man seems like he's stuck in a world of mundane particulars, limited by all the things around him, while the Dramaturgical Woman can do whatever she can get away with." That's the right sort of contrast but the wrong significance, so I will flip the contrast and present it the opposite way. Remember our young couple at the height of their lives, delighting in a world of divine particulars, enriched by all their I-Thou relationships, leading fulfilling lives. They are the Relationship/Status couple. Contrast them with Don Quixote. He was a man with a vision—who cast any old objects for helmet,

horse, and lady—and was beaten up and carried home in a cage. He couldn't get away with being a knight. He's a Dramaturgical Man.)

The *contrast* between the two individuals—the Relationship/Status Man and the Dramaturgical Woman—is very close to the *contrast* between the real world and reality. In the real world and in the Relationship/Status Model, the structure of statuses is taken as *given*, as simply being the case. With the concept of reality and the Dramaturgical Model, *nothing* is taken as given. Rather, the anchor is simply, “What can you get away with by way of behavior?”

What does this contrast have to do with being an accomplice? Recall the question that we raised earlier: What do we have to fall back on when we're dying? When we're disengaging from the real world? When we're no longer bound by our relationships to objects, processes, etc. in the real world? The answer is ourselves as playwrights, ourselves as scenario-creators, ourselves as Dramaturgical Persons.

Ossorio (2006) notes that the Dramaturgical Model may be taken as an “alternative formulation” of the Relationship/Status Model (p. 259). It is easy to see this when we have the Dramaturgical Woman and the Relationship/Status Man in mind. If the Dramaturgical Woman *succeeds* in bringing off her scenario, she has created a world in which that scenario is possible, i.e., she has created a structure of statuses that defines what things are, and that is the world of the Relationship/Status Man.

We can therefore add one additional answer to the question, “What do we have to fall back on when we're no longer bound by our relationships to objects, processes, etc. in the real world?” The answer is ourselves as world creators. Dante's life is a powerful reminder of this concept. Having been exiled from everything he loved, having left behind almost everything that gave him behavior potential, he fell back on his extraordinary ability as a creator of worlds.

## Dreams

The concepts of reality and reality constraints are also helpful in understanding dreams. Consider dreaming as one of a variety of ordinary activities for problem-solving, such as realistic problem-solving, brainstorming, fantasy, daydreaming, etc. These activities differ in the degree to which reality constraints are relaxed when we engage in the activity (cf. Ossorio, 1982/1998, p. 72).

With realistic problem-solving, strong reality constraints are operative. The solution we generate needs to be one that we can act on in the real world. It needs to be practical, logical, responsive to what's there, etc. But when we are dreaming we do not have to be logical; we do not have to preserve real world consistency; we do not have to worry about sequence of events, continuity of characters, consistency of place, etc. In short, we operate with maximal freedom from reality constraints. Activities like brainstorming, fantasy, and daydreaming fall between these two extremes.

If we place these activities on a continuum (see Figure 1), the contrasting ends of the continuum correspond to the distinction that we have been making between the real world and reality. At one end we have the heavy reality constraints that go with behaving in the real world. At the other end we have the freedom of a boundary condition, where we do not know what our constraints are, only that there are some.

What we do when we're dreaming is similar to the description of what the Dramaturgical Woman does. We have a scenario, a behavioral pattern in mind, and we stage it for ourselves in our sleep. We cast whomever and whatever comes to mind for the characters, props, and settings, and see if we can bring off the scenario. We have this freedom because we're asleep, and we're not engaging in behavior in the real world. Under these conditions, all kinds of things are loosened up, so we may be able to enact a behavior pattern that we did not think of as possible for us when we were awake.

When we wake up and remember the dream, the play that we staged in our sleep may not make sense. To understand the dream,

we need to “Drop the details, and see what pattern remains”. If we are able to see the pattern, then we can check to see if that idea can be applied to our real life situation. (See Roberts (1985b, 1998) for more in-depth discussions of dreams and dream interpretation.)

As an example of this method of interpreting dreams, consider the famous “Dream of Clarence” in Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Richard III*. When he has the dream, Clarence is imprisoned in the Tower of London due to the maneuverings of his younger brother Richard. Richard is willing to do whatever it takes to be the King of England, including disposing of Clarence. In the first part of the dream, Clarence and Richard are on a ship, recalling old times together, but then Richard “stumbles”, pushing Clarence overboard. Clarence recounts:

Lord, Lord, methought what pain it was to drown,  
 What dreadful noise of waters in my ears,  
 What ugly sights of death within my eyes!  
 Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,  
 Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,  
 Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,  
 Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels.  
 (Shakespeare, 1592/2000, p. 195)

In recognizing the pattern portrayed in the dream, some context is helpful. *The Tragedy of King Richard III* was written in the late sixteenth century, when British trading companies were flourishing, bringing back gold and jewels from the New World. Thousands of commoners in England took jobs as sailors and made their living on the trade ships. Some of these ships sank, but from the point of view of the trading companies, that was just the price of doing business. The men, gold, and jewels that went down with the ships were expendable, a calculated loss for the companies.

The pattern that Clarence portrays in the dream is one of joining the innumerable collection of valuable objects at the bottom of the sea, his status reduced to that of just another calculated loss. Shakespeare’s audience was sensitive

to the pattern of valued men (brothers, sons, husbands, fathers) being treated as dispensable objects, and they would have easily recognized the significance of the dream.

But as accomplices, why do we care about dreams? As people get closer and closer to death, they may enter a state in which they are described as “confused”, “disoriented”, “incoherent”, etc. In this state people talk in ways that don’t seem to make sense. The usual medical explanations for the person’s “confusion” include anoxia, toxicity, medications, stress, the progression of the disease, etc. The alternative, quasi-religious explanation is that the dying are glimpsing the world beyond, and if we listen closely to them, we may gain understanding about “life after life”.

In contrast to both of these approaches, as accomplices we can understand the dying as doing what people do naturally, i.e., creating scenarios, but at a point in their lives where ordinary reality constraints no longer carry that much weight. If we interpret what they say in the way that we interpret dreams, we may be able to see the sense that they make and respond in mutually satisfying ways.

For example, within an hour of my father’s death, a nurse came into his room to turn him. He asked her distinctly, “Are you from the Third Battalion?”, but she laughed heartily and responded, “This isn’t World War II.” He affirmed, “I’m not going that far back”, but she continued to treat him as disoriented, and he withdrew into himself.

While she was in the room, I agonized over what he meant: “Are you from the Third Battalion? *What* Third Battalion?” Finally I let go of that detail and the pattern hit me: he must have decided to face death in a company of fellow soldiers, and he was waiting for them to come for him. After the nurse left the room, I reassured him: “She was just a nurse, but the Third Battalion will be here.” He seemed very relieved and came back into contact with us.

One reaction to this kind of example is, “How do you know it’s *true* that he was hoping to go out as part of a company? How do you know that that’s what he was *really* doing?” It is a matter of having the judgment and sensitivity to see what it looks like, not a matter of knowing for sure. As Ossorio (2006)

expresses it in the context of a different example: “It isn’t necessarily true (it doesn’t follow from the facts given) but it is obvious—*it looks that way*—and people do see it.” (pp. 172-173)

## Ordinary Mysteries

“Ordinary mysteries” are phenomena that we encounter in the course of life that initially seem puzzling or mysterious, but lose their magic once we have understood them (Ossorio, 2006, p. 310). The dreamlike communications of the dying are one example, and several other examples will now be discussed.

### *Special Abilities*

Some people, even though they are so close to death that it seems that they could not possibly have any capacities left, have some remarkable abilities. They are able to wait for a person to arrive or to wait for a particular event to happen. They are able to call a person to come to them or notify a person who could not be there that the death is occurring.

Needless to say, these are not described as abilities, special or otherwise, by most scientists. The phenomenon of waiting is dismissed as spurious, since there are no hard data to support it. The phenomena of calling a person to come or notifying a person of the death are dismissed as totally bogus, because there is no conceivable mechanism of transmission. But hospice nurses, who have personal contact with different people dying different deaths, see all of these phenomena.

For a moment, imagine that we have hard scientific data that shows, at the .001 level of significance, that dying people are able to wait for a specific event, such as someone arriving at their bedside, someone leaving the bedside, or the occurrence of an anniversary or holiday. How would we explain that? First, we need to drop the requirement that we give a physiological explanation. It is hard to imagine any physiological explanation

being plausible, given that the body is close to total failure. The person is anoxic, toxic, terminally exhausted, etc.

So what is a possible explanation? Simply that the dying person is free of some of the constraints that our embodiment imposes on us. With this freedom, the person is able to wait for a person or an event, even though we would not have thought it was physically possible.

What about the other two abilities, i.e., calling a person to come at the time of death or notifying a person that the death is occurring? While there are no experimental studies of those abilities, there are a number of anecdotal reports. If those reports are real, how would we explain them?

We couldn't explain them if we restricted ourselves to the laws of physics, just as we couldn't explain waiting if we restricted ourselves to the laws of physiology. But when we're using the concept of reality and the Dramaturgical Model, we are not restricted to any laws of physics whatsoever. Physics is another game that people play, one that does not have a place for these sorts of phenomena.

What would a reality-based explanation look like? One candidate is that all of us are in principle in contact with each other, but at a level that we do not normally respond to, a level that ordinary reality constraints block out. If people have access to this level when they are dying, that may explain why they are able to call a person to come to them, or say goodbye to an absent person at the hour of their death.

Why does this matter to an accomplice? Although an accomplice is basically irrelevant in these situations, there may be opportunities to support the dying person in the exercise of these abilities. For example, if a special person is on the way to the bedside, the accomplice can keep the dying person apprised, e.g., "She's at the airport" or "He's on the shuttle". The person *in extremis*, even in a coma, may hear, and it may help him or her to wait a little longer. If a person who is not there feels that he is being called and telephones to say, "I think I'm losing it. I *felt* Mom call. Isn't that crazy?", the accomplice can say, "No, it's not crazy. Come now if you can." If a person who could not be there says that she

had the “weird experience of knowing exactly when Dad died,” the accomplice can legitimize it. That’s what the dying person wanted.

### *Companions of Uncertain Status*

When the going gets tough, the dying may get companions of uncertain status, like a loved one who has already died, a religious figure, an old friend, an old pet, et al. These companions are not unusual at the end of life, but they are usually pre-judged out of the play. Just as the ability to wait is regarded as spurious, and the ability to call is dismissed as bogus, companions of uncertain status are treated as hallucinatory.

The following advice about dealing with hallucinations is from a reasonably good handbook for caregivers: “Although not unusual, hallucinations can be very upsetting. Do not humor your loved one. Gently describe what is really happening. Explain that what he or she is experiencing is a natural result of either the illness or the medications being taken” (Fairview, 1999, p. 68). As accomplices, we can do better than that, treating the companions in whatever way seems best for this particular person. That may mean explaining them away, but it may not.

With the Dramaturgical Model in mind, it is easy to understand the appearance of such companions at the end of life. In this Model, a person is focused primarily on the scenario that he or she wants to bring off, and only secondarily on whether real objects, processes, etc. are available. In this situation it would not be surprising if a companion appeared who was just right for one of the parts.

Listening to what the dying person says about the companion may give an accomplice clues about the scenario in progress. It may be an old, familiar scenario and be easy to recognize if you know the person. Recall all of those empty places discussed earlier, places once filled by people who had intrinsic value for us. Even if people have not put on *Hamlet* for 50-60 years, that may be the play that they want in their last days. If

Hamlet appears at the bedside, think of the violation it would be to trivialize that by attributing it to medication or illness.

Callanan and Kelley (1993) give a beautiful example of a woman who had been in a coma for several weeks, “but moments before she died, she awoke, broke into a beautiful smile, and reached for something unseen. She put her arms together and looked down joyfully, as if cradling a baby. She died in that posture with a look of happiness on her face” (p. 179). Her son recognized that she was holding her first born child, who had died just moments after birth.

Companions of uncertain status will not be discussed in depth here, but it is worth noting the place that they have on the reality constraint continuum (see Figure 1). These companions are right up next to realistic problem solving, because they are perfectly tailored to fit the ordinary real world and violate reality constraints only minimally. (See Roberts (1991) for a paradigm case formulation of the companions of the dying.)

## **The Problem of Understanding a Person’s Death**

We have been focusing on the end of life drama, but this drama is only one scene in an entire lifetime. If we want to understand the significance of the final scene of a play, we need to look at that scene in the context of the whole play. Similarly, to fully understand the significance of the end of a person’s life, we need to look at the end in the context of the whole.

Why is this a problem? Because life is not over until it’s over, and we don’t know what it is until it’s over. As long as people have some time left, they can make changes that affect the significance of their lives as a whole. The problem of understanding a person’s death is the problem of understanding a person’s *complete* life, and the problem of understanding a person’s complete life is that it is not yet complete.

You might be tempted to play the devil’s advocate and ask, “Is that really a problem?” For many people, probably not. What they do in the face of death is simply a natural continuation of

what they've been doing. But for some people, what they do in Act V, Scene IV gives a different picture of their whole lives.

We will now look at some examples of people replaying old patterns, rewriting their history, and doing something different at the end of their lives. Two of the three examples are drawn from literature. Because the dying can only give us clues about the scenarios that they are creating, it makes sense to turn to gifted scenario-creators, i.e., writers, who can fully envision and express what a dying person might create.

### *Replaying Old Patterns*

For some time he lay unconscious, and then suddenly he cried out: "Order A. P. Hill to prepare for action! Pass the infantry to the front! Tell Major Hawks..." then stopped, leaving the sentence unfinished. Once more he was silent; but a little while after he said very quietly and clearly, "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees," and the soul of the great captain passed into the peace of God. (Henderson, 1898/2000, pp. 114-115)

This is the death of Stonewall Jackson, a Confederate general during the American Civil War. It is easy to drop the details and see the pattern that remains here. What is Jackson doing by saying, "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees"? He is leading his troops to rest. We can see that Jackson was a general to the end and enacted his signature-scenario as an officer who took care of his troops. His death completes his life in a fitting way but does not change its significance.

### *Rewriting History*

"Rewriting your history" is the name of an exercise sometimes used in Descriptive psychotherapy. It is for people who have histories that do not fit who they really are, and the instructions

are simply to “Write a history that does fit you.” The exercise doesn’t work with people who insist that their histories are unchangeable. It is surprisingly effective with people who understand that what we do in later acts of our life play can make an *ex post facto* difference to the earlier acts of the play.

Borges’ short story “The Other Death” is a beautiful example of a person rewriting his history at the end of his life. In the story a young man named Pedro Damián had lost his nerve in the battle of Masoller. He then spent the rest of his life waiting for another battle in the hope of changing the significance of that shameful incident in his life.

For forty years he waited and waited, with an inarticulate hope, and then, in the end, at the hour of his death, fate brought him his battle. It came in the form of delirium, for, as the Greeks knew, we are all shadows of a dream. In his final agony he lived his battle over again, conducted himself as a man, and in leading the last charge he was struck by a bullet in the middle of the chest. (Borges, 1949/1973, p. 179)

In creating this scenario *in extremis*, Damián is affirming that “what he is now is what, ‘after all,’ he was all along.” (Ossorio, 2006, p. 270).

### *Doing Something Different*

A classic example of doing something different at the end of life is portrayed in Tolstoy’s story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”. It influenced such remarkable films as Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* and Kurosawa’s *Ikiru*, as well as Chekhov’s short story, “Rothschild’s Fiddle”. All are powerful portrayals of people changing the significance of their lives by what they do at the end.

Ivan Ilych is a petty official who has lived his life within rigid constraints. At every point he has done the done things, making his official duties the center of his world. His relationships to his wife and son are purely rote; he works to minimize his contact with them. But

then he becomes ill, realizes that he's dying, and struggles to maintain his belief that his life has been good. He spends three days in an intense struggle in a black hole, until finally he sees his way clear.

At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. He asked himself, "What *is* the right thing?" and grew still, listening. Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes, looked at his son, and felt sorry for him. (Tolstoy, 1886/1960, p. 155)

This is an example of how when we are dying, we not only lose our attachment to the real world. We also lose our attachment to our *place* in the real world. Once we are dying, we are no longer bound in the same way by our part in the real world drama, and hence we may do something that does not fit the part that we have always played.

What is Ivan doing by struggling in a black hole? Tolstoy tells us that he is struggling against the realization that his life has not been right. What is he doing by seeing that his life hasn't been right? He's freeing himself from his old place in the world and from the constraints that have kept him from really living. Ivan's final act is to see his son and wife as fellow persons and to act with them in mind. Playing that part at the end of his life, even just for a moment, gives us a different picture of his whole life.

## **An Infinite Relativity Set**

In Table 1, each of the deaths that we have discussed has been added to the relativity set of dramaturgical pattern/person characteristic pairs that we introduced in the first section of the paper. Because the set is infinite, the table is intended only as a starting point to sensitize accomplices to a few of the possibilities.

Only one of these scenarios involves the paradigmatic scene with the family. This could be a sampling artifact,

but it could also be that treating the dying as scenario-creators opens our eyes to a wider range of possibilities.

## Reminders

Conceptual clarity is important for an accomplice, but there is a reality constraint that cannot be underestimated. Sleeplessness and the pain of loss can leave an accomplice in a fog, forgetful of what's most important in the situation. I will therefore end with a few simple reminders that I hope capture the spirit of being an accomplice.

*Relax and enjoy the person's company.*

One way that accomplices can go wrong is to slip into thinking, "If only I do the right things, I can enable the person who is dying to have his or her own death." Another way that accomplices can go wrong is to think the converse: "If things are not going the way that the dying person wants, then I must be failing to do the right things."

Being an accomplice is not about *doing* the right things, nor is it about *failing* to do the right things. It is about appreciating a very particular, personal, I-Thou relationship with the person who is dying. This relationship is what makes all the things that an accomplice does make sense, and it is why being an accomplice is intrinsically satisfying.

In reality, accomplices do not have that much influence on how things turn out. People may be good accomplices, and yet the death of the person doesn't turn out the way that the person wanted. As Nuland (1993) expresses it, "Occasionally—very occasionally—unique circumstances of death will be granted to someone with a unique personality, and that lucky combination will make it happen, but such a confluence of fortune is uncommon, and, in any case, not to be expected by any but a very few people." (p. xvii)

Even if the death turns out exactly the way that the dying person wanted, there may be no way for the accomplice to know that. At best, accomplices relax and enjoy the times of

mutual understanding and presence, affirming dying persons in whatever scenarios they create to complete their lives.

*Stay in contact with the person and be responsive to him or her.*

People who are dying may remain very much in touch with those around them, even as other objects, processes, etc. in the real world fade away. If the dying are in a dreamlike state, they may still cast *actual* people for parts in the scenarios they create. They may also judge how well those people are playing the parts to which they have been assigned, and negotiate with them about the places and the corresponding standards. In this way, they may remain mutual status assigners with the living, even though they no longer fully share the real world. (See Roberts (1985a) for a conceptualization of persons as mutual status assigners.)

In the last days of my father's life, he explored a variety of scenarios related to how he wanted to face death. At one point he opened his eyes, looked at me, and said, "You can be the horse." I knew that I was being offered a part in a drama that he was envisioning, but what part? So I asked him, "What's the horse for?" (i.e., "What's the pattern?"). He replied as if it were obvious, "To pull the chariot." I realized that he was thinking of facing death like Ben-Hur, and I replied gently, "Okay, but easy on the whip." We laughed together, and after awhile, he announced, "That wasn't a good idea." We could not have shared these moments if I had not been responding to him as a fellow scenario-creator and status assigner.

Accomplices give their utmost to maintain contact, to understand what the person wants, and to help the person achieve whatever it is that is wanted.

*Don't usurp the dying person's place as a world creator.*

When a person enrolls in Hospice, that person is automatically cast in the role of Patient, and a family member is cast for the role of Primary Caregiver. What's wrong with that? Imagine that you went to see *Hamlet*, and it was an excellent performance. But in the last act, last scene of the play, the actors abruptly

switched to the last scene of *Macbeth*. You'd probably be frustrated because you'd want to see the last scene of *Hamlet*.

Being in Hospice can be like switching to the last scene of a different play in the last scene of your life. Regardless of what has gone on before, and regardless of who you are now, you need to fit the role of Patient and a loved one needs to fit the role of Primary Caregiver. These cookie cutters are grossly violative of individuals, and may interfere with people completing life, and their life together, in a way that is fitting for them. The Primary Caregiver, trying to do a good job as a Primary Caregiver, may insist on treating the dying person as a Patient, when that is *not* a part that the dying person wants to play.

Instead of taking a cookie cutter approach, accomplices offer care from any mutually acceptable position in the world of the dying person. Position titles may run the gamut from Devoted Partner to Sensual Lover to Friend in Need, from Fellow Pilgrim to Faithful Squire to Royal Helper, from Soul Mate to Mire Mate to Teammate, and on and on. Accomplices can change status as the dying person's world changes, which can be fulfilling (and fun) for them and for the dying person.

*Don't be a zombie.*

When people are in a dreamlike state at the end of life, time may cease to exist for them; sleep may no longer be a necessity; and they may lose their awareness of the way that daily cycles affect other people. While the dying may be exempt from these reality constraints, accomplices are not. They cannot enjoy being accomplices if they are zombies from lack of sleep, so they seek a balance between being with someone who is dying and taking care of themselves.

*Remember that "Value distributes over possibilities".*

Consider a child who loses a marble and treats it as a major tragedy. From an adult point of view, the child is reacting very strongly to something that is a very small matter. Consider a society hostess who is devastated that a certain someone didn't

attend her party. Both are examples of people treating things as life and death matters that to other people are obviously trivial.

The child and the socialite are living in restricted worlds, and all of the value that they are capable of giving to things is given within that world. Because they are limited to that narrow scope, some things are extremely important to them, even though they are trivial in a more realistic framework. Within that narrow scope, they *are* that important.

When a person is dying, his or her world becomes increasingly restricted, and the person may get very upset about minor mishaps. If the accomplice looks at the mishap only from the perspective of the real world, it probably won't seem so significant. It may be hard to understand why it's such a big deal.

Instead, accomplices remember that "Value distributes over possibilities". The dying person is like an athlete in the thick of competition, putting his whole life into winning this particular game. After the game is over, the athlete regains the perspective of his world as a whole, but the dying person may have few other meaningful possibilities. Bringing off the current scenario may *be* his or her life.

## Conclusion

In seeking to understand and be with a fellow person who is dying, an accomplice must pass between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one side is the monster of modern medicine, explaining everything in physiological terms. On the other side is the whirlpool of psychological theories, dictating how everyone should die. The Dramaturgical Model gives an accomplice the power and freedom to avoid both these perils.

I have used the Dramaturgical Model to understand the dying as scenario creators, creating the last scenes of their lives. Sometimes the dying enter a dreamlike state as they get nearer to death and their reality constraints are more relaxed. If we treat their communications in this state as we would dreams and look for patterns, we may be able to appreciate the final scenarios that the dying create.

Having an adequate explanation of this sort empowers an accomplice to be with the dying person in an I-Thou way, without succumbing to the overwhelming force of physiological explanations and without slipping into “one size fits all” ideologies.

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Table 1. Relativity Set

<i>Pattern in the face of death involves...</i>	<i>Person characteristic</i>
standing “on guard oath-bound”	Irish poet with an indomitable will
raging against the dying of the light	Welsh poet who lived colorfully and recklessly
progressing through stages	Swiss psychiatrist who took Freudian theory seriously
being reduced to the status of a commodity, a dispensable object	English nobleman who treated others as Thou
marching out in a battalion with other men	Man who appreciated the value of being with a corps of men
cradling her first-born child	Loving mother whose first baby died minutes after birth
leading his troops to rest in the shade	Southern general who took care of his troops
fearlessly leading the last charge of the battle	Argentinean man who lost his nerve in battle when he was barely twenty
acting with the interests of his son and wife in mind	Russian bureaucrat who lived by rote, doing all the done things
...	...

Figure 1. Relaxation of reality constraints



