9.7: Some Final Thoughts

Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is considered the defining text of modern existentialism. Sartre was an atheist, so the brief introduction to existentialism in this chapter went in the direction of atheism. However, Frankl and May were not atheists, and one of May’s most influential mentors, as well as a close personal friend, was Paul Tillich. Tillich remains a well-known and respected existential philosopher in the spiritual tradition. May went so far as to say that Tillich’ book *The Courage to Be* might be the best and most understandable presentation of existentialism as an approach to life that has been written in English (May, 1983).

It is also interesting to note that both Frankl and May were significantly influenced by Alfred Adler. Frankl worked closely with Adler for a time, and May took a summer course with Adler. Both cite Adler regularly in their writings. Adler’s focus on the childhood struggle against one’s own inferiority, his emphasis on social interest as a responsible means to superiority, and his recognition of the dangers inherent in seeking superiority at the expense of others, all fit well with the existential perspective on making responsible choices in living one’s life. This point emphasizes, once again, the profound influence that Adler has had on psychology, and that he is in all probability the most under-recognized figure in the history of psychology.

In 1897, William James published an essay entitled *Is Life Worth Living?* (James, 1897/1992). James begins by describing how some people see the value in life, indeed they fully enjoy life, no matter what happens to them or around them. However, for most people this is not the case, and there is no magic way to give everyone such an optimistic point of view. So, James presents a series of arguments that one might use with suicidal people (that is the term he uses) in order to convince them that life is worth living. He relies heavily on religious faith, though not on any particular religion, but also leads into a discussion of existential thought. Approximately a decade before Frankl and May were even born, James wrote the following words:

…Suppose, however thickly evils crowd upon you, that your unconquerable subjectivity proves to be their match, and
that you find a more wonderful joy than any passive pleasure can bring in trusting ever in the larger whole. Have you not now made life worth living on these terms? This life is worth living, we can say, since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view, and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success...These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. (pp. 501-503; James, 1897/1992)

The challenges that we all face in trying to live authentic lives, the challenges of making responsible and ethical choices that are true to who we ourselves are, can be difficult. In a fascinating book entitled Not a Genuine Black Man, Brian Copeland (2006) talks about his family's racial struggles during the civil rights movement and the difficulties he faces today as a Black man who has adopted many so-called “White” cultural values. Copeland insists, however, that we cannot so easily claim that any given value or personal interest belongs only to one group of people:

…When all is said and done, I AM indeed a Genuine Black Man - because I am resilient. That's what being black in America is truly about: resilience…I stayed on my feet through taunts and harassment, through police intimidation and bigoted nuns, through schoolyard bullies and Sylvester, through my mother’s death and bouts of sometimes crippling depression. I am still standing.

I am black because, as my friend Mr. Wilkins once told me, people should be called what they want to be called. I have the right and the ability to determine my identity regardless of what other blacks or whites say. I am not an "oreo," nor am I “still a nigger.” I am a man. I am a black man.

No one person or group of individuals holds the monopoly on what in this society is the “true” black experience. My world is as “black” as that of Malcolm X, Colin Powell, Snoop Dogg, Jesse Jackson, Usher, Bill Cosby, or Diddy. As their experiences in America are unique, mine is unique - yet it is the same. It is as valid as that of the poor African American living in “the ‘hood,” the rich black rapper balancing a lifestyle of fame and violence, and the black scholar working to better this world through academic dissertation. It is as authentic as the experiences of those who marched with Dr. King for civil rights and those who defy the black community by arguing the conservative point of view.

It is the “true” black experience because it is my experience… (pp. 243-244; Copeland, 2006)

discussion question \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Brian Copeland talked about how difficult it can be to live an authentic life when you don't meet the expectations of others. Have you ever gone against the advice of family or friends? Did it prove to be the right decision, or did it at least help you to feel better about your own confidence in yourself?