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A Slayer's Death Denial: The Struggle for Authenticity in "Graduation Day: Part One and Two"

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[1] Although in the modern world it is considered unusual and unfair when teenagers die violently, it is a common occurrence in the town of Sunnydale (Jarvis, 2009). Despite the mortality statistics, many of the townspeople seem mysteriously oblivious to the threat of vampires and go about their lives as though there were nothing to fear. Ernest Becker (1973) writes about "death denial" and the ways that people deny their eventual mortality in order to function in the world with less fear and anxiety. Certainly *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* illustrates examples of "death denial." Although death, in the form of monsters and vampires, is always lurking, even the main the characters do not seem to be anymore aware of the necessity to embrace and appreciate each individual moment than those who live in a world without vampires. They make jokes and puns as they head out to fight the monsters, as though it were all a game, rather than a crisis of existential proportions. Psychologist Irvin Yalom (1980) writes that overwhelming levels of "death anxiety," which is the fear of death, lead one to deny the existence of death. However, without the capacity to confront and accept one's own eventual death and its significance, we live as if we have all the time in the world and forget the importance of each decision and relationship. The vitality of life is only experienced through the knowledge of death. The third season finale "Graduation Day" episodes illustrate this philosophy. At the beginning, the character of Buffy displays a loss of vitality for life. Through various confrontations with death, she is able to live more authentically, meaning she can engage in more meaningful relationships and make choices that take into account what she really wants from life. An existential interpretation of the "Graduation Day" episodes, using the writings of Rollo May and Irvin Yalom, shows the dangers of "death denial" and points to living more authentically through awareness of the inevitability of death.

[2] There is already a body of literature that presents existential interpretations of *BtVS*. Much of this literature also addresses the way the series demonstrates the importance of living "authentically," i.e. how Buffy learns to see the importance of defining "value and meaning for herself rather than accepting social conventions" (Foy & Kowalski, 2011, p.230). For example, Fritz and Sulzenbacher (2010) discuss how Buffy is an existential character because she must repeatedly choose to be the chosen one, making her identity active instead of passive and, therefore, more authentic. McDonald (2001, August) also discusses the value placed on choice in *BtVS*. He notes that with choice and responsibility comes immense anxiety, so much so that people long to have decisions made for them. He discusses the way the characters struggle against the desire to have their roles "determined for them," such as the fact that Buffy often accepts the prophecies but at other times fights back against them (p.2). Similarly, others have presented Buffy as a character who chooses individualism over conformity (Foy & Kowalski, 2011) and contrasted her with Kendra and Faith, who make inauthentic decisions based on the expectations of others (Richardson & Rabb, 2007) rather than on their own wants and desires.

[3] These interpretations leave out the impact of the awareness of death on authentic choice. In order to make authentic choices, we must recognize the value of our own life and the life of others. When we lose sight of the value of our own life, it is easy to go along with the expectations of others. When we deny that we will die, we can put off more authentic decision-making. The literature, by not addressing the way Buffy develops her capacity for authenticity, seems to present Buffy as possessing an inherent ability for this type of authentic decision-making. Richardson and Rabb (2007) go so far as to say that Buffy is from the beginning "more autonomous" and therefore of "better moral character" than Faith. In this

essay it will be argued that it is through repeated confrontations with her own death and the death of loved ones that Buffy comes to make more authentic decisions and that this change in her character develops particularly during the "Graduation Day" episodes.

[4] The "Graduation Day" episodes begin with a character, Buffy, who is currently experiencing an inability to simultaneously live her life as a normal high school girl and perform her function as a vampire slayer. McDonald (2002, March) notes that these two identities are in conflict with one another and that the character finds them difficult, if not impossible, to balance. Buffy tells Willow that she can't do both graduation and the fight with the mayor at the same time. In almost all instances the incompatibility of these two identities leads her to eschew her own life in favor of her professional life. She originally plans to miss graduation, minimizing the impact of this decision by saying, "You get a piece of paper and nothing changes" (Whedon, 1999).

[5] The conflict between assuming her role as a slayer and fulfilling her personal desires is inextricably linked with a second existential conflict, which is whether she has control over her own life, or whether her decisions are governed by the Council and by her moral responsibility to protect others. As McDonald (2001, August, p. 1) writes, "Buffy slays, Therefore she Is." Slaying is the purpose for her existence. Her own wants and desires are irrelevant. In Season 1, she must approach what has been foretold to be her own death for the good of humanity. At the close of Season 2, she is forced to send her own lover to hell. Buffy's decisions have previously been made for the good of humanity, regardless of her own desires. The "Graduation Day" episodes begin with a character whose life is lived for the purpose of others and who is therefore conflicted about the value of her own existence. Buffy repeatedly throws herself into harm's way without much concern for her safety, taking chances with her own life as though it were only there to be sacrificed. At the beginning of "Graduation Day" she says to Angel, "I just wish this were over, done" (Whedon, 1999). In one sense she means their back-and-forth romance, but on another level she means everything entirely. The character is shown as living an inauthentic existence and displaying the resulting loss of vitality for life.

[6] *BtVS* shows a character who has the power and strength to defeat any multitude of vampires, but lacks any power or agency in her own life. As May (1969) writes, this loss of agency results in depression and a withdrawal from others. Buffy indeed isolates herself from others during the beginning of these episodes. Although it has been established that she loves Angel, she tells him, "I don't need an escort...I don't need you crowding me" (Whedon, 1999). As existential psychology suggests, Buffy's notable emotional disengagement may be the result of the repression of her own wants and desires. May (1969) notes that "Inner vacuousness is the long-term, accumulated result of a person's particular conviction about himself...that he cannot act as an entity in directing his own life" (p. 28). Emotion is a by-product of giving oneself authentically to a situation. Departure from authentic participation results in numbing and a giving up of wanting and feeling in order to limit the anxiety involved in not being able to attain those wants and desires. As Willow talks about her nostalgia for high school, she asks Buffy, bewildered, "Don't you feel it?" Buffy responds flatly, "No. I don't." She doesn't even feel that she will miss things about the high school, because she hasn't exactly been a part of it. Buffy's ability for emotional engagement is limited throughout the beginning of these episodes. She refers to her romance with Angel originally as a "work romance." She has largely taken Wesley's advice not to "let her feelings...interfere with work" (Whedon, 1999).

[7] May (1977) believed that neurotic anxiety stems from a repression of the awareness that one has the possibility to address limitations that are self-imposed. One has forgotten that the limitations are self-imposed and feels powerless to change one's circumstance (May, 1983). This is how "Graduation Day" begins. Buffy's character has largely given up on her own power to choose her life path. She has accepted that her job of "killing professionally" must come before her own desire to have friends, finish high school, and engage in a meaningful romantic relationship (Whedon, 1999). *BtVS* portrays what existential psychology refers to as a lack of awareness of one's responsibility to oneself and the resulting loss of agency (May, 1983). She follows the orders of the Council, at her own peril. She spends nights on patrol for vampires and days exhausted in school, barely paying attention to the world around her. Buffy believes this is her destiny and that she is the "chosen one," but is unable to see that she is the one who has given herself this responsibility to protect others and although she has

superhuman strength, it is ultimately her decision whether to fulfill the role of slayer. As McDonald (2001, August) writes, the series never displays the characters as "simply puppets with the metaphysical powers pulling their strings, with no choice and no responsibility" (p.2). The characters are always displayed as having choices. It is Buffy's choice to have forfeited her existence in the name of responsibility.

[8] Certainly we can commend Buffy for the humanity in her awareness of her moral responsibility toward others (Stroud, 2003). However, she has struck no balance (May, 1983). The fact that Buffy cannot even really attend graduation evidences that indeed no balance is present for this character. Rather than manage the continuous anxiety-inducing decision-making process of choosing between herself and her responsibility toward others, she has already decided against herself. She, however, has the freedom to act in many other ways. May (1983) referred to freedom as "an agonizing burden" (p. 34). The burden is agonizing because we must accept some guilt with every decision we make, whether that guilt be related to letting down ourselves or others. Foy and Kowalski (2011) make the comment that *BtVS* argues for increased individuality as the successful existential outcome. However, the series shows that it is not quite so simple. When Buffy is selfless, she does harm to herself and loses the experiences of romantic relationships and academic learning that she owes to herself as a teenage girl. When Buffy is selfish, she puts her family, friends and all of humanity in danger. As the series shows, there can be no truly successful outcome or right decision, but perhaps there can be more balance between what we want and what others need from us.

[9] The events of "Graduation Day" lead Buffy's character to come face to face with death, and through this confrontation she leaves more room for her own wants and desires. Although the characters have previously confronted human-demon hybrids, in these episodes they will confront an actual demon. It is a terror-inducing crisis of life and death, amidst what has become a monotonous and "professional" day-to-day of vampire slaying. When Xander says, "I woke up today with this feeling. I just know there is no way I'm getting out of this school alive," he does not mean metaphorically, but literally, as well (Whedon, 1999). Despite the fact that Xander has fought many monsters and vampires before, through this comment we get the sense that, for once, he is genuinely concerned for his life.

[10] *BtVS* indicates that through awareness of the reality of death, we live more authentically. Realizing that they could be dead in several days, Willow and Oz are able to more closely bond. Detachment, Buffy's method of management of fear, is expressly disparaged in this scene. Willow notes, "We could be dead in two days and you're being ironic detachment guy...Panic is a thing people can share in times of crisis" (Whedon, 1999). Ultimately, Oz agrees and the episode displays how two people's acceptance of death leads them to more fully live and appreciate their last days. Even Xander is able to reassess his priorities and skip class with Cordelia. Although the two have been at odds, this no longer seems relevant with death looming.

[11] For Buffy, the ability to see the possibility of death and therefore act more authentically does not come quite as easily. It is perhaps the possibility of Angel's death that allows for the beginning of her transformation. The knowledge that immortal Angel can and will die helps to differentiate the trivial from the significant for Buffy. As the two argue on the street, their conversation about dating is brought to a sudden stop by a poison arrow. Suddenly their dramatic argument is reduced to an insignificant conversation, not to be addressed again. Fearing Angel's death, Buffy is finally able to accept the guilt that comes with putting one's own desires above responsibility. Buffy begins to access her ability for personal choice when she tells the Council that she will find a way to save the dying Angel above her responsibility to figure out how to stop the mayor and that she won't be taking anymore "orders." The Council member she reports to remarks, "This is mutiny" but she responds, "I see it more as graduation." Evidencing that this action can be viewed as a pivotal moment of personal growth rather than a decision independent of enduring meaning, the mayor tells us later in this episode, "Graduation doesn't just mean your circumstances change. It means you do" (Whedon, 1999).

[12] Yalom (1980) writes that it is overwhelming death anxiety that leads us to deny death. The first step to acknowledging the reality of death requires also admitting to ourselves our own death fears. "Graduation Day" also displays how accepting the reality of death

involves coming to terms with our own fears. At the beginning of these episodes, it is evident that Buffy is not aware of her own fears of death. Buffy says that she wants her mother to leave town because she would worry about her, curiously leaving out any concern for herself. She says to Faith, "All that killing and you're afraid to die?" This question may be intended as a projection of Buffy's own fears, since Faith gives no indication that this is what she is thinking. In fact, Buffy does not once mention her own fear during the "Graduation Day" episodes. The mayor feels he can smell it on her, but she gives no indication that she concedes this point to him. At the beginning of the episode she suggests going after the mayor by saying, "Mayor's trying to hide, I say we go seek" as though it were simply a game rather than a life and death situation (Whedon, 1999). Kromer (2006) writes that Buffy chooses an immortal vampire as a love object because she secretly wishes to die. It could also be said that choosing an immortal love object, someone who can never be completely gone, evidences that Buffy has a deep-seated fear of death.

[13] Although other literature also discusses the way *BtVS* points to the importance of acknowledging death in order to experience the vitality of life (McDonald, 2002, June; Stevenson, 2003), literature on how the series addresses the concept of death denial is lacking. *BtVS* displays how denying fears of death can become pathological and limit the ability to appreciate existence (Yalom, 1980). In some literature on *BtVS*, the main characters are presented as proficient in their ability to confront the reality of death, rather than struggling against the denial of death. Jarvis (2009) for example writes that a "constant engagement with death" leads to a "passion for living so often demonstrated by the central characters" (p.2). Stevenson (2003) writes, "Despite facing death on an almost daily basis...the kids maintain an active social life. Neither death...nor apocalypse...keeps them from celebrating...If anything, they make the celebration of life more necessary" (Paragraph 9). It is argued here that the characters display evidence of death denial and that this death denial is shown to inhibit their ability to make authentic decisions and engage in meaningful relationships. Without an acknowledgment that she can be killed, Buffy does not need to reassess her decisions to put off her own life for vampire slaying. Additionally, her fear of the death of others causes her to isolate herself. Rather than seeking comfort and support from her mother during the events of "Graduation Day," she sends her away. "I'm going to fight this thing but I can't do it and worry about you," says Buffy (Whedon, 1999).

[14] Yalom (1980) presents several methods for denying death to oneself that are displayed by Buffy during "Graduation Day." Although her methods for denying death are exaggerated by her superhuman strength, they are not unfamiliar to viewers. She believes herself to be strong and that she can protect others. People who are strong are less vulnerable and their loved ones are less vulnerable as well. Denying her fear of death, Buffy charges into dangerous situations to prove time and time again that there is nothing to fear, ultimately denying the fear of death or 'nothing' (Yalom, 1980). Vampires, whether real or imagined, are something onto which she can transfer a fear of death. They can be fought. She can seek allies against them. She can develop magical rituals to destroy them. It is because she has compartmentalized death as resulting from/happening to vampires that it is so hard for Buffy to accept her own mother's death later in "The Body" (Whedon, 2001a) or to accept that she has perhaps harmed a non-vampire in "Ted" (Greenwalt & Whedon, 1997). Additionally, Yalom (1980) describes and *BtVS* evidences how a belief in personal specialness serves to deny death. A belief that we are special allows us to imagine that even when dead we will be remembered for our uniqueness, and therefore never completely gone. Through her talents she can achieve "symbolic immortality" (Becker, 1973). Buffy clings to this belief. She says to her mother, "There is something I can do that I can do better than anyone else in the world. I'm going to fight this thing" (Whedon, 1999). When she is gone, she will be read about by slayers and watchers until the end of time. Ultimately a belief in her own specialness is shown to allow her to feel something more than mortal (Yalom, 1980).

[15] During "Graduation Day" this very identity as invulnerable protector is threatened through confrontation with death. First, when Angel is shot with a poison dart, she is forced to see her own weakness to protect others. Next, when she stabs Faith, she is forced to see that even a slayer can be killed. It is evident that Buffy sees Faith as similar to herself, perhaps even, in some senses, the same person. During her "Graduation Day" dream, she asks Faith if they are in her mind or Faith's. Buffy and Faith at various points agree that they are just like

one another. They are both slayers. They are both young teenage girls. After stabbing Faith, Buffy stares in shock at the blood. From Buffy's recognition that the two are alike, the viewer can make the leap that after stabbing Faith and realizing Faith could bleed and die, Buffy would be forced to confront the possibility of her own death, as well.

[16] A threat to an individual's identity can be so powerful that the only way to cope is to kill oneself (Yalom, 1980). For Buffy, the realization that slayers (therefore herself) may not be invulnerable is too much to bear. She decides to give up and sacrifice her own life for Angel's. As he drinks her blood and she kicks a table rather than him, we are seeing her battle the urge to fight him off. It seems paradoxical to imagine giving up one's own life based on a fear of death. Yalom (1980) presents this choice as a measure of control over the uncontrollable. Although the viewer could instead choose to see Buffy's act as altruistic, it is difficult to do so because her death would ultimately result in the destruction of the rest of the world and therefore Angel, when she is not around to stop the mayor or the list of other villains that are certain to emerge. The theme of finding difficulty deciding to live given the reality of death is echoed again in Season 6 (McDonald, 2001, November). At the end of season five, before completing the sacrificial death that she merely offers in "Graduation Day," Buffy says, "I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices, if everything gets stripped away. I don't see the point" (Whedon, 2001b). Season 6 also addresses learning to live in and appreciate a world despite the fact that "Nature demands killing and death all the time" (McDonald, 2001, November, p. 1).

[17] "Graduation Day" shows how the 'self' is more than just a sum of one's roles. Buffy is more than just a professional vampire slayer. May (1983) describes the moment at which one realizes that she or he is a person who exists and who is responsible for that existence and identity as an "I am" experience (p. 99). Buffy experiences herself as "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Her profession is her identity and her purpose for being on Earth. When she stabs Faith, she realizes she can kill people as well as vampires and her identity becomes "Buffy the Slayer." When she gives her blood to Angel she realizes she has the ability to choose to save life as well as take it. It makes her no longer just a slayer, but "Buffy." May considered the "I am" experience a precondition for change. One must realize he or she has the ability to choose an identity before beginning to address one's potential, and the acceptance of death is a central part of this realization.

[18] It is during Buffy's dream about Faith that she recaptures the desire for being alive. The dream evidences the importance of being in touch with authentic emotions, even anger and fear. In *BtVS*, Buffy and Faith are presented as opposites. One dresses in light colors, the other in dark. Buffy fulfills her responsibility as a vampire slayer. Faith eschews this responsibility and gives in impulsively to hedonistic desires including aggression (Richardson & Rabb, 2007). However, in this dream, when Buffy confronts Faith, she admits she's been "holding in" these impulses (Whedon, 1999). May (1983) might say that Buffy's character has the "potential" for authentic expression of emotion, but holds it back for fear that aggression may drive others away in the way that Faith's behavior has isolated her from friends and family. Xander echoes this fear when he notes that if Buffy kills Faith, Buffy will be like Faith and therefore he will lose her. May (1983) believed it is a fear of our own power that prevents us from engaging in the world. Buffy is a character that fears her own powers. She takes no responsibility for her aggressive actions, assigning them to her fated profession (Jarvis, 2009). She holds in her rage against Faith and her anger with Angel for choosing to give up on their relationship. May (1969) believed that it was a necessity to accept the demonic in ourselves. "Happiness is to live in harmony with one's demon," he writes (p. 125). In her dream, Buffy feels she is not imagining Faith but they are actually taking part in the same consciousness. They are finally one. Directly before their fight scene, Faith asks Buffy to prove she is ready to stop holding her aggression and other emotions back with the phrase "Give us a kiss" (Whedon, 1999). When the dream is complete. Buffy is able to wake up and kiss the comatose Faith on the forehead, an expression of love for the angrier and more hedonistic parts of herself.

[19] Jana Riess (2004) also talks about the way the series portrays aggression, hostility and darkness. She writes that when you stand next to a vampire in a mirror you see only yourself and that the vampires in the series represent projections of our own dark impulses. She discusses the way the series shows that there are dark impulses in all of us. In Season 4,

Riley has a particularly difficult time learning the lesson that good and evil are not so easily teased apart. It is argued here that Buffy learns this lesson first in Season 3, during her confrontation with death and her resulting acceptance of her authentic self, who is not so different from Faith.

[20] The psychologist Winnicott (1971) talks about "transitional spaces" as spaces that are safe for change because they are only partly reality. They are also fantasy. The spaces he is talking about are intended metaphysically. For example, children learn to be adults through playing at being adults, and this play is a transitional space. Although they may be performing the behaviors of caring for others through games with dolls, it is safe because it is partly fantasy. The child is able to utilize these safe transitional spaces in order to transition into adult-like actions of caretaking and even considering the needs and wants of others. This dream for Buffy can be considered a transitional space where she is able to admit the ways in which she is like Faith, because a dream is partly only fantasy.

[21] The dream also signifies Buffy's acceptance of the reality of eventual death. Yalom (2008) also believed that dreams about death help us to acknowledge the reality of death outside of dreams. In that sense, death dreams are a transitional space for death acceptance. "Graduation Day" evidences this sort of transition within the dream space. Buffy is able to consider death during this dream. Faith says to Buffy, "You want to know the deal? Human weakness – it never goes away" (Whedon, 1999). Human weakness may refer to giving into emotions like aggression but certainly also refers to physical death, the last true moment of weakness. Faith presents this point, but it is Buffy's mind that is having the dream and therefore Buffy who is having this realization about life and death. This dream also contains the phrase "miles to go," which is a reference to Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem about eventual death.

[22] Yalom (1980) refers to moments when we are forced to acknowledge the reality of death as "border moments" and notes that they can precipitate changes in the way we confront death as well as our own lives. Buffy experiences a series of these border moments in the "Graduation Day" episodes, culminating in this dream where she and Faith discuss the eventuality of death. Following this dream, Buffy is more ready to take risks, access her authentic emotions, and be less isolated from others. (Editor's note: Cf. Keller on this dream as "*prefigur[ing]* the path" Buffy takes, p. 166.) By acknowledging her fear of death and "human weakness," she is paradoxically less afraid for herself and others.

[23] May (1969) believed that "Love is a reminder of mortality" (p. 102) and *BtVS* echoes this message. Anya says to Xander, "What I think something could happen to you, I feel bad inside." And Xander returns, noting that this is the basis of love, "Welcome to the world of romance." Anya highlights that these feelings are "horrible" (Whedon, 1999). With belongingness and emotional investment comes fear of death. Buffy's character avoids getting close to others for fear she cannot protect them. This avoidance prevents her from interacting authentically with others. She sends her mother away for fear her mother might get hurt. She tells her friends to stay put while going to fight Faith for fear they might get hurt. She forces herself to shoulder the burden of protecting the town alone. She has the choice to include others in her world and to accept the possibility of their death and with that would come the potential for increased relatedness with others, but she is too afraid. *After* her dream, she wakes up and remarks, "Get everyone, I'm ready" (Whedon, 1999). Her plan involves the students of Sunnydale High confronting the mayor together.

[24] As Brannon notes (2007), Buffy is a more powerful slayer than those that came before her because she has friends and is often able to ask for their help saving the world. She does not fight alone. It is during Season 3 that she is able to finally allow others to risk their lives alongside her, and it is this decision that makes her powerful. In turn, her power protects those that she loves. When Spike details how he has been able to kill slayers before, he explains that all slayers have a death wish and it is this wish that allows him to kill them (Petrie, 2000). However, as Yalom (1980) writes, it is actually a fear of our own death that leads to this death wish. By wishing for death, we deny the fear of death to ourselves. When we admit our fear, we can appreciate our own life and the life of others more intensely. It is then that life is worth living and we have the resolve to fight.

[25] Through Buffy's transformation to a more emotionally and interpersonally engaged

character, the "Graduation Day" episodes show that accepting the possibility of death leads to living a more authentic life. However, these issues are not completely resolved in this season and it is not the last time this theme is addressed. As McDonald (2001, November) describes, Season 6 again deals with finding the capacity for emotional engagement through confrontation with death. Buffy, magically brought back from death, no longer finds joy in life. She cannot die and therefore cannot live. When Willow is about to destroy the world, Buffy is able to realize again that she is glad to be alive. She is consequently more able to open up to her sister (McDonald, 2002, June). Perhaps this theme must reemerge because death becomes impossible for Buffy when she is brought back to life at the beginning of Season 6. She must confront an actual death again in order to re-appreciate life. McDonald (2001, August) writes about how Season 6's "Older and Far Away," addresses what life would be like without death (Greenberg, 2002). Dawn thinks she wants a world where no one ever leaves, which wish leads to the characters being miserably stuck inside a house together. McDonald (2002, June) writes that a world without death would be a world of permanence that is like "being magically trapped in a house and forever unable to leave." Impermanence helps us greater appreciate life.

[26] Buffy's realization (again) in Season 6 that death is actually possible leads once again to an ability to include others in the danger. It is no coincidence that Season 7 requires the full cast and even other potential slayers to defeat the Big Bad. During this season, Buffy is criticized for including the potential slayers in the fight, but at this point she has finally learned that protecting others from death is a form of death denial and leads her to dangerous levels of emotional isolation. The entire series points to the importance to letting go of some of our anxieties around death, accepting impermanence and living as fully and authentically as possible. As evidence that this theme is a particularly significant aspect of "Graduation Day: Part One and Two," these episodes are the point when the entire student body must cease to deny the existence of vampires in order to live. They must stop ignoring the mysterious violence and realize that they are indeed in danger. They must defend themselves, rather than live as though death were not coming. To some extent, Sunnydale's death denial finally comes to an end.

[27] However, sitting with her friends at the conclusion of these episodes, Buffy appears detached and remarks that she'd like to be woken "when it's time to go to college" (Whedon, 1999). In these last moments, she seems to prefer to dissociate rather than marvel at her continued existence. When her friend asks that they all take a moment to appreciate that they have survived high school, she is the first to get up and walks away. In this sense, *BtVS* realistically displays that the choice to live authentically and to eschew wasteful living is not a one-time decision but made in each and every moment (May, 1983).

[28] *BtVS* shows that there will always be ways in which we minimize the impact of death to ourselves. Season 5's, "The Body" shows the viewer to what extent death has been minimized in all other episodes, including but not limited to the "Graduation Day" episodes. "The Body" is arguably the most realistic depiction of death in the series. It juxtaposes the typical disengaged and sarcastic reactions of the characters to death with the "emotional realism" of the confrontation with death depicted in that particular episode (Wilcox, 2005). For viewers, this episode is particularly difficult to watch as it is more physical and less fantasy-based than other death scenes. There is much controversy about the moment at the end when a vampire emerges to be slain. Many fans and critics argue that "this moment interrupts the narrative" of the dramatic confrontation with death and brings in the typical fantasy that does not realistically display death (Stommel, 2010, p 5; contrast Wilcox, 2005, pp. 186-190). However, it is just this sort of combination between fantasy and reality that makes *BtVS* an existential journey for the viewer. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a transitional space where the viewers can come to terms with their own fear of death. It is safe because it is partly fantasy.

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