

Playing with fire.

(Smoking as an Existential Choice)

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June 2005.

Abstract.

At a time when it seems that society's main task is to find rules and regulations which endeavour to protect its citizens from any form of danger, illness and antisocial behaviour, the antismoking campaign has risen to the top of the list of necessary battles to be fought in order to protect people's right to an healthy and clean environment.

Smokers, under immense pressure, are giving up. Some more successfully than others. Many however, seem to persist in their habit. They challenge and resist the new healthy trend and hang on to their choice of lighting up with a determination which, in my opinion, deserves a little consideration.

In this study I am going to analyse the reasons that make the "*Smoker by Choice*" hang on to his/her right to choose and how this choice can be understood as an existential phenomenon of our times.

Introduction.

A man and a woman look languidly into each other's eyes. He offers her a cigarette. With a slight nod she accepts and slowly extends her hand. He lights a match and lightly touches her fingers while bringing the flame close, his eyes immersed in hers. A scene out of one of Humphrey Bogart's films, charged with eroticism. The moment that simultaneously ignites the cigarettes and the couple's passion, that very instant when glances touch across a cigarette, is the epitome of sin.

Nowadays, smoking is sinful, harmful, irresponsible, and must be stopped.

The Sun Newspaper reported that "... *films which feature characters smoking could automatically earn the equivalent of an 18 rating in the US, if anti-smoking campaigners have their way. Some experts believe that censors should treat puffing on a cigarette as seriously as swearing.*" (The sun on line. February 16, 2005).

Back in Europe in the meantime, smoking has been banned in most public places. Self-help books on giving up are filling the shelves of most libraries and bookshops and anti-smoking clinics are sprouting everywhere to help eradicate the vice. The anti-smoking campaigners are rejoicing in their battle to redeem the addicts *for their own good*, in the worship of longevity, the new obsession of the 21st century.

Yet outside office blocks, in secluded courtyards, in the street, in the privacy of one's home, away from world's judgement, many people still smoke. Some want to give up, others smoke because it is their choice.

It is the *Smoker by Choice* that I find of interest and in this essay I will try and define what it is that gives this tenacious human being the determination to hold on to what is deemed to be a most detestable habit. I am going to observe smoking from an existential point of view, and relate the meaning of smoking to the core of existential philosophy, trying to establish the implicit value that accompanies the ritual of the cigarette.

Existential points of view.

There are four ultimate concerns in one's life, says Irvin Yalom (1980) in his book *Existential Psychotherapy*: "... death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. The individual's confrontation with each of these facts of life constitutes the content of the existential dynamic conflict." (Yalom, 1980. p. 8). All four are accompanied by existential anxiety, which, while belonging to existence itself, cannot be discarded, but only accepted. It can contribute to the drive to make one's life what it ought to be, or it can be the negation of life's fulfilment, in the form of doubt, guilt and the inhibition of one's will.

Many people take up smoking at times of great anxiety or fear. The cigarette then becomes the instrument for a moment of concentration and self-analysis. Smoking creates the isolation needed for one's energy recharge. This act is usually accompanied by the feeling of guilt, for smoking is also perceived as a sign of frailty and weakness. A person should be able to find life strength within his/her inner self, without resorting to the aid of tobacco. Its damaging effect on health and society's condemnation, produce at the same time a strong feeling that smoking is required as an act of defiance and rebellion against such views. It is possibly the combination of guilt and defiance that gives the smoker a sense of psychological fulfilment.

“Existential guilt is experienced by many people who feel that they have opted out of the basic anxiety of living by doing something which gives them temporary relief, but which is wrong in essence.” (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1988. p. 45)

The *Smoker by Choice* is well aware of his/her anxiety and the guilt attached to it. In fact it is through the smoking ritual that both these existential issues are embraced and transcended.

Fear of death.

In a society where longevity is an absolute value, to be a survivor is the new moral goal. The smoker, however, seems to affirm the opposite: that life is short and finite and that living as opposed to surviving, acquires a different value. Indeed the act of smoking implies that the presence of death is stared in the face each time one lights up. Not unlike the mountain climber who now and again glances down the abyss in a mixture of fear and thrill, for the smoker it is the risk of dying that makes living valuable. One's life, in that view, is valued by the implicit danger of the small suicide committed every time a cigarette is lit.

The poison that is inhaled with every puff brings the pleasure of a slow death, the romantic beauty of something cherished that slowly vanishes, just as all things alive will and do. Like a passionate love affair, it is the exquisite knowledge that the passion will burn itself out and eventually die, that makes the eroticism express itself in all its strength. Passion, like the cigarette, brings perfect pleasure and it cruelly leaves one forever unsatisfied, craving for more.

Smoking at times of war was a necessary ailment to combat fear of death. It is not a coincidence that tobacco smoking was imported into Europe by soldiers. When cigarettes were distributed, the soldier knew that the attack was imminent. Tobacco helped the soldier by steeling his nerves and mastering the anxiety inherent to his condition. Cigarettes transformed anxiety into fear of death and as such provided the temporary illusion that such fear could be conquered and eliminated by victorious combat after taking a few long puffs, in a suspended moment, away from the harsh reality of war. “*Anxiety strives to become fear,*” Paul Tillich (1952) states in *The Courage to Be*, “*because fear can be met by courage.*” (Tillich, 1952. p. 39).

The two most famous brands of cigarettes, Gouloises and Gitanes, are the emblem of the soldier and the gypsy, masculine courage and feminine passion, Don Jose and Carmen, entwined in the existential drama of life and death.

Freedom and responsibility.

Smoking is taboo. Smokers must be educated and rehabilitated, freed from their addiction. For the *Smoker by Choice* this is a constant dilemma that must be faced day after day. One side of him/her understands that it would be wise to stop and at times resolutions are made to do just that. Another side feels that smoking is a free choice, and, within the respect for others, a sacrosanct right. While the resolution to stop would be a choice made *for* others, or *for* one’s conscience, the will to continue smoking is the essence of the smoker.

The recurring decision to try and stop could be identified in Sartre’s idea of “*The ‘Faith’ of Bad Faith*” (Sartre, 1943. Ch. 2/3.) In *Being and Nothingness* he states: “*Bad faith*

apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith.” (Sartre, 1943. p. 68)

For Sartre, the failure to keep even the strongest resolutions is evidence that human beings are equipped with their inherent freedom and the realisation that that freedom implies the responsibility of choice.

The decision to smoke “... *may be understood as preferring a certain form of dying slowly, to the alternative of dying over an intolerable form of living ... assuming a death of one’s own choosing is more desirable than suffering a life over which one has no control.*” (Klein, 1993. p. 143).

Isolation.

Anxiety and anguish are the inevitable consequence of our freedom, as we have to stand in front of our destiny alone, with no one to protect us or guide us. Smoking is often a ritual that wants to be consumed in isolation.

The *Smoker by Choice* values his/her smoking as a time for reflection. A time that is suspended from reality, a moment of meditation helped by the rhythmic breathing in and out and better consumed in closeness with nature. There is something incredibly alluring in creating time and space for one’s smoking ritual. This is a time and a space where the relationship is between a human being and an object, yet it can be as real as that of two lovers. This is in fact a place where no one can intrude; a space in one’s life that is totally one’s own. There are few moments as intense as those two minutes spent smoking the last cigarette of the

day, at night, in the dark, staring at a starry sky, in total solitude. Then the word *lonely* gains a new meaning and life suddenly becomes sweeter.

The *Smoker by Choice*, however is not one who foregoes social relationships. On the contrary, he can distinguish the time and place when others are allowed inside his world, or when solitude is a choice needed to ponder about important issues and important relationships. One situation does not elude the other. Yet again, smoking can also be a moment of sharing and connecting with fellow human beings.

Emptiness and meaninglessness.

Cigarettes are not useful. In fact it is their utter futility that makes their appeal universal. It is difficult sometimes to remember the value of cigarettes, when society is passing laws to get rid of them. Similarly it is difficult sometimes to remember the meaning of one's life, when we are constantly reminded that we are soon going to die. The very packet of cigarettes warns that smoking kills, that which awaits the smoker is painful death, wrinkled skin, fat arteries and holes in one's lungs. So what is the point of smoking?

As we wake up every morning and go about our daily tasks, we know very well, however conscious the thought may be, that life is only a short breath and will soon finish. It is that thought that gives life a new meaning: that the short breath has to be lived fully, its preciousness deriving from its fragility. A life that goes on forever would be a nightmare, just as it would be if a cigarette would never be extinguished.

“Thrownness and that Being towards death in which one either flees it or anticipates it, form a unity.” (Heidegger, 1926. p. 426 -7). From birth to death, life is lived in between.

This is when the cigarette becomes the symbol of man's existence, of the meaningless, empty space that divides being from non-being. As the cigarette is consumed, so is the essence of life. Smoking the meaningless cigarette is the act that affirms the knowledge, the awareness and the acceptance of an existence with no ultimate purpose, lest that of living it for the sake of living.

In an attempt to fill the emptiness of one's life a cigarette is a welcome tool. *To pass the time...* is another reason for lighting up.

World point of view.

In *Existential Counselling in Practice* Emmy van Deurzen-Smith (1988) describes four different existential worldviews: the natural or physical world, the public or social world, the private or psychological world and the ideal or spiritual world. The *Smoker by Choice* relates to these different existential aspects in his/her special way, through smoking.

In relation to the natural.

Emmy van Deurzen-Smith's study case of Brenda (1988) beautifully illustrates the relationship of the smoker with the natural world dimension. Smoking affords the experience of one's body as one's own. Inhaling smoke is like eating fire, rekindling one's life and feeling extra-alive. Exhaling represents one's own power being projected out of one's mouth and given back to the natural world. Carrying cigarettes and fire gave Brenda a sense of oneness with substances of the natural world and the feeling of being the carrier of the magic in the world. When smoking Brenda felt in charge of her own destiny, in command of the natural world.

"The smoking symbolised this mastery over the physical aspects of her existence, a real playing with life and death." (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1988. p. 166).

Air and fire being two elements of the natural world, their significance is imbued in the act of smoking. Air passes through the mouth, into the throat, into the lungs. It is the same air that makes our voice, our crying, our singing. It passes through, circulates and it is expelled back into the open.

In relation to the social.

Cigarette smoking has a subtle universal flavour. Smoking is a language with no geographical boundaries. It is often the act that seals an understanding beyond language, an encounter with foreign realities that can be shared even when they cannot be explained with words. Smokers relate to each other through the synchronicity of their movements. They share the experience as a common way of being in the world and being in contrast with the world.

The anti-smoking campaigners unite in the fight to ban smoking; for many this battle is what they need in order to understand their position in society, to belong to a group where rules and behaviours have clear models. There is a feeling of safety in fighting a war together, especially when it is fought for *someone else's goodness*. It then becomes a crusade. Sometimes it becomes an addiction. Smokers, on the other side, persist on their choice of behaviour and resist the intrusion. Unimpressed by the seemingly charitable motives, they find solace and strength in the encounter with fellow cigarette lovers. The difference between the two groups being that while the first tries to change the second, the latter resists such intention with the need to protect its individuality and freedom of choice.

At other times, when the cigarette is not lit, the *Smoker by Choice* relates to others in a respectful manner. He is certainly not going to try and convince people that smoking is good, he respects the freedom and right for others not to be contaminated by passive smoke and for children to be protected from the harmful habit. Aware of the dangers of smoking, the *Smoker by Choice* can judge when it is appropriate to light up or otherwise. He/she respects others in a way which is more sensitive to personal freedom, than that showed by the antismoking campaigners.

In relation to the psychological.

Notwithstanding the social task smoking may fulfil, at other times the *Smoker by Choice* may prefer to consume the smoking ritual in solitude. Diving inside one's own personal and psychological dimension, smoking becomes a sign of not having given in to the expectations of society and having retained a personal hold on one's right to choose. The cigarette then acts as the symbol of one's control over one's own world, of making room for expression of one's taste and inclination, one's will to find space and time for oneself.

Playing with fire may also indicate that fire is missing in one's life. While smoking may be a symbolic way to reintroduce the fire of passion in one's existence, the repetition of the act, whereby every puff is the same as the one before and the one after and every cigarette is exactly the same as any other, may imply that repetition is exactly what may need to be challenged. Seeking to put fire back into one's life could well mean that eventually, if successful, the smoker may decide that the ritual is no longer needed, when the symbols have been transformed into reality. Smoking is then given up in a natural and spontaneous way.

Passion, energy and enthusiasm are the elements of that fire, the essentials that one may be looking for when descending inside one's own existence. Although fire needs to be cared for and rekindled every now and then, it is possible that it may go out, or even never been lit, but it is the awareness of this that brings the first sparkle of change.

In relation to the spiritual.

In pre-Colombian times tobacco was considered a god. Native Indian tribes shared the calumet in the encounter with the spirit of their ancestors. The moment of taking a cigarette is a special one. It is a time of heightened experience. It can be a moment of transcendence, of oneness with the universe at large, or a moment of attunement with something that exists beyond the realm of natural experience.

The ritual of fire, smoke, ash; the connection between breath, lungs, mouth is, for some, a personal form of meditation or prayer. The roundness of the cigarette, the softness of the smoke, can be compared to a mandala. Sharing the smoke implies belonging to the same tribe, sharing a vision of existence that allows escaping from time, calling up the past and evoking the future.

Although nowadays the ritual is consumed in a shortened, hurried way, when smokers share the experience, they also share the collective outlook of a universal cycle that imitates the past and evokes it in the present.

Conclusion.

There was a time, when chaos entered my life. I experienced deep anxiety, fear, loss of meaning and the sadness of failure. I looked for help from people. From books. From some kind of outer belief. Nothing worked. I retreated into myself and in the loneliness of many dark nights I took up smoking. The sparkle of the match. The slow burning of the cigarette. The fire being inhaled as if it were a purifying magic potion; the same being exhaled from inside me, taking with it anything that I did not want in there. The ritual afforded me many special moments, when, as if deep in meditation, I could review my existence, I could embrace my pain and find faith in my destiny. I could then accept, with the rhythmic flow of the smoke going in and out of my lungs, the motion of life's cycles. Then, once the cigarette was extinguished I could linger a little longer and embrace my own life coming to an end, at some point, and the presence of death became a reality I could play with, and build upon.

High up during my travels in the Himalayas I reached through people's souls, when I sat watching heavily loaded caravans of Yaks slowly passing by and shared a cigarette with a local farmer. Language could not ease the encounter, but the offering of a cigarette and the sharing of a ritual, put me in touch with the other in a different way, led me inside the other's dimension.

At other times, in a hot southern Indian forest I sat under a huge Banyan tree and smoked with locals. It was not so much the spoken words that connected us, but again, the shared experience. We talked about life and death. In the wake of the Tsunami destruction we shared fear and astonishment. We re-valued the meaning of life and we connected as we sat together, our smoke intertwined, just like our existence.

Smoking is neither good nor bad. The duality lies in the fact that it is either. If smoking is a choice, then the challenge is to find the right balance between its goodness and badness. To achieve the will needed to keep the balance in place, to find the right amount, the right time, the right way. Cigarettes, alcohol, chocolate, sex, food, fizzy drinks, anything that gives pleasure can turn bad if it is overdone. Is it necessary to put a total ban on all those activities? Perhaps one should be educated to find the right balance in their enjoyment.

The choice of smoking should be considered carefully; cigarettes, like vintage port, should be enjoyed in the right place and at the right time. I don't value those cigarettes that are smoked in a hurry, as a mechanical habit. Smoking, together with all other activities that seal life's pleasurable moments, can be savoured and enjoyed with consideration and respect.

*“Life is a cigarette,
Cinder ash and fire,
Some smoke it in a hurry,
Others savour it.”*

(Manuel Machado, “Chants Andalous”)

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