

Călătoria către sine. Memoriile unui psihiatru
Becoming Myself. A Psychiatrist's Memoir, Irvin D.
Yalom, traducere și note de Florin Tudose, Vellant,
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Irvin D. Yalom, a compassionate heart who struck for those around him in need of therapeutic advice, is one of the best known mental healthcare practitioners and thinker with an active life in this field. After a long road on life's path sprinkled with a multiple types of writings both fictional and non-fictional, the author considered it was high time he reflected on his own achievements. In *Becoming Myself*, a long waited autobiography, he turns inward to analyze his experience as a psychotherapist, his deepest thoughts and feelings with an amazing honesty.

The book is organised in short chapters that offer vignettes of Yalom's early life, the pains of leaving home for university, marriage, experiences of his many travels and development of his awe inspiring career.

In the first chapter we are witnessing the author's confession of a nightmare. What is striking the reader is the bare truth of a deep analysis of his dream at the end of which something has been learned. He retrospectively acknowledges that the offense he brought to a 12 year old acne girl in his childhood reappeared in the dream because it has always been there, only carefully forgotten. This is not a random beginning, but more a well thought introduction into a major method of self discovery and

progress through a Freudian analytical approach to dreams. While unveiling his experiences as a new and developing psychiatrist, Yalom provides a brief history of psychiatric treatment orientation in the U.S.A. He describes the Freudian method of revealing the unconscious desires during the dreams, which were prevalent when he started his career and then goes on to discuss how psychiatry moved toward the interpersonal approach, an alteration of the Freudian approach.

As we proceed reading the memoir, the renowned existential psychotherapist invite us to reflect together on his past and intellectual history starting with his home life living in Washington DC, where his Russian immigrant Jewish parents ran a supermarket in a lower-class neighbourhood. The memories from that period are painful and quite hard to look at and his desire to be understood and listened to opens a wound he was about to fully heal years later in his profession. From a very early age, he longed for a mentor, the icon of a savior who would bring comfort to his disturbed soul. While turning the next two chapters we are thrilled to see that his ideal fulfills in the image of his father's doctor who finds the right words to vanish all the guilt his mother inoculates in his mind for his father's chest pain. As he confessed that was an epiphanic moment showing him what he was going to do as an adult: to be a doctor and guide people towards their inner peace as he was being helped find his own.

What strikes the reader positively are his contrastive, but genuine feelings towards his parents. Although, he does not hesitate to recall and confess their dysfunctional relationship and name their insufficiencies, this sincere exposure of his impression on them will surely have served him well when he retrospectively admits not being able to show enough kindness and understanding or express the gratitude they deserve for their supportive attitude. The author mentions several times his thirst for a kind word from

his mother, but he is bewildered at the same time by the realization that he succeeded professionally thanks to both of them, to their hard work to provide him all he needed to study at better schools. And yet, what the young Irvin, and probably all children yearn, is a more affectionate relationship with his parents. This emotional space that started from early childhood is what he wants to fill as quickly as possible.

In the following chapters of the book, Yalom recollects the most fruitful years of professional and personal development. The reader is introduced to his personal universe in which the author confesses his religious issues “the ruins of my own religious education,” his marriage to Marilyn then slowly turns to periods of civic and professional advancement, like the year in the Army, the European holidays where he could feel the presence of the most prolific and admired mentors, such as Freud in Vienna. There are also whole pages dedicated to the shaking and transitory ground of the innovative activity in group psychotherapy of the “encounter groups” in the 1960s, which, nevertheless, brought him financial benefits and the success in becoming an existential psychotherapist due to the perfect blending between his original methods and those already applied. Noticeable names in psychotherapy appear in the text, such as: Rogers, Bowlby, Frankl, R.D. Laing and Rollo May as well as countless others litter the story and appear at critical junctures like stars lighting his path. The main source for books like: *Love's Executioner*, *When Nietzsche Wept*, *Two years with Schopenhauer*, *Spinosa Problem* is a mixture of psychological and philosophical beliefs that concerned him constantly. The internal drive for such stories, such as *When Nietzsche Wept* may be found in his own search for the meaning of life. Yalom also considered that Nietzsche, who was contemporary with Freud, stated some valuable ideas that were relevant for the psychotherapists' education, but were so

neglected at that time that the urge to recreate and bring to life his philosophy made him pay a tribute to this thinker. It can also be seen as a symbolic way to redeem these tormented souls and free themselves from their obscure outlook on life.

Group therapy was a new idea at that time. Throughout his work, Yalom has significantly contributed to the understanding of what makes therapy helpful and of how to engage meaningfully with clients in individual and group therapy. Sometimes he imagines doing therapy with his younger self, a method a bit odd, but a great way to retrace an old mind pattern and create a new one with a new outcome.

Yalom has much to offer social workers. Throughout the book, he repeatedly touches on three points that are central to good social work. The first is the importance of human relationships. This is one of their principal values. Social workers learn that it is through the relationships they form with their clients that positive change can happen. He insists on being present and engaged with the client, as well as totally sincere. One such example of complete opening towards the client is when he confesses to a patient, who had bad thoughts about the therapy itself, although she was willing to do it, that he somehow transferred his prejudices he had on her due to a striking resemblance with another patient he worked very hard with. It's stunning to see such frankness towards his patients and this only implies respect, commitment, empathy and love so abundantly offered to the others. Another example of empathy and compassion towards his patients is when he was able to help a mute patient, Sarah, who has not been talking for months. Talking to a mute person as if she was perfectly capable of responding made the recovery possible. And although he doubted its effectiveness the patient treasured those moments: "All through that time you were my bread and butter".

The second point is Yalom's focus on process, on what is happening in the here and now. The past is important, so is the future, but what is happening here and now, as we are working on this challenge together, is the most important. It is where hope and empowerment occur as clients start to believe in themselves and their ability to change their thinking. This tool is the key to his own mental health and he cannot recommend something unless he practices it in the first place.

The third point is the need to self-reflect. Yalom models ongoing self-reflection as he strives to be of use to his clients. It is through his reflection on his experiences in his own therapy and on his work with clients that Yalom developed his ideas about what works and why. It is remarkable the way he tackles death, both of his patients and his own perspective on it. This is a long term anxiety he has not succeeded to overcome yet. Due to his skeptical nature and the lack of any religious education in his childhood, the adult Yalom has rejected any form of faith in God and embraced, consciously or not, philosophic ideas that projected his own doubts and disbelief. We could wonder if this is the cause of the unease and anxiety he discreetly struggle with.

Nevertheless, the author confesses that what redeems him constantly is the joy and fulfillment work produces. He finds the meaning of life when he involves in his patients' most intimate issues and joins hands in solving them together. It's illuminating for the reader when he draws a conclusive line at the end of the book, and life, stating that he has very few regrets and that he has lived a meaningful and extraordinary life being surrounded by a fabulous wife and has been blessed with great children and grandchildren. His industrious, though balanced nature was also well paid off at this final moment of conclusions.

All in all, we can say that he has received a gift, like all of us, and through assiduous study and dedication he succeeded to

multiple it so as to be in the benefit of everyone who needed it. In doing so, he became the first person helped through his own endeavors to assist people mentally or enrich their cultural horizon.

Becoming Myself remains an incomplete effort to reach his beginning, to make a full circle and, surely, this is the beauty of any authentic soul, be it a believer or not, when he realizes he is a child in the art of ageing and that the line between those two extreme points is very thin, almost invisible. I dare say that such a great, insightful writer is a step away from reaching and perceiving his own eternity.