

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
Joss Whedon

AN UNAUTHORIZED EXPLORATION OF *BUFFY, ANGEL, AND FIREFLY*

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Like ice cream, psychotherapy comes in many flavors and colors, and most practitioners mash it up a bit, eventually dishing out multi-hued swirls rather than pure chocolate or vanilla. Yet psychological theories are often taught as if their conversion into practice was pristine; chocolate theory yielding chocolate cones, vanilla yielding vanilla, and so on. While that may not be so in clinical work, nevertheless, Mikhail Lyubansky allows us a glimpse of pure strawberry: existential theory and therapy unsullied, as applied to Buffy Summers. Considering the unimaginable responsibilities and undeniable confrontations with death that Buffy must endure year after year, Lyubansky views an existential approach to making sense of it all as just the right flavor.

BUFFY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

MIKHAIL LYUBANSKY

The hardest thing in this world . . . is to live in it.

—Buffy Summers, “The Gift” (5-22)

I'm just going to go ahead and say it. Buffy Summers, the blond former cheerleader and long-time vampire slayer, is the most psychologically well-developed character on television. Ever. Her character, like the show itself, probes deeply into life's biggest questions: the nature of good and evil, the meaning of love, the weight of responsibility, the fear of death. In this essay, I approach Buffy as an existential therapist, using existential theory and therapeutic principles to make sense of Buffy's motivations, worries, and behaviors.

The therapeutic lens is not intended to imply that Buffy is “crazy.”¹ She most certainly is not; for delusions cannot be shared by so many people. The fact that Willow, Xander, Spike, and the rest of the Scoobies all share Buffy's reality indicates that Sunnydale and all its monsters and

¹ “Crazy” is not a psychological or psychiatric term, but the popular connotation of the word suggests a thought disorder, like schizophrenia in which a person experiences a different reality than other people (e.g., hallucinations, delusions).

slayers are real and not delusional.² So, why therapy? It is almost certain that Buffy would meet diagnostic criteria for depression during most of season six, but that's really not the point. Existential therapists don't generally see people as sick but as sometimes needing guidance in their efforts to negotiate the challenges of life.³ We could all use this sort of guidance occasionally, but it would be of particular benefit to Buffy, whose daily challenges are epic in nature.

But why existential therapy? It is not the most popular (that would be Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and it is not the latest new treatment, like Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. In all honesty, it may be difficult to even find a practicing therapist who works primarily from existential theory.⁴ I don't myself. And yet, if Buffy asked me for a referral during any period of her life after becoming the Slayer, this is the specific type of psychotherapy I would recommend, for it is the only therapy developed to explicitly deal with those big life issues that Buffy seems to confront on a daily basis. Consistent with existential principles, I prioritize depth over breadth, and focus exclusively on just two existential themes: *responsibility* and *death*.

The Weight of Responsibility

“How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought by a peddling shanghaier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager—I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?”

—The Young Man, *Repetition*

² The other possibility is that, as shown in “Normal Again” (6-17), all the episodes actually reflected Buffy's delusional world. However, there was ample evidence in “Normal Again” that it was the mental hospital that was delusional, not Sunnydale.

³ This is also true of many other types of psychotherapies, including Adlerian, Rogerian, and Cognitive Behavioral.

⁴ Existentialism is a philosophy that argues that individual human beings have full responsibility for creating meaning in their lives. Existential therapy was developed to guide people along this meaning-making path.

One of the fundamental assumptions of the *Buffyverse* is the element of free choice. Almost everyone, dead or living, has the ability to choose what they become.⁵ Spike and Angel chose the hard road of redemption for their evil pasts, the vampires have all chosen (by drinking their sire's blood) their immortal but also inhuman existence, and even Buffy, "the Chosen One," had the ability to either accept the role of Slayer or turn her back on it. Similarly, all of the Scoobies made a conscious choice to join Buffy in her fight against evil, even at the cost of pursuing other interests, including attending a prestigious university. Willow described this process in "Choices" (3-19):

The other night, getting captured and all, facing off with Faith . . . things just got kind of clear. I mean you've been fighting evil here for about three years, and I've been helping out some, and now we're supposed to be deciding what we want to do with our lives, and I realized that's what I want to do. Fight evil. Help people. I think it's worth doing, and I don't think you do it because you have to. It's a good fight, Buffy, and I want in.

It is, to be sure, not a one-time decision but a lifelong process. Thus, even though Buffy chose to accept her responsibility as Slayer in season one, she hid from her responsibility in season three ("Anne," 3-1) and confided in Giles in season five that she was "thinking of taking a break . . ." and "not get[ting] into full Slay mode" ("Intervention," 5-18⁶).

As in the *Buffyverse*, free choice is also an important assumption of existential therapy. Like Alfren Adler before them, existential therapists believe that it is neither genes nor environment (nor even the gene X environment interaction) that determines our behavior, but *how we choose to respond* to our genes and environment.⁷ According to existential tenets, people are often afraid of freedom (to choose) because with freedom to choose comes the possibility of choosing poorly. With free-

⁵ There are notable exceptions, including Spike's killings and sirings when under the influence of the First.

⁶ I examine this episode in depth later in this essay.

⁷ This is not to suggest that genes and environment are unimportant. They are just not seen as deterministic.

dom, in other words, comes responsibility.⁸ Existential therapists point out that many individuals, at some point in their lives, struggle with accepting this responsibility and, therefore, deny or limit their own freedom. Some displace the responsibility onto other people (e.g., “My boss made me work late”); others think of themselves as helpless victims of life circumstances (e.g., “They only want to hire someone with a college degree”); still others absolve themselves of responsibility by a sort of temporary insanity, as when they attribute a behavior to their drinking (e.g., “It was the beer talking”) or to their unconscious drives⁹ (e.g., “I don’t know what happened; I would never do something like that”) (Yalom and May). The existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre referred to these types of excuses as statements of “bad faith,” and argued that it is inauthentic to assume that our existence is controlled by forces external to ourselves. To live an authentic and meaningful life, existentialists would have people take personal responsibility for their lives, honestly evaluating the kind of person they are and mindfully choosing the kind of person they wish to become (Corey). This is the focus of existential therapy: to help clients “own” their feelings, desires, and actions and find meaning in their lives.

Accepting responsibility is something that Buffy learned early on, with a particularly crucial lesson coming at the end of the first season, when a prophesy of her death caused her to quit her slayer duties, resulting in the deaths of several classmates. These deaths convinced Buffy to resume slaying, and, with the exception of the previously mentioned lapses, by season three, her willingness to take responsibility for her behavior stood in stark contrast to Faith’s unwillingness to do so. As a slayer, Faith had her own way of giving up responsibility. When she accidentally killed the deputy mayor, she blamed her supernatural powers—“Something made us different. We’re warriors. We’re built to kill” (“Consequences,” 3-15)—and much to Buffy’s dismay, she seemed to feel no remorse or distress.

The freedom to choose and, therefore, to accept responsibility, accord-

⁸ Viktor Frankl in 1978 recommended that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be complemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast. Money is currently being raised to turn Frankl’s vision into reality (see <http://www.sorfoundation.org/>).

⁹ “Whose unconscious is it?” the existential therapist might inquire.

ing to existential therapists, requires a combination of wishing and willing. Although the first part may sound easy, wishing, or being in touch with what one really wants, is closely connected to feeling, and individuals disconnected from their emotions often have trouble experiencing or expressing a wish. Faith, who lived under the motto, “Want. Take. Have,” provided a good example of a person struggling with wishing, as existential therapists believe that impulsive persons avoid wishing by acting impulsively on all urges rather than prioritizing their wants and acting accordingly.

Once a person connects to his/her wishes, it is necessary to choose how to act on the wish. Here again, some people have trouble—delegating the decision to someone else or passively allowing circumstances to control what happens.

Buffy had to make a series of hard choices over the years. When she first arrived at Sunnydale, she chose to befriend the geeky Willow and Xander rather than the popular Cordelia, to disclose her identity as Slayer to her friends but not her mother, and to avoid normal boys because dating them would be a hazard to their health. Later, she chose to sleep with Angel, and later still, to kill him in order to seal the entrance to hell. Buffy's choices did not always end up serving her own best interest, as when she hid her Slayer identity from her mother, who most likely would have been supportive, nor were they always righteous, as when she chose to emulate Faith's lifestyle and rob a gun store. But in making her choices, Buffy also showed a willingness to take responsibility for the consequences. Thus, she blamed only herself for her estranged relationship with her mother and stood up to Faith when Faith refused to take responsibility for accidentally killing the deputy mayor.

Buffy, it turned out, became rather good at taking responsibility, and eventually her friends learned to do so as well, for responsibility and accountability were part of the show's underlying themes. In episode after episode, we were reminded that our actions always have consequences. This was probably best exemplified in “Bargaining” (6-1 and 6-2), when the Scoobies, overwhelmed by grief (following Buffy's death) and slayer responsibilities, decided to bring Buffy back from the dead. It was not a choice they made lightly, but none of them were fully prepared for the consequences of their decision: Buffy resented having her life

back, and a new demon was created to balance out the good energy (in the form of Buffy) that should not have been on the Earth. The existential message is not that Buffy's friends should have foreseen the consequences (there was no way to do so), or that they should have made a different choice. To the contrary, the message is that even though none of us can know for certain how our actions will impact the world around us, we still have to wish and decide, and then take responsibility for those decisions. There may be free choice, but there is no free lunch.

Some choices, to be sure, are harder than others—for Buffy, as well as for the rest of us. At the top of this list is how to cope with the death of loved ones and, more importantly, with our own sense of mortality—an issue at the very center of existential theory.

The Gift of Death

“As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind, that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity . . . of learning that death is the key which unlocks the door to our true happiness.”

—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

To existential psychologists, death is a gift. By definition, it provides an awareness of our mortality, which, in turn, may produce a profound shift in perspective and lead to personal growth. It kills us, but without death, we would not know that we are alive. Without death, life would have little urgency, and there would be little to live for. It is the inevitability of death, existential psychologists argue, that forces us to find meaning in our lives. The specific meaning can only be determined individually, but Rollo May and Irvin Yalom argue that a confrontation with death persuades individuals to count their blessings and become more aware of how their relationships impact their life. In the words of novelist Paul Theroux, “Death is an endless night so awful to contemplate that it can

make us love life and value it with such passion that it may be the ultimate cause of all joy and all art.”

Of course, death, or actually the fear of death, can also produce intense anxiety. This death anxiety can be so crippling that it becomes intolerable, causing the afflicted to live their lives in such a way that they practically eliminate all alone time, which is when thoughts of death and mortality tend to intrude. In their desperation to avoid isolation, individuals sometimes form unhealthy relationships, which leads to other problems.

Buffy confronted death¹⁰ (and also the dead) on a daily basis and in many different forms, including dealing with the death of her mother (“The Body,” 5-16), maintaining relationships with the long-dead vampires Spike and Angel, and ultimately, confronting her own death (“The Gift,” 5-22) and eventual resurrection (“Bargaining,” 6-1 and 6-2). In each instance of death, the associated existential questions came to the forefront.

Perhaps the *Buffy* episode that is most difficult to watch (but also among the best!) is the one in which Joyce died. In “The Body,” there was no playful humor, no witty wordplay, and until the very end, no supernatural creatures. As Jana Riess wrote in her spiritual guide to the vampire slayer, “the monster that has taken her mother so abruptly . . . [is] the one monster that Buffy cannot overcome” (25). In this episode, Buffy was like the rest of us, helpless against the unpredictability and permanence of death. In the course of the forty-eight hours following her mother’s death, Buffy experienced shock, self-blame, denial, and confusion. Her friends also struggled to deal with the loss, each reacting differently, but always with more intensity than when they faced supernatural death. It is an episode about grief—real grief!

May and Yalom point out that grief is experienced differently depending on the individual’s relationship to the deceased, with the loss of a parent particularly linked to feelings of personal vulnerability. “If our parents could not save themselves, who will save us?” they ask, adding, “When parents die, nothing remains between ourselves and the grave. At the moment of our parents’ death, we ourselves constitute the barrier between our children and their death” (288).

¹⁰ She literally confronted Death in season two’s “Killed by Death” (2-18) when she fought the demon Der Kindestod, whose German name means “the child’s death.”

Consistent with existential theory, her mother's death reminded Buffy of her own mortality and set off a new search for meaning. Buffy became concerned with the possible negative impact that slaying was having on her life, worrying that it may have been hardening her emotionally and preventing her from experiencing love and intimacy. For Buffy, existential therapy¹¹ came in the form of a spirit (of the First Slayer), with whom, at the recommendation of Giles, she decided to consult. Much to her dismay, the spirit informed her that death is a gift:

FIRST SLAYER: Death is your gift.

BUFFY: Death . . .

FIRST SLAYER: Is your gift.

BUFFY: Okay, no. Death is not a gift. My mother just died. I know this. If I have to kill demons because it makes the world a better place, then I kill demons, but it's not a gift to anybody. ("Intervention," 5-18)

As it turned out, the vision of the First Slayer is right. In "The Gift" (5-22), Buffy made the ultimate sacrifice, plunging to her death in order to save the world and, not incidentally, Dawn. It was her gift to them, but it was also her gift to herself, for in dying, she found purpose in her life (to save the world and her sister). For existential therapists, the discovery of life's meaning is gift enough, and, by all appearances, Buffy's last moments were content, for she not only reaffirmed her purpose in life but in her final selfless act also absolved herself of the responsibility of slaying. Her life's work was done. But upon her death Buffy received yet another unexpected gift, for she found herself in what she assumed to be heaven:

¹¹ In this context, the word "therapy" is used to convey the idea that the spirit's words serve a therapeutic function. I do *not* wish to create the impression that this benevolent spirit is functioning as a psychotherapist, existential or any other. A real therapeutic relationship is one that both therapist and client enter consciously and deliberately, and it brings with it a series of obligations for the therapist—among them a commitment to help the client. Disappearing after a few wise words, as this spirit does immediately after the exchange below, would be unethical.

Wherever I was, I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time didn't mean anything. Nothing had form. But I was still me. . . . And I was warm, and I was loved, and I was finished, complete. I don't understand theology or dimensions, or any of it really, but I think I was in heaven. ("After Life," 6-3)

It is noteworthy that, despite her ongoing fight against evil, Buffy never really aspired to reach heaven. Rather, she grew to embrace her role as Slayer because it was what she needed to do. If heaven is the ultimate measure of success—a life well lived—then Buffy's ascendance to heaven can also be seen as consistent with existential principles. As Viktor Frankl admonished in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue . . . as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a course greater than oneself" (xiv). He might as well have been talking about Buffy.

To be sure, death in the *Buffyverse* is not quite as permanent as it is in our reality, and Buffy was soon brought back to life by her friends ("Bargaining," 6-1 and 6-2). She told them she was grateful to them for giving her the world, but she later confided to Spike that she was happy in the heaven-like place and actually resented that her friends tore her away from it:

Everything here is . . . hard, and bright, and violent. Everything I feel, everything I touch . . . this is hell. Just getting through the next moment, and the one after that . . . knowing what I've lost. . . . ("After Life," 6-3)

Following her resurrection, Buffy experienced her greatest existential crisis yet. Not only did she have to deal with life's mundane responsibilities (finding a job, paying the bills), but her Slayer responsibilities were a violent and jarring contrast to her former peaceful existence in paradise. Although she had previously struggled to face the inevitability of her own death ("Prophecy Girl," 1-12), she now, for the first time, struggled to face life, going through the motions of slaying and living, not feeling anything, not knowing if it would ever get better. "Will I stay this

way forever? Sleepwalk through my life's endeavor?" she sang in "Once More, With Feeling" (6-7).

Buffy recognized that she was stuck in a rut. She knew that she had lost not only the will to live, but along with it, her sense of self:¹²

I don't want to be
Going through the motions
Losing all my drive.
I can't even see
If this is really me. ("Once More, With Feeling")

Although she had earlier found meaning and purpose, these were torn from her when she was brought back to life¹³—after all, she had already fulfilled her life's purpose. What reason could there possibly be for her to live now? "I don't understand . . . why I'm back," she confided to Giles ("Grave," 6-22).

According to existential therapists, the solution to the problem of meaninglessness is engagement, "wholehearted engagement in any of the infinite array of life's activities" (Yalom and May 290). The goal of existential therapy, then, is to remove the obstacles to engagement, to explore what prevents the person from loving another or from gaining satisfaction from work or creativity.

In Buffy's case, the main obstacle seemed to be her social isolation from her friends. She resented them for bringing her back to life but cared enough about them to want to shield them from the knowledge that they had torn her away from heaven. She felt that, not having had the experience of dying (and being raised from the dead), they could no longer understand her. Moreover, her desire to protect their feelings prevented her from doing anything that might increase their understanding. This isolation was devastating for Buffy, who earlier made a point of turning her back on the slayer tradition of working alone¹⁴ in order to

¹² Frankl called this sense of emptiness "the existential vacuum."

¹³ As Anya put it, "She came back from the grave much graver" ("Once More, With Feeling").

¹⁴ This tradition is evident in season one's opening voice-over: "She alone will stand against the . . . vampires."

enjoy the emotional and instrumental support of her friends. In her desperation to control her psychological torment, Buffy shut down emotionally, not feeling anything—positive or negative. Fortunately, Buffy was once again offered some sound existential advice, this time by Spike, who explained (in verse) that her pain would only diminish if she could reengage in living life.¹⁵

Simple though this advice may be, removing the obstacles to engagement is often far from easy. To the contrary, May wrote that “one does not become fully human painlessly.”

For Buffy, the first step of reengaging in life was being honest with her friends about how they “rescued” her from heaven, which she finally revealed in the song “Something to Sing About” (“Once More, With Feeling,” 6-7). Even then, however, her journey toward engagement was long, hard, and, as far as her sexual relationship with Spike was concerned, degrading.¹⁶ Although she had told her friends about being in heaven, she still maintained a psychological distance from them by hiding her relationship with Spike. As he did before, in “Normal Again” (6-17) Spike offered an astute existential analysis, reminding Buffy that she, like all of us, had the ability to make choices about how to live life:

You're addicted to the misery. It's why you won't tell your pals about us. Might actually have to be happy if you did. They'd either understand and help you, God forbid . . . or drive you out . . . where you can finally be at peace, in the dark. With me. Either way, you'd be better off for it, but you're too twisted for that. (pauses) Let yourself live, already. And stop with the bloody hero trip for a sec. We'd all be the better for it.

At this point, Buffy was in no psychological condition to follow Spike's advice. Even disregarding her temporary bouts of delusions and halluci-

¹⁵ Part of the charm of this advice on living was that it came from a vampire who, by definition, was dead.

¹⁶ Although many fans, as well as Sarah Michelle Geller herself, disliked the sixth season's dark storyline, Buffy's compulsive sexual relationship with Spike was consistent with how individuals often respond to terrifying isolation: using another person to meet a specific need (in Buffy's case, to feel something emotionally), rather than getting to know and relating to the whole person.

nations, she was simply not yet able¹⁷ to reengage in the emotional intimacy that she had shared with her friends prior to her death.

Existential therapists would acknowledge both her wish to find meaning in her new existence and her “stuckness” in making that wish a reality. As Abraham Maslow wrote, “If we wish to help humans to become more fully human, we must realize not only that they try to realize¹⁸ themselves, but that they are also reluctant or afraid or unable to do so. Only by fully appreciating this dialectic between sickness and health can we help to tip the balance in favor of health.”

Interestingly, the person who finally allowed Buffy to tip toward health was not Spike but Dawn. When Buffy finally emerged from her depression and despair at the end of season six, it was because watching Dawn fighting demons stirred within Buffy a combination of parental pride and sisterly love. With tears of joy, she told Dawn,

Things have really sucked lately, but that’s all going to change, and I want to be there when it does. I want to see you grow up, the woman you’re going to become. Because she is going to be beautiful and she is going to be powerful. I got it so wrong. I don’t want to protect you from the world. I want to show it to you. (“Grave,” 6-22)

This was a fundamental paradigm shift for Buffy. Whereas before she found her life’s purpose in her calling as Slayer and in her fight against evil, now she found it in sharing the beauty of life with her sister. Thus, with the help of her friends, her sister, and some well-placed existential guidance, Buffy managed to overcome a crisis of meaning and, once more, to reengage in life.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes that the categorical imperative of logotherapy¹⁹ is to “live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are

¹⁷ An existential therapist would say “not yet willing.”

¹⁸ This second “realize” refers to the humanistic notion that humans are constantly striving to improve themselves.

¹⁹ This is a specific type of existential therapy, developed by Frankl, which focuses on finding meaning in life.

about to act now” (131-132).²⁰ It's a rather tricky thought-experiment, at least for most of us. But Buffy, who has died not once, but twice, embodies its very essence. We all have to grapple with existential issues in our lives. To the extent that living a meaningful (by existential standards) life is truly possible, Buffy has shown us the way.

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²⁰ Here's an example: Imagine that you are thinking of doing something unethical, like taking credit for someone else's work. Frankl's categorical imperative would have you pretend that you carried out this unethical action and had to face all of the corresponding consequences (which also have to be imagined), and then had the opportunity to live your life again. Would you make the same choice with the benefit of such “hindsight”?