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THE EXISTENTIAL IMAGINATION

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To think in an “existential” mode is to attempt to address the most basic problems of individual human existence, the meaning (if any) of death, the (possible) purposes of life, the nature and responsibilities of the individual self, the possibility of freedom without premature recourse to answers prescribed by religion or tradition. While this “quest for meaning” does sometimes lead seekers back to traditional answers, the process allows for an authentic re-interpretation and appropriation of the perspectives offered by such teachings. The course includes readings from psychological and philosophical writers as well as works of literary imagination. Student research will introduce the works of existential imagination in fields such as art, dance, film, music, and religion.

Texts: (available at Shakespeare and Co., across Broadway from Gallatin)

Gordon Marino, ed., *Basic Writings of Existentialism*

Irvin Yalom, *Love's Executioner*

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

Class process:

This course is centered on careful reading and discussion of texts. Read each assigned text, mark it up, write about it, bring it to class, and be ready to write and talk about it, and to listen to others' perspectives. Since the course is about ultimate matters such as life, death, meaning, alienation, these will surely be the subjects of our conversations. Be prepared to reveal your questions and ideas, and to create a safe space for others to do so as well.

Requirements:

1) *Preparation, attendance and participation.* Allow at least four or five hours for preparation each week. Some of the texts are difficult and may require several readings. Come to class on time, with your books, ready to write, talk and listen. *Say something in every class session.* I will call on you if it will help you to speak.

2) *Writing assignments, quizzes, postings to internet forum.* Writing will be assigned frequently throughout the semester, some in-class and some outside, some graded, some not. You need to fulfill all writing assignments on time for them to count toward your grade. Frequent quizzes can be expected.

3) *Research panel and paper.* You will do independent research and write a 5-8 page paper on existential aspects of a field of the arts or religion. You will present your work on a panel with several other students (5 to 10 minutes per person). The paper is due on the day of your panel's presentation.

4) *Final project and presentation.* At the end of the semester you will create a final project, a product of your own existential imagination. This may be a "book of existence," a play, a story, a dance, a work of art or music, a web page ... please discuss your ideas with me. Whatever you do should draw on your skills and background, and needs to be presented to the class.

Policies:

Incompletes are given only for medical and other valid emergencies. Please talk with me about any problems you may be encountering.

Papers and other work are *due at class time* and receive credit only if handed in on time. No make-up work.

Academic honesty is extremely important. Your papers should reflect your own thinking, and must be written in your own words. If you refer to or draw on or quote other people's work, you must give full credit, using footnotes or endnotes, and a fully documented bibliography.

Plagiarism, or lack of documentation, whether intentional or not, must be reported to the dean and will result in an F on the paper or for the course.