

***On having nothing to lose: Daseins-icide and the lethal and liberating possibilities of
“choosing-not-to-be-of-any-value” among children and adolescents***

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*“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears
a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far
away.” Henry David Thoreau*

I. Beginnings: A word about “development”

Before addressing the heart of my presentation today, I wanted to briefly discuss some basic dilemmas we face when we approach developmental psychology from a Daseinsanalytic, or existential, perspective. Any discussion about childhoods and adolescence leads to the initial difficulty of demarcating phrases and stages, which are not directly experienced themselves, but, instead, are constructs imposed on lived experience for classification purposes. We must be cautious not to collude with confusing our lived experiences with categorizations *about* our lived experiences (Heidegger, 1962, Boss, 1979), nor collude with privileging a so called ‘higher’ stage of development, such as operational thinking, over a so called ‘lesser’ one, such as sensory motor development (Sims, 2008, Berman 1994). Moral judgments are often in store for those individuals whose situation in life does not neatly fit into established stage or phase categories, such as when an adult acts in childlike ways and is often called “immature,” or when a child acts in responsible ways and is considered a “young woman.”

I suggest existential-phenomenologists stay focused on meaningful situations *as lived* when thinking developmentally, and remain loyal to the rule of horizontalization by seeing each lived situation as neither greater nor lesser in significance than any other experience. If we don't, we can easily slip into colluding with unilinear causal thinking about the relationship between developmental stages, thus ignoring that much of how we develop depends on how our futures appear and on what projects are significant in our present from which we look into the past. We would then be drawn to see the child or adolescent as a half-baked adult, thus already beginning a therapeutic relationship from a disrespectful place. How, then, *can* we talk about developmental stances in existence?

To begin with, our "thrownness," or the inevitable and non-negotiable limitations in which we find ourselves, takes on different ontic nuances and dimensions at different times across our lifespan, and includes varying ways of making sense of what is happening in our lives. Strength, height, relational experience, the range of life events, access to increased or decreased resources, and so forth, are all part of our unique existential situations, which are incomparable and mutable. We can, nevertheless, speak of *developmental positioning as stances we take in the world according to varying co-constructed and enframed horizons accessible to us at different points in our historicity*. These stances may or may not correspond to demarcated age brackets. *We develop given how we respond to callings rather than solely how are shaped by causes*. Now let me bridge my earlier comments about developmental psychology to my focus today.

Without much experience in confidently moving about in the world, but with an ever increasing desire to do so, the tween, traditionally described as someone between the ages of about 7 and 13, moves through the world finding her way of "being there"

evaluated for its ability (or not) to *purchase* a place in the world, which, technically I call the *commodification of Dasein*, which invites *Dasein-icide*, a process I will describe momentarily. *Dasein* is our particular way of moving meaningfully through situations in the world as we come to understand who we are and provide opportunities for those to do the same in a co-constructed way. *Dasein* is commodified when *Dasein's* value is reduced to mean the amount of exchange capital it has to purchase recognition and validation.

The desire to “be there” in ways others wish us to be there is a temptation for us all, as Heidegger, Sartre, Buber, and Merleau-Ponty have all soundly argued--albeit in quite different ways. But I suggest that the tween is particularly vulnerable to selling her *Dasein* to the highest bidder. Carol Gilligan (1993) was one of the first theorists to explore the sacrifice of one's unique voice in order to belong to *Das Mann*, or the generic and status quo ways in which we spend much of our everyday lives, which, for growing young girls, is a patriarchal way of being in the world.

The tween's ultimate concern, to borrow Paul Tillich's phrase (1958), is how he can be himself *and* be accepted by another, which is more often than not felt as an either/or choice. Tweens are highly vulnerable to the world's conditional, disregarding lack of acceptance, given that the tween's most prized and sought for commodity is acceptance--a commodity they are sure must be earned.

Tweening-in-the-world is uncanny and surreal given its liminal “in-between-ness.” There is a movement beyond the herd mentality of family life, *toward* experiencing one's lived uniqueness, *while* seeking membership in a new herd of peers. Each new co-existential belonging is bought at a price to each tween's unique ways of

“being there,” while each authentic comportment runs the potential of costing him a “being-with-ness.” *It is as if the cost of “being-with” others means the potential sacrifice of “being there” as oneself.* In regards to my opening comments about developmental psychology, whatever our chronological age, whenever we are assessing the cost value of whether or not I am acceptable to the other as I am, we are existentially tweening-in-the-world--whether our interest is in being chosen to start for the baseball team, being seen as pretty, able to be promoted vocationally, or seeing any connection as predicated on the buying power of status, no matter how much or less we have. We can tween-in-the-world at 7 or at 70. So what is the lived world of the tween?

The tween throws the dice to see whether or not he or she is adequate for peer membership. Being at odds with groupthink and de-individuation in relation to one’s peers threatens group securities and can result in being ridiculed, being ostracized, and other forms of bullying. As so-called identities are constructs “about” lived experience rather than “as” lived experience, and given that assigned roles are fluid and co-constructed rather than fixed, Erikson’s reflections on both industry vs. inferiority and identity vs. role confusion are best understood existentially as *the sweet pain of movement between Dasein and Das Mann in the search to “be as” while “being-with.”* What if one resigns from tweening-in-the-world by abandoning the call to step out into one’s uniqueness, and relinquishes the desire to commune? It is at this moment when suicidal risk appears, heralding the presence of an *already* occurring Dasein-icide.

What I mean by the neologism, *Dasein-icide*, is the *co-constructed, ontical killing of Dasein by commodifying childlikeness-in-the-world.* In other words, Dasein-icide precedes suicide when our unique ways of being in the world cease to be understood and

valued unless we earn such value by what another needs us to be. What is worse, if when our very innocence and vulnerability and uncensored love of life isn't heard and appreciated as valuable and unique in itself. Initially, one would think *Dasein-icide* to be impossible, and ontologically it is. After all, aren't we always and already "there" in someway, even if being absent, otherwise, or elsewhere? Aren't we always and already in relationship, even if distant, alienated, or dissociated? Won't there always be 'something' rather than 'nothing,' as Heidegger reminded us? Indeed. But, if "being there" is predicated on a decision to take up one's possibilities amidst one's limitations in our everydayness, one can, therefore, just as well close off one's everyday possibilities amidst one's everyday contingencies, and in the process forget *Dasein's* ontologicality, or common human existential givenness shared by all human beings. But with *Dasein-icide*, I would argue that more than forgetting our ontological foundations is operative; ignoring it and diminishing its significance is more actively expressed.

What I am speaking of is more than an anaesthetic "going along with" the status quo and is more like a proactive intentionality to reduce existence to a care-less-ness about whether one fits or not, regardless of the status quo's agenda. The pathos of concernment is reduced to an everyday cost analysis of value and worth, an ontic commodification, and slowly extinguishes the desire to "be there." This movement is *Dasein-icide*, which, again, occurs long before biological suicide, and which comes into existence when one hopelessly doesn't "measure up." To see *Dasein* as ontically commodifiable is only possible when one unmoors *Dasein* from its ontologicality.

Ontological existence cannot be commodified since that which "is" is already and always in place before any attribution of rank ordered evaluation, or any imposed

templates of purchase-ability. How we take up our ontological “is-ness” in our ontic everydayness is where value and worth ranking become entangled in meaning-making. Granted, “is-ness” can be only experienced ontically, but *each* moment of ontic everydayness holds meaningfulness that can be meaningful in other than commodifying ways. Commodification is *not* an existential given, but a fallen mode of signification. Hence, I am indeed suspicious of rank-ordered scales of measuring worth, and consider such a scale as the *sine qua non* of what J.R. Rowland (2004), in her *Harry Potter* series, called the “dementor.” Suicide is one response of battling with this kind of dementor; as for many warriors it is a way to cease being measured and commodified. .

Much has been written in existential therapy about whether the choice to suicide is as legitimate as any other exercise of freedom (Binswanger, 1958; Szasz, 1988), or whether enacting suicide is courageous or cowardly (Camus, 1955), or whether the suicidal moment is a temporary situation blinding one to other possibilities of meaning (Frankl, 1963). Although these hard fought positions offer moving and courageous views of suicide, we must offer more.

Suicide prevention must attend to *Dasein-icide*. If the worth of existence is based only in terms of whether or not I can buy the others’ acceptance through being what the other needs me to be, and failing to do so or failing to stop doing so, suicide, then, can be understood as an enactment to end the commodification of such an existence. Suicide becomes a protest and revolt against the felt reduction of this kind of co-existence.

As David Bakan (1970), Georges Bataille (1988), and others have noted, such apparent acts of self-destruction are actually acts toward liberation. From what one is liberated depends on each unique story, but I suggest the tween’s act of liberation is to do

violence to a life of commodifying oppression from which no escape seems possible. Moreover, rather than just an enactment to escape commodification, tween rebellion of any sort is also, in Bataille's language, a "transgression of a taboo" in search for transcendence, freedom, and the sacred.

Given these understandings of the enactment of significance embedded in suicide, prevention should have as its focus the project of clearing and lightening closed and burdened spaces prohibiting the disclosure of a tween's *Dasein*, long before the first suicidal ideation comes to mind. Safety contracts, around the clock vigils, institutional incarceration, chemical tranquilization, all attend to the preservation of *biological existence*, but not necessarily attends to *Dasein*, and can easily enact further commodification of *Dasein*, and, consequentially, *Dasein-icide*. Then, sadly, suicide prevention can, paradoxically, *increase* suicide risk. Even the prescribed discharge plan from the hospital to "communicate more openly" is felt by many tweens as a set up for yet further nuances of being-for-the-other, as Sartre understood this dilemma. The tween is expected to communicate as the *other* defines "open communication," whether the other is the discharging physician, the staff psychologist, the parent, the state, or someone else. Moreover, among the definitions of "open communication," silence, an often used mode of communication by tweens, is rarely viewed as anything other than a privation of communication. Even the tween's quiet tears are assigned exchange value: some tears are seen as manipulative and unworthy of attention; other tears show true mourning and remorse and thus, are of greater value in purchasing attention, while no tears at all buy further pathologization and further so-called "concern." With this kind of commodified

concern, it should not puzzle us at all if a tween ceases to cry all together. When ontic closure is of this quality, why would ontological remembering matter at all?

Putting the issue in context, global child and adolescent suicide statistics report projected fatalities could rise to 1.5 million by 2020 (World Health Organization Press Release, Geneva, 2004). Suicide has *doubled* in the past few years for tweens, a large number of them being girls. To concretize the horror, it seems that the tween's chosen method of death is asphyxiation by hanging, which makes Daseinsanalytic sense. Hanging discloses the embodied fallout of *Dasein-icide* in which one's air is constricted and the nerve bundles leading in and out of vital organ conduction in one's brain stem, often called the "mouth of God," are incapacitated. One is left swinging groundlessly in suspension...with no definitive or in-spired footedness to "be there" at all, and not by chance, but by choice.

If *Dasein* is both the experience of a lightened and cleared freedom to move through situations in the world as one is, in one's own way, then *Dasein-icide* is the co-constructed annihilation of this process; ontic existence is asphyxiated from its ontologicality. Our co-existential participation in this co-construction is in how we clutter, close off, and heap burdens on clearings so as to exacerbate the shyness of *Dasein*. We do this when requiring parental love to be earned, when privileging rank-ordered, standardized test scores over individual validation and relationship building in schools, when seeing the tween as an over-baked child or a half-baked adult in developmental psychology, when imposing our never-good-enough-ness on tweens in sports, when seeing respect as a one-way street from tweens to adults, when devaluing a tween's chosen interests as *merely* transitional phases or *merely* viewing her ended

relationships as *merely* puppy love heartbreaks, or when colluding with assessment reports or therapeutic treatment plans that pathologizes the tween as the identified (and sole) patient. The list could go on.

These enactments of significance deserve their own hearing as well, but they are nonetheless compartments of closure. It is tempting to be prescriptive here and prohibit closed compartments, but a closer look at such compartments of closure discloses intended offerings of safety and comfort. Rather than prohibit these kinds of “being with,” understanding them may offer options for maintaining safety and consolation *without* closing off anyone’s *Dasein*. Existentially, win/win resolutions are possible if the ontological reality of a shared existence, or our *Mit-Dasein*, is acknowledged and validated. We are free, and must address our freedom in some way, each moment of our lives, all of us.

When unique ways of being-in-the-world are blocked, stifled, ignored, and/or destroyed, then persons, events, and things can’t show themselves as they are, in their own way. Faced with this option, tweens may force a clearing in order to live out his or her freedom, whether through rebellion, violence, or oppositional compartment, or just simply relinquish their uniqueness to belong all together--all attempts to either gain exchange value, or get out of the market all together. It is as if “being there” becomes a perpetual choice between “being there as the other needs me to be, *or* being nowhere, undefined and stealth in the face of another’s radar.” This latter choice *is* ontic *Dasein*-icide; the forfeiture of ec-stasis and resoluteness, that is, the forfeiture of standing out in uniquely definitive ways of being-in-the-world, all made possible and brought to us by our sponsor: the commodification of “being-there-ness.”

Amelio (a pseudonym, of course), a late tween gang member, and his father sit in my office, each struggling to be seen, only to perpetually interrupt each other in service of each one demanding to be valued by the other (i.e., if you respect me you will keep my curfew; if you respect me you will trust me to come in on time even without an enforced curfew). Their co-constructed tactic? Each one devalues the other's way of "being there" in hopes of winning a contest and achieving the trophy of "being *only* there," or *solely* occupying *co*-existential space, an task forgetting an ontological condition that cannot be erased—"being with" is non-negotiable. Eventually, Amelio gives the tween battle cry, "*whatever*," and looks to me, "Dude, I'm telling you now, this is never going to work." And he is correct, if he means existence will be satisfying if others will get out of my way. Existence is co-constructed. Forgetting their shared "being with" each one attempts to erase each other through devaluing each other . Ontically, no suicide is present...yet... but *Dasein*-icide is, as co-existence is reduced to competitive, commodifying constrictions.

The commodification of "being there" works in this way: Rather than allowing "there-ness" to show itself *as it is, in its own way*, "there-ness" is more often than not ascribed a rank-ordered value of worth according to the ability to exchange or purchase love, validation, and respect (or not). If not earned, then acceptance is not returned. Life is a perpetual "if, then," and "when you, I will...." When "being there" is commodified, and hence, commercialized, *Dasein*-icide has already occurred in co-constructed ways long before a tween tightens the noose around her neck. Caution should be taken lest diagnostic assessors and therapists trying to "help" don't inadvertently hand *Dasein* the rope.

Our hope to prevent *Dasein*-icide in our ontic everydayness is by loosening the noose of constricting commodification of *Dasein* through understanding and radically validating the discourse and comportment of the tween in existential communication. Of course, part of the givens of existentiality and existential communication include the thrown limits of one's own facticity, including the reality of the other's rights, needs, and demands of us. Our freedom is always and already situated and never absolute; we will get in the way of each other, but in doing so we will find ourselves through such interruptions.

One place to start this project is to explore the experience of a tween's ontically being nowhere in particular, that is, choosing not to matter at all. Taking this position, or non-position, is a valiant attempt at dis-location as the tween tries to slip away from the fangs of commodification. If not located, then not commercialized. A tween's use of discourse is one strategy in this task. If language is the house of Being, as Heidegger understood it to be, then an exploration of tween discourse should uncover an understanding of a tween's choice to hang in the world. I suggest that how tweens take up this struggle can be phenomenologically understood by exploring the tween's use of one word: "*whatever*."

My comments about the expression, "whatever," are based mostly on discourse in the United States' tween culture. I am quite curious whether this phenomenon is as prevalent in other countries and cultures as it is in the United States. Beyond "culture" as a generic demarcation, an understanding of the word, "whatever," necessitates looking at the hermeneutical contexts in which it is spoken and lived.

As I see it, the comment, “whatever,” is the tween’s way of taking up commodification, and should be received by attendants of souls with deep compassion and radical understanding. Vocal inflection discloses how the tween finds him or herself in a commodifying “with-world.” “WHAT-ever” can be a passive giving oneself over to fate or finitude, seeing both of those possibilities as the same, and is typically accompanied by a forgetting of one’s ownmost possibilities within such thrownness. “What-EV-er” can be an attempt to diminish the meaning and significance of the authentic call to “be there” in unique and distinctive ways as well as a diminishment of the significance of an authentic existential meeting. The quick retort, “Whatever,” inattends to accountability, contingency, and declines the invitation to take up the call towards one’s ownmost existence. While, “What-EVER” is a strength-based protest against generic commodification or any sort, no matter how irritating it is for the recipient of this dismissive discourse. But the lethal red zone is when “whatever” becomes an ontical giving up on both “being-with” *and* “being there” in definitive ways, thus leading to *Dasein-icide*. A tween will then feel he or she has “nothing to lose.”

Hope is often paradoxical, though, and very well may be in this dilemma. Like any *pharmakon*, the proposed remedy to *Dasein-icide* has the potential to liberate, but also to annihilate. It is often the case that when someone has nothing to lose, he or she may be on the brink of disaster, *or* at the brink of a faithful leap into transformation. The former situation in life may prove lethal, while the latter one may prove liberating. In the former situation, having nothing to lose means having nothing of value to be taken or used by someone else. In such lived situations, one is valuable only in terms of what the other needs me to be. High risk for suicide occurs when one finds oneself not measuring

up to another's desires, or doesn't want to, and views one's existence as having a deficit of existential capital to earn the other's love. One ceases to care about the pricing of existence, and one stops living while one's heart and brain continue to function. This is ontical Dasein-icide, or the death of the de-commodified, transcendent soul in everydayness.

In my research I have found reviews of suicide notes to disclose a stuck-ness in relationships that have been oppressively commodified, in which the suicide appears to be preceded by a type of existential cost analysis, and findings showing a type of existential bankruptcy. Here are some examples (Kleiner, 1981): "I am enclosing your pin because I want you to think of what you took from me every time you see it." "I don't want you to think I would kill myself over you because you're not worth any emotion at all. It is what you cost me that hurts and nothing can replace it." "Please forgive me. I have tried to be good to you both." "I feel I have let everyone down and I feel as though I will never change or never improve. I am in love with a girl and I know that I am not good enough for her."

The lethality of commodification is clear: debt unpaid, unworthiness, a failure to earn love, and so forth. The tween's "being there" becomes hopelessly inadequate as the situatedness is premised on scales of sell-ability. Without interruption, commodification trammels on toward Dasein-icide.

IV. Openings: Therapeutic Possibilities

In the liberating situation, though, having nothing to lose does not mean having nothing of value, but means that whatever one has is inherently, uniquely, and incommensurately one's own, its worth resting in its uniqueness always and already

“there” with or without the other’s acceptance and love—hence, the tween’s explorative movements through being-eccentric-in-the-world. This stance jettisons commodifying scales of measurement regarding one’s existential worth, and allows one to follow Boss’ question, “Why not?” The tween understands that the world still commodifies, but she courageously refuses to play “the exchange game.” How can we contribute to this possibility? We can offer radical validation of the tween *Dasein* showing itself as it is, in its own way, whether in therapeutic consultation, in teaching, coaching, or parenting, thus offering another possibility way “hanging out.” “Hanging out,” for a Daseinsanalyst, means to “be-with” others in non-oppressive and non-commodifying ways, in other words, in ways that exhibit what Heidegger called, *Gelassenheit*, or re-release-ment.

Angie, as I will call her by this pseudonym, saw the movie, *Twilight*, 27 times, and falls asleep at night watching various scenes, now encased in her Ipod. Angie, being a raging, gothic veteran of a suicide attempt, and a survivor of sexual molestation, struggles nobly against Dasein-icide. The most significant scene for her in *Twilight* is when Belle, the heroine of the film, awakes during a night’s sleep to find Edward, the lead vampire, perched in her room, watching her sleep. “I want to wake and find someone like Edward watching over me as well,” she says, “to protect me, it’s just soooo hot.”

It is at this point that *Dasein*’s showing itself is usually closed off by others leaping in and shutting down its possibilities of showing itself as it is in its own way. My own paternal inclinations wanted to jump in as well: No more vampires on dates! Please be safer than that, and keep your windows shut at night! She is a veteran of commodified

relationships, but her rebellious comportment is trying to break free of living under this oppression.

Over time, Angie and I talked of the lived significance of vampires for her, and of waiting for the Edwards to come in her life, which, for *me*, is a continuance in destructive provisions of existential blood for more predators. For her, though, it means something quite different. It means that she would find love from someone who also understood what it meant to *not* belong, or to be seen as weird or dangerous, and with whom to share some camaraderie with the choice not to be vulnerable so as to not be hurt. She, like Edward, is misunderstood in the world, partially due to hiding in it. But commodifying concerns are clear: “What would they do if they really knew her?” In other words, would others purchase her *Dasein* for membership, or not?

Knowing that her authentic ways of being in the world were meaningfully constricted, and given her goals of more expansive and free relationships and a lessening of her rage toward others, it seemed the way to help loosen these constrictions meant connecting with her without commodifying her--a difficult task when therapy itself is a service for a fee. But amidst these thrown contingencies we proceeded.

“You really need to do something with your office to make it more exciting,” she remarked at the start of our time together. At other times, any move to connect in validating ways or bring to light inattended attunement to contingencies was met with multiple “whatevers,” but the relationship continued to grow. Her mother reported that they were getting along much better. We continued to discuss *Twilight*, and I shared my concern when watching the film that Edward could at any moment kill Belle, even though he struggled with his love for her. Trying not to commodify her *Dasein* by

devaluing what Edward meant to her, while at the same time challenging the inattention to contingent possibilities, I was concerned about her response. She surprised me. “I know,” she retorted with a smile, “that’s what makes it exciting, that the possibility of being bitten is there, but that he loves her enough to resist going only for what he can get from her.” Whoever thought a vampire could have an I-Thou encounter? Her hopes and dreams rest on being with someone who loves her beyond what he or she can get from her, while admitting the mutual struggle toward win/win resolutions. It is from consultation with the vampire that she seeks liberation from commodification.

If I would have leapt in and said, “No vampires,” thus committing ontical *Dasein*-icide, this latter disclosure of *Dasein* would have been aborted. In walking with the journeying tween, combating *Dasein*-icide requires loosening various constrictions through radically validating the adolescent beyond how they can be for us, while attending to the gravity of contingencies in the shared relationship, and, most importantly, in seeing significance in all concrete, singular, and incomparable enactments within the authenticity of existential encounters.

Ironically, the remedy to the tween’s being-whatever is found in a Daseinsanalytic brand of “whatever.” The Daseinsanalyst lives whatever-in-the-world, not as an enactment of radical dismissal, but as an enactment of radical openness to *any* world disclosing possibility *without* ascribing commodifying exchange value to any experience. Each and every experience is seen as having its own ‘thou-ness,’ in the sense that Martin Buber used the word (1970). At best, the “whatever” of the Daseinsanalyst is likened to re-lease-ment, or *Gelassenheit*. Ironically, it is a return to the very childlikeness that is

initially sacrificed in *Dasein's* commodification: an openness and unbridled “being there,” free of the need to purchase life and love.

V. Conclusion

Tweens are open, free, and full of wonder. To therapeutically walk with them along this pathway means we must go with them through the forest on the way to the castle. The poet Robert Bly (1990) reminds us that on each journey from home to the castle, or, in our discussion, from commodification to liberation, we all must go through the forest, which is fraught with peril. In the forest of “whatever,” the dangers are commodifying ones, with invitations to *Dasein*-icide possible at every turn. Its inhabitants, having Eriksonian (1968) nuances, include hardened trolls, encased in scales of mistrust; centaurs having found their human offerings of industry co-opted and commodified, thus being transformed into half human, half alienated workhorses, and, of course, dementors (Rowland, 2004), vacuous creatures perpetually seeking to sell high and buy low with his, and our, souls. What is our role in accompanying the child-olescent, or tween, on this journey? Lightening the burdens and clearing spaces toward unfolding *Dasein's* uniqueness through a celebration of re-lease-ment, while attending to dangers and contingencies along the way.

It takes courage to go into the forest with a tween, including the courage to break free of our own commodification through understanding its meaning in our everydayness. In doing so, we will provide space for tween *Dasein* to unfold in a clearing of grace-ful, unearned, and hence, de-commodified validation, as the tween follows Thoreau's challenge to step to a different drummer, no matter how far or how measured its music. To hope for *Dasein's* freedom in this way is, perhaps, to face.... “whatever.”

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