BLUEBIRD

The place of death and fear of dying in my long, good life

Andrew Cooper

Edited by
Heather Price

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firing the mind

This is the first book in the *Tavistock Lives* series

Series Editors

Kate Stratton and Jocelyn Catty

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About the author

Andrew Cooper was a registered social worker and psychoanalytic psychotherapist and Professor of Social Work at the Tavistock Centre and the University of East London. He practised as a clinical social worker in the Adolescent Family Therapy service at the Tavistock, led the Professional Doctorate in Social Work and Social Care programmes there, and worked as a consultant to teams and organisations. In addition to his books *Borderline Welfare: Feeling and Fear of Feeling in Modern Welfare* (co-authored with Julian Lousada, 2005) and *Conjunctions* (2018), he has written widely about therapeutic and relationship-based social work practice and research as well as the policy contexts that support or impede these practices. Andrew died on 5th July 2023.

About the editor

Heather Price is a senior lecturer and staff tutor at the Open University, UK, and a psychodynamic individual and couple psychotherapist and visiting lecturer at Tavistock Relationships. She and Andrew were married for twenty-two years.

Series editors' preface

Tavistock Lives is a new series devoted to life writing in its many forms: memoir, biography, autobiography, letters, marginalia, and other narrative traces through which lives are told, remembered, and understood. Its focus is on those who have trained or worked at the Tavistock Clinic—founded in 1920 and now part of North London Foundation Trust—and who have carried psychoanalytically informed approaches to mental health into a wide range of professional settings. The series takes its inspiration from the richness of these individual histories and from a simple conviction: that the Tavistock's pioneering contribution to mental health lies not only in its theories and methods, but in the people who have shaped it and in the stories they have to tell.

At its core is a belief that institutions are formed by the people who inhabit them, struggle within them, and carry

their ideas forward. By providing glimpses into the lived histories of those who have shaped the Tavistock tradition, the series explores how ideas emerge from particular biographies, how professional commitments grow out of personal dilemmas, and how the personal and professional influence one another. It attends to the ways in which stories of lives are selected, shaped, and interpreted, and to how these narratives inform our understanding of ourselves, our work, and the world around us.

The series launches with Andrew Cooper's *Bluebird: The Place of Death and Fear of Dying in My Long, Good Life*. Written shortly before his death in July 2023, it is the memoir of someone who knew illness intimately: diagnosed with cancer twice in his twenties, Andrew—a Professor of Social Work and adult psychotherapist at the Tavistock for many years—spent much of his life on the border between illness and health. Moving between childhood memory and adult reflection, the book traces connections between early experience and later physical and mental pain, between personal fears about death and dying and the wider societal forces that shape our response to them—and the ways in which welfare systems shield us from realities we would rather not face. Woven throughout the book is an exploration of the life-enhancing potential of psychoanalytic psychotherapy—and the cost of fleeing our fears rather than facing them.

Foreword

Death is terrifying, and for most of us it is something banished to the future, at the hazy end of what we hope will have been a rich, fulfilling life. As a person blessed with good health, I've not had to fear for my life in the way that my husband Andrew had to when he was diagnosed with cancer twice as a young man. This experience marked him and sometimes I could be impatient with his preoccupation with death. After all, why would we need to attend to death in the midst of our work and life?

Andrew was unlucky in having a life-threatening illness at a relatively young age. If you survive cancer physically, the meaning you make of having had that experience can have a profound effect. Andrew was doubly unlucky in that he struggled with his mental health over the course

of his life and, in his memoir, he identifies the source of the struggle as a belief that he had brought his cancer upon himself.

Why would someone believe this? That they had deliberately invited death in? And surely you can't bring about ill-health in your body by the actions of your mind. Can you? For Andrew, exploring the answer to this question was a deeply troubling, personal process. It was about encountering his own self-destructiveness and mental pain, and the determination to look these squarely in the face led him to spend many years as a patient in psychoanalysis. This takes great courage and is a moral endeavour. The fruits of all that work are in this memoir.

Destructiveness, and self-destructiveness, is a problem we all face in different guises and one of Andrew's great gifts was to take the personal and use it as a springboard for thinking about wider philosophical questions. He did this in a way that was not arid and abstract. He was trying to convey emotional truths that really mattered in situations where understanding them really mattered, such as in child protection work. Andrew studied philosophy and literature at Warwick University before becoming a social worker and psychoanalytic psychotherapist. He eventually led the Tavistock Clinic's Professional Doctorates in Social Work and Social Care, unique courses focused on

understanding the emotional demands and psychosocial complexities of caring work. He also wrote more broadly about the practice of psychotherapy, politics, and the public sphere.

Andrew didn't survive his second experience of ventilation in ICU. For myself and his children, this has felt premature—we lost him too soon. But as Andrew says, it was a long, good life and he was able to live it to the full, paradoxically because of his efforts to encounter death.

The title, *Bluebird*, links to Bob Dylan's great song, 'Up to Me', in which the artist sings about the presence of death in life and the need for all of us to take action, and to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions.

Heather Price

Prelude: The ‘pause’

In some hospitals, when a patient dies the staff practise what is known as the ‘pause’. The decision has been taken to stop the effort to prolong life through CPR or other means. The person is pronounced dead. One of the team now leads everyone present by asking them to pause for a minute, to remember that this was someone’s mother, wife, sister, daughter, or friend and to acknowledge how hard they have all just worked to save her. The team take a few moments to be still, to sit with the experience of the death. Someone may close the patient’s eyes. Then the leader signals it’s time to move on to their other work. You can see short videos on social media depicting this practice; I’ve seen one of them many times, but I’m still moved to tears on each viewing. The pause is a way of quietly insisting that we do not turn away from the presence of death in our work and

life, but allow it a space in our minds, creating a moment in which the process of mourning can begin.

What happens to us if we don't afford ourselves such opportunities? Busy lives and the emotional demands of others mitigate against us taking time for stillness of any sort. But there may be much more deep-seated obstacles to us allowing an awareness of death, and our fear of dying, a place in our experience. Indeed, we may find on closer examination that we're not really capable of this painful task.

This book is an enquiry into aspects of such experience, led by my personal, autobiographical encounters with death, fear of dying, near death, and life-threatening illness. Along the way I engage with some profound questions, but if the writing has a value, it lies much more in how the reader is provoked to think about themselves, and for themselves, in their own relation to the omnipresence of death in life.

There are many places I could begin, so this is just one.

It's 1980 and I am in my mid-twenties, already painfully separated from a loving wife, in a state of generalised emotional agony which has steadily intensified since my teens, unable to properly mourn the recent death of my father and enduring a second episode of cancer in my lymphatic system and the heavy duty impact of a chemotherapy regime. I am constantly anxious about the reappearance of localised

alopecia—not from the drugs but from mysterious causes that feel wholly psychological—and am living in a dark and grimy licensed squat in East London. In short, I am fighting for survival on many fronts.

I have started psychotherapy twice weekly. In subsequent decades I've often said that therapy has saved my life. But surely it was modern medicine, the NHS, that really saved me? Two episodes of cancer, two or more bouts of pneumonia, haemolytic anaemia, two episodes of cellulitis leading to hospitalisation, thyroxine replacement tablets every day, preventative antibiotics and most recently a near fatal aspirate pneumonia that landed me in intensive care on a ventilator. I'm nearly seventy now and still alive. What possible claim can psychotherapy rather than physical medicine have on my continuing presence here on earth?

Not long after I began therapy all those years ago, I told my therapist a dream. I was crying in the dream but then realised that in fact there was just something wrong with my tear ducts, so I was leaking rather than weeping. My therapist made a simple interpretation that hit home. Didn't the dream show how readily I converted feelings into something bodily, mechanical? In the jargon of psychotherapy, he was suggesting I somatised my feelings. In retrospect I think I seized on this idea too simplistically and zealously. How far could the action of emotional life on bodily states be taken? The possibilities

are dizzying. If we can bring illness upon ourselves, then how about recovery?

The mind–body 'problem' is nearly as old as philosophy itself; psychosomatics is a complex and much researched specialty; our relationship with death and dying is explored by writers, dramatists, artists, sociologists, psychoanalysts and more. What can I possibly add? Perhaps just this: some condensed reflections from an 'insider' perspective, after a lifetime of grappling with these experiences and the questions they raise.

In the stories that follow of my numerous encounters with illness, fear of dying, bereavement, and the deaths of others, these rather deep questions about an overt or hidden *agency* at work in our illnesses, and in our dying or recovery processes, emerge as a central conundrum. Even granted I may have had more than my share of bad luck in becoming so unwell so young, maybe such events do not just 'happen to us'. In other words—serious illness, fear of dying, bereavement, escaping death, recovery—what's been my part in it all? What have events done to me, and what contribution have I made to them?

This book is a memoir, but also an effort to make sense of complex experiences in my life, experiences of a kind that I believe most or at least many people traverse but don't think about much. In around 2016 I was writing and speaking about dying, end-of-life care, the idea of a good

death and so on, at professional and academic events. At one conference I spoke about the place death had had in my life and wondered if this was a good basis for a book but did not pursue the idea any further. I was also trying to write a novel based on the idea of a man attempting to free himself from the shadow cast across his life by serious illness when he was young. His difficulty in casting off this shroud pointed back to earlier experiences, which might have created fertile ground in which a fear of dying could put down roots. A few scenes from this incomplete, very autobiographical novel appear in the present book. A certain psychotherapeutic sensibility is threaded through the writing, but I've not wanted to make this a case study of any sort. It is, I hope, an intelligent enquiry into lived experience.

Following the Covid pandemic of 2020–2022, there has been a wave of writing about illness, loss, death, and extreme encounters with mortality. My own proposition is that this represents the surfacing of an existential state that is everywhere and always present, but not always very available to look at squarely. In 2022 I was no longer pursuing writing about death or dying in any shape or form when another near-death experience rocked the foundations of my life. This is where the present story begins.