



## Irvin Yalom

**The Schopenhauer Cure**  
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**Is Julius in some ways a self-portrait? Was writing this character in part a way of contemplating your own death?**

Every protagonist contains much of the author. In fact, Julius has many similarities with a previous character, Seymour Trotter, the psychiatrist in the first chapter of *Lying on the Couch* to whom I gave many of my own quirks and beliefs. In fact, for a while I considered making this book a sequel to *Lying on the Couch*. But after a while, I abandoned that plan. All the psychiatrist protagonists in my stories and novels contain bits and pieces of me.

At my age I do think about death, but, as a good existentialist, I've been contemplating death in general—and my death in particular—all my life. I've spent many years working with dying patients and

I've written a great deal (in *Existential Psychotherapy*) about apprehending our mortality.

Here's a curious incident. A few months after the book was published I was x-rayed because I had some severe muscle and bone pain. A particularly insensitive orthopedic surgeon muttered that there might be a metastatic cancer present and ordered an MRI which could not be done for three days. During those three days I could much identify with Julius and much to my amazement I found myself using some of his coping methods to soothe myself, especially examining my life meaning through Nietzsche's thought experiment of eternal recurrence. Some day I'd like to write a story about this odd incident of an invented character taking care of his creator! The MRI, by the way, indicated a perfectly benign condition and I am currently in good health.

**As a therapist, as well as the author, what did you think Julius hoped to gain by contacting Phillip again?**

As a result of his encounter with death Julius embarks on the task of exploring his own life meaning. In particular he wonders whether he has offered anything of enduring value to his patients. In the course of that examination he comes across the chart of Philip Slater, a man whom he remembered as one of his biggest failures. First, he wonders whether Philip has been a late bloomer – that is whether he might have realized some benefits from therapy a long time after termination. (Many patients report this – comments of the therapist go into deep storage and then reemerge later when they are able to make use of them.) But even if he had not help Philip before there was still a possibility that he might now be of value to him. Julius believed that as he had aged he had grown wiser and more effective. Maybe he had been given a second chance. Maybe like Zarathustra, he had grown over-ripe with wisdom and still had a chance to redeem Philip (and himself). Hence he begins to treat Philip as a very special project.

**The ways in which philosophy and psychology work together, and inform each other, are clearly engaged in your novels. Do you think there are ways in which they are different, and are there things that one can do that the other cannot?**

I remember taking courses in the history of psychology and psychiatry and learning that the pioneers in these disciplines were 19th century physiologists and physicians. The courses offered such a skewed picture to the young practitioner intending to devote his/her life to the art of caring for others. I always felt that such courses make some significant omissions and now after so many years practicing as a therapist, I would teach such a course including great novelists and philosophers such as, Plato, Epicurus, Lucretius, Spinoza, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hume, Sartre, Camus, and many, so many others.