

Zhi Mian: Facing Life as It Is

Several years ago Xuefu Wang started the Zhi Mian Institute in Nanjing, China, to provide therapy services and training. Zhi Mian essentially means "face to face" or "facing life as it is." The Zhi Mian Institute has enjoyed great success over time. I am not sure a clinic bearing a name with such a meaning would have the same success here in the United States. Maybe I am wrong, hopefully.

In my limited experiences in China, there seems to be great openness to existential ideas—both in being open to existential psychology and in the sense of just generally being open to existential issues. Maybe this is because, as we often heard on our trips, the people of China has suffered greatly. In the United States, we often have the luxury of escaping the existential issues that people in other countries have to confront on a regular basis. But sometimes I wonder if such protection, such little suffering, is such a good thing. After all, a little suffering can be quite a blessing at times and we often need suffering to learn some of the most important lessons of life.

But let me take a minute to diverge and talk about how few in the West seem *to face existentialism as it is*. But let me note, I am not promoting the idea that there should just be one approach to existentialism, but rather that I am concerned about some of the distortions I see how how existentialism is understood as represented in some unbalanced and uninformed perspectives.

Many seem to think of existentialism as referring to this rugged individualism in which one's responsibility is only to oneself. This defies the existential reality of relationship and our relational nature. It seems to me that many of these individuals are really trying to escape responsibility to others and escape the pains of relationship and commitment.

Others want to make the focus just on responsibility and choice. They emphasize our ability to change our life situation. However, they too often deny what Rollo May referred to as *destiny*. Destiny, in this sense, refers in large part to the limits on our freedom. This viewpoint is much easier to maintain when one has access to certain privileges. This is not so easy for the underprivileged and those who have many limits on their freedom. This can easily turn into blaming people for life situations they cannot control, a lack of empathy for the difficulty of many life choices, and a lack of understanding of the contextual forces. This often also serves to devalue suffering—the suffering person is seen as suffering because of their poor choices and the implicit is to "get over it."

Yet, there is an opposite misunderstanding of existentialism and the human condition. If you do a search for "existentialism" in many popular forums, especially those geared toward the youth, existentialism seems to be associated with idealizing suffering and the concept of meaningless. Existentialists are seen as people drawn

toward depression and who seeking suffering. But seeing the possibilities in suffering and not pathologizing suffering is not the same as immersing oneself in suffering for the sake of suffering.

I don't think these three misunderstandings of existentialism really "face life as it is." Choice and freedom, furthermore, is limited when we do not honestly face life and the human condition. It is just as dangerous to deny our limits as it is to deny our freedom. It is just as dangerous to avoid suffering and life's dark realities as it is to over-identify with these. It is just as dangerous to deny our relational nature as it is to become lost in community or conformity. If life is suffering, life is also beautiful. Maybe the only unqualified thing we can really say about the human condition from an existential perspectives is that it is paradoxical.

Xuefu is an individual that I have come to greatly admire for his knowledge and wisdom as well as his character and integrity. He hopes that "Zhi Mian" becomes a phrase that is recognized in the English language. This post, in part, is doing my part in promoting that, but I wonder if people in the United States are really willing to face life as it is. As I spend more time abroad and with people from other cultures, it seems to me that we in the United States engage in a great deal of distortion—in defense mechanisms of sort. Our privilege allows us to do this. But I worry that the longer we hide behind comfort and the delusions of superiority that the more this sets us up for difficult times ahead. I think that our unwillingness to face life as it is connects to the failures of our education system, our lack of valuing of mental health, and our blind servitude to money. We can't seem to see beyond ourselves. Zhi Mian is not just a personal imperative, but a collective or cultural one. We ought not deny life as it is on any level.

Posted by Louis Hoffman on April 21, 2009 at 09:16 AM