

Philosophy

Existentialist philosophers remind us that it's sadness, weakness, and misery that make us wholly human.

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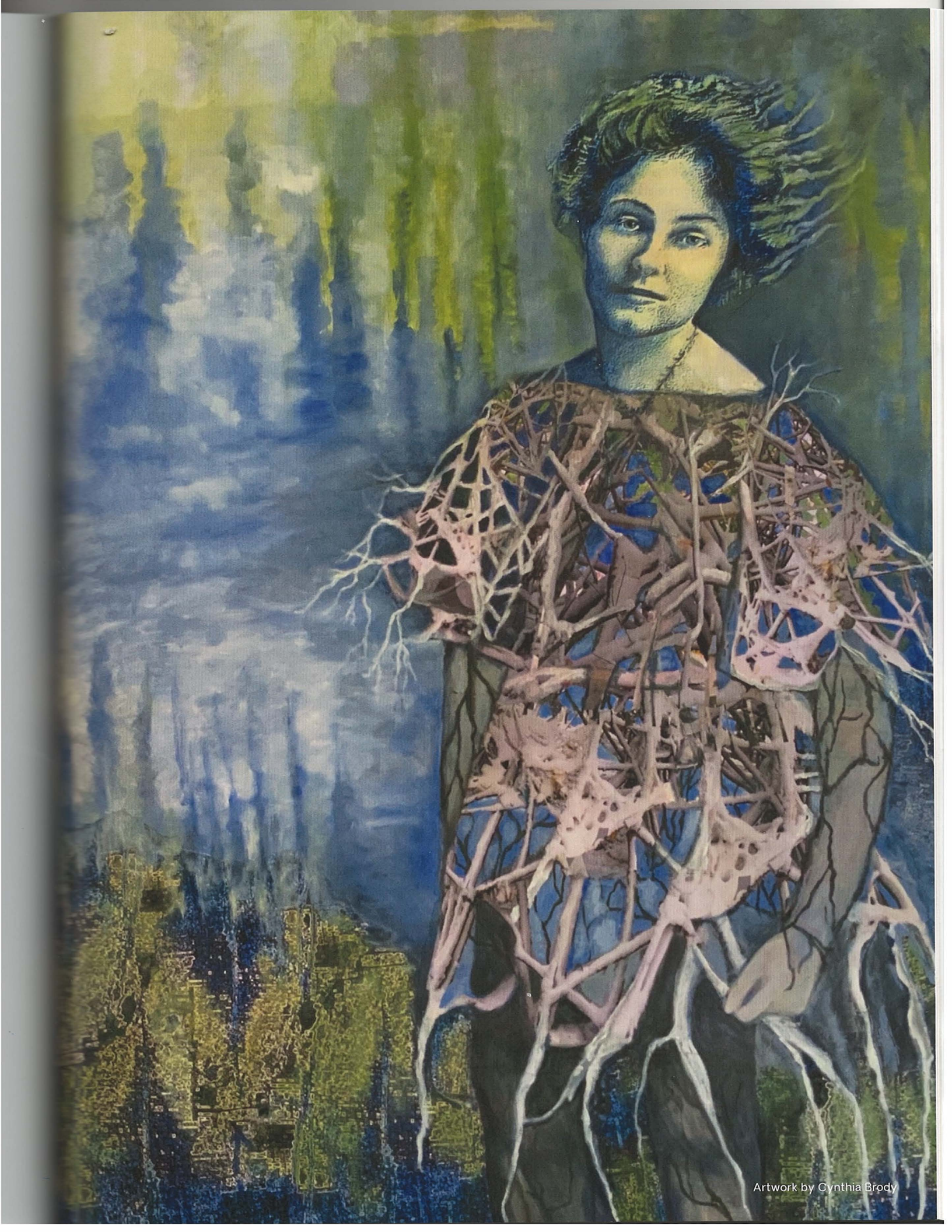
Existentialism is the only type of philosophy that has ever called me to "think higher, feel deeper".



When I was 18 and taking my college first philosophy course, a priest in the confessional cautioned me against reading dangerous books. Even then I doubted the wisdom of warning precocious young women against reading, but I had heard that the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had the power to take away your faith. So, I compromised: I took my philosophy homework to church and read Nietzsche in the safety of God's silent presence. Unlike that priest of little faith, I trusted that God would not be intimidated even by Zarathustra, Nietzsche's mischievous alter ego who walks tightropes for a living. I read, understood, and was amused by Nietzsche. He makes a strong argument against Christianity, and he persuaded me that many or even

most people who act hatefully in the name of religion, and who harbour a desire for others to burn in hell are not fundamentally holy. Nietzsche also challenged me personally: he made me sniff out my acts of fake love and admit when they were prompted by malice, or what he called resentment: hatred of my own weakness. But he didn't sway me. That semester I learned that philosophers aren't bogeymen, and that Nietzsche would not grind down my tiny mustard seed of faith.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was a tougher critic of Christianity than Nietzsche, but he also promoted love. They both railed against Christians who used God to hurt people or whose faith was reducible to a pin or a flag. Nietzsche called himself dynamite;



Artwork by Cynthia Brody

Kierkegaard, a fork. They were both right but only Kierkegaard had this second prong, the one that knew what it felt like to be in the presence of God, as I did in those quiet college days. By the time I graduated I had become a student of Existentialism without becoming an atheist. It's the only type of philosophy that has ever called me to, as Elie Weisel put it, "think higher, feel deeper".

In 1949, the Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran wrote that he'd abandoned philosophy because he could find no human weakness in Immanuel Kant, no "authentic accent of melancholy". Without Existentialists like Cioran, I'd abandon philosophy too.

US President Joe Biden and his wife, Neilia Hunter, chose not to have a fourth child because things were 'too perfect', and soon enough, he lost Neilia Hunter and their baby girl to a car crash. Forty years later, he lost another child to cancer. When I think about that level of suffering, I recall Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who lost his baby and his faith in one turn, Kierkegaard, who inherited depression from his father, and Mexican American philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa, whose father died in a car accident when she was 14. Existentialists excel at letting a person suffer because they've been there; they are awash in the human weakness and authentic melancholy that Cioran couldn't find in Kant.

Time after time I go to the Existentialists for cover from the world of love and light, from the facile optimism that seems to terrorise my fellow US Americans. The Existentialists don't tell me to cheer up and they don't judge me. Sometimes they even tell me things are worse than I'd thought. I appreciate their honesty, especially in a society where happiness gurus are heavily invested in me buying their gratitude journals. And they almost convince me! Just in time I come home to an Existentialist like Arthur Schopenhauer, who tells me that life is suffering punctuated by moments of joy. By not asking me to, the Existentialists make me smile.

Unamuno commands me time and time again to use the sadness I feel as a conduit to reach other sad people. He reminds me that sad people are more capable of recognising the suffering of others than joyful people, who coined the term "Debbie Downer" to describe people like me. Unamuno believed that like calls to like, which gives me great comfort because it combats the 'should' in my head objecting to my pity party. I shouldn't be happier, in fact, because if I were, I would become more calloused against the tender spots in other people. Like my Existentialist predecessors, I am full of human weakness. At the same time, I applaud contemporary thinkers who remind us that it's just the human condition. We are all of us wholly human, only the more so for our weaknesses, tender parts, miseries.



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It's always a shame when I meet someone who thinks that Existentialism boils down to Jean-Paul Sartre, atheism, and radical freedom. Not all the Existentialists were atheists, and I am drawn more to Kierkegaard, Unamuno, and Simone Weil, whose religious dimension (or at least whose recognition of religiosity as a valuable enterprise) adds a layer of depth to their work that I don't find in Sartre. In this category I find Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Erich Fromm. I read William James as an Existentialist whose depression and crises of faith make him a more relatable character than some of his American pragmatist counterparts, who tend to be too optimistic for my disposition. About radical freedom: Sartre coined the phrase "existence precedes essence", which means that we make ourselves who we are. He believed that the reason most people don't become someone is that making decisions

makes us want to throw up. Several corrections have been made to Sartre, for example by Existentialist Franz Fanon, for whom slavery and unfreedom were not abstract concepts or personal choices but historical realities for human beings who shared his skin colour. Fanon checked Sartre's privilege publicly, and Sartre amended his ideas.

Good Existentialism is no 'bootstraps' philosophy, where we are fully responsible for how we turned out. Black, Mexican, and Chicana Existentialist traditions have ensured this, and they are to thank for keeping the Old Guard Existentialists relevant. Anzaldúa, who was highly influenced by Kierkegaard, is constantly reminding me to keep an eye out for how society is shaping, limiting, and disciplining me into a particular worldview, body, and identity. I am, in part, socially constructed, although I can and do struggle against expectations and rules set out for me. As a ninth

and last child I've got a taste for feeling *de trop*, which means I'm also prone to *zozobra*, Mexican Existentialist Emilio Uranga's term for the psychological sense of being naked and shipwrecked with no dinghy in sight. My birth wasn't an accident, per se, but I figure the law of diminishing returns must apply to childrearing, too. Most of the time my feeling like a ninth wheel just makes me quirky, but sometimes it gets bleak. When I get sick, for example, I can't imagine ever feeling better. Why would a child born of habit, who grew up in hand-me-downs and ate what little remained on the bone after the rest of the litter took a turn, heal? And with those parents and most of those siblings still living, I look up to see the sword of Damocles dangling over my head. Life has taught me that my pessimism is warranted, and my favourite philosophical storytellers agree. In their company, my fragility feels perfectly human.

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