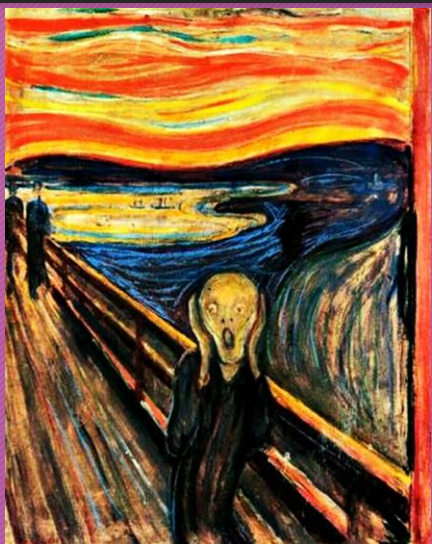# The Role of Death Anxiety on Attitudes and Behavior Aroused by the Pandemic

Sheldon Solomon

Skidmore College

# What is Soul?

- Psychology = psyche + ology
- Psyche = soul in original Greek
- Aristotle: the soul is the "essence of a natural body imbued with life"

- AXE = CHOPPING
- EYEBALL = SEEING
- WOODPECKER = PECKING
- GRASSHOPPER = HOPPING
- HUMAN = ?

# What is the 'soul' (i.e. essence) of humanity?

- HOMO SAPIENS
- HOMO LUDENS
- HOMO FABER
- HOMO AESTHETICUS
- HOMO NARRANS
- HOMO MORTALIS:

"it is our knowledge that we have to die that makes us human" (Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp, 1863*)

# The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life

*Back of everything is the great specter of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness. . . . We need a life not correlated with death . . . a good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. . . . And so with most of us: . . . a little irritable weakness will bring the worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight into full view, and turn us into melancholy metaphysicians.*

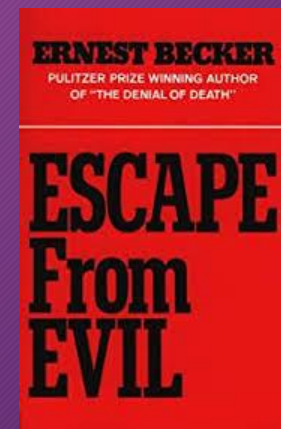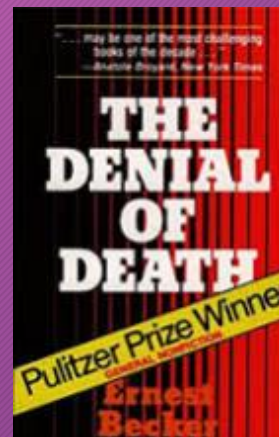William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902
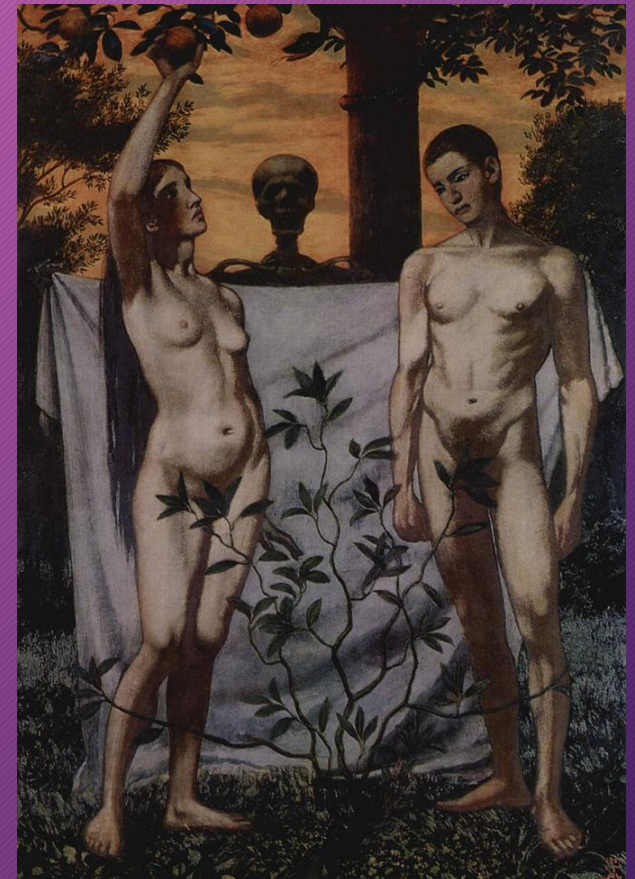
# Ernest Becker
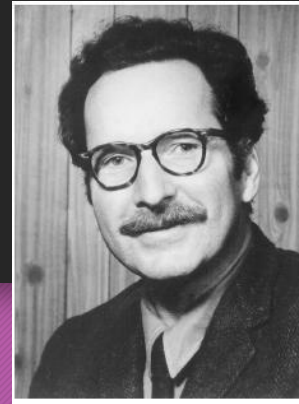
*...the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.*

*The Denial of Death, 1973*

# TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY:

- The awareness of death creates the potential for paralyzing terror. One of the most important functions of *cultural worldviews* is to manage the terror associated with this awareness of death. This is accomplished primarily through the cultural mechanism of *self este*em, which consists of the belief that one is a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe.

- People are thereafter fundamentally motivated to maintain faith in their culturally acquired belief systems, confidence in their self-worth, and close relationships with significant others as a psychological bulwark against existential terror, and will consequently respond defensively when their cherished cultural beliefs, self-esteem, or close relationships are undermined.

# Is it true?
# An Epistemological Interlude

*Science is refusal to believe on the basis of hope.*
C.P. Snow

*The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death does not appear under its own name; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.*

Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 1992

# Self-esteem as Anxiety Buffer Paradigm

- If self-esteem functions to buffer anxiety, then increased self-esteem (or dispositionally high) self-esteem) should reduce anxiety in response to subsequent threats.
  - The effect of raised self-esteem on self-reported anxiety in response to stress.
  - The effect of raised self-esteem on physiological reactions to stressful situations.

# Mortality Salience Paradigm

- If cultural worldviews serve to provide beliefs about the nature of reality that assuage our anxiety associated with the awareness of death, then asking people to ponder their own mortality (**mortality salience**) should increase the need for the protection provided by such beliefs.

- This should result in vigorous agreement with and affection for those who share our beliefs (or are similar to us) and equally vigorous hostility and disdain for those who do not share our beliefs (i.e., are different from us).
  - Judge study
  - Reward for heroic behavior

- Other **mortality salience** manipulations: death anxiety scales, exposure to gory videos, being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, subliminal exposure to the word "dead" or "death"

# After being reminded of their mortality:

- Christians like fellow Christians more and Jewish people less.
- Germans sit closer to fellow Germans and further away from Turkish immigrants.
- People are more eager to shop and buy luxury items.
- People are more charitable, but only towards those in their in-group.
- People are more uncomfortable in nature and more willing to undermine the environment in pursuit of profit.

.

# Death Thought Accessibility (DTA) Paradigm:

If cultural worldviews and self-esteem mitigate existential terror, then threats to cherished cultural beliefs and/or self-esteem should increase the accessibility of implicit death thoughts.

DTA is typically assessed by a word-stem completion task (adapted from a measure developed by Dan Gilbert):

Participants are asked to make words from fragments such as:

- C O F F _ _
- S K _ _ L
- G R _ _ _

- C O F F _ _                             COFFEE VS. COFFIN
- S K _ _ L                                   SKILL VS. SKULL
- G R _ _ _                                   GRILL VS. GRAVE

- Christian fundamentalists who read an essay describing logical inconsistencies in the Bible (or evidence in support of the theory of evolution) had increased DTA.

- Canadians who read an essay belittling Canadian culture had increased DTA.

- Atheists who read an essay suggesting that Jesus may have actually existed had increased DTA.

- Americans asked to reflect on their "undesired self" had increased DTA.

# Proximal and Distal Defenses

Distinct defensive processes are activated by conscious and non-conscious but accessible thoughts of death.

Proximal defenses, which entail suppressing death-related thoughts or pushing the problem of death into the distant future by denying one's vulnerability, are rational, threat-focused, and activated when thoughts of death are in current focal attention.

Distal terror management defenses, which entail maintaining self-esteem and faith in one's cultural worldview, are experiential, are not related to the problem of death in any semantic or logical way, and are activated as the accessibility of death-related thoughts increases, up to the point at which such thoughts enter consciousness and proximal threat-focused defenses are initiated.

# A Time to Tan

► Immediately after an explicit death reminder, residents of South Florida who read about the dangers of too much exposure to the sun reported that they would use a more powerful sun screen and spend less time at the beach (proximal defense).

► However, five minutes after an explicit death reminder (during which participants are distracted) participants who base their self-esteem on their appearance reported that they would use a less powerful sun screen and spend more time at the beach (distal defense).

# So What?

*The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death does not appear under its own name; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.*

Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 1992

# The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness

"When the angel of death sounds his trumpet the pretenses of civilization are blown from men's heads into the mud like hats in a gust of wind."

George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, 1919

- Mere existence of the "other" is psychologically threatening.

- Residual terror…

- Denigration, dehumanization, destruction…
  - The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who threaten or bolster the cultural worldview
  - Evidence that mortality salience motivates aggression against worldview-threatening others
  - Mortality salience, martyrdom, and military might: The great Satan versus the axis of evil

# "I am not an animal!"



Death anxiety fosters alienation from nature and contempt for the environment...

- MS increases disagreement with the claim that humans are animals.
- Comparing humans to animals increases death-thought accessibility.
- Lost in the wilderness
- Of wealth and death
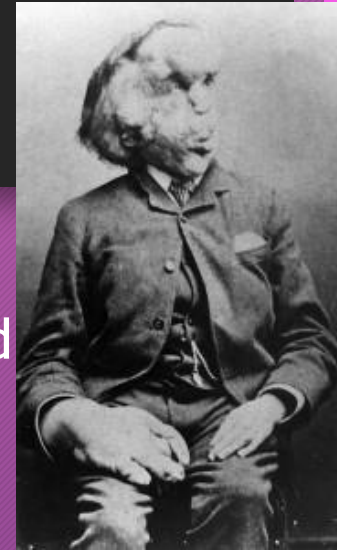
# Lethal consumption



"The human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life ever-lasting."

Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

"modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing" – Ernest Becker

- He who dies with the most toys wins.
- The Fame Game
- Money in My Pocket

# Fatal Attraction





Max Weber: in times of historical upheaval people often embrace leaders with "charisma", "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."



"It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction – what calm, what relief."

Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* 1971

- In spring 2004, John Kerry was more highly regarded than George Bush in an aversive control condition.

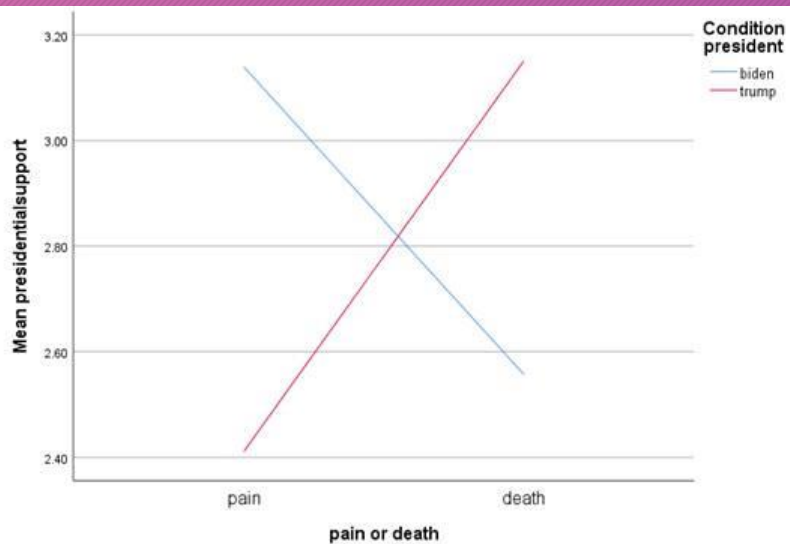- However, after a reminder of death, George Bush was more highly regarded than John Kerry:
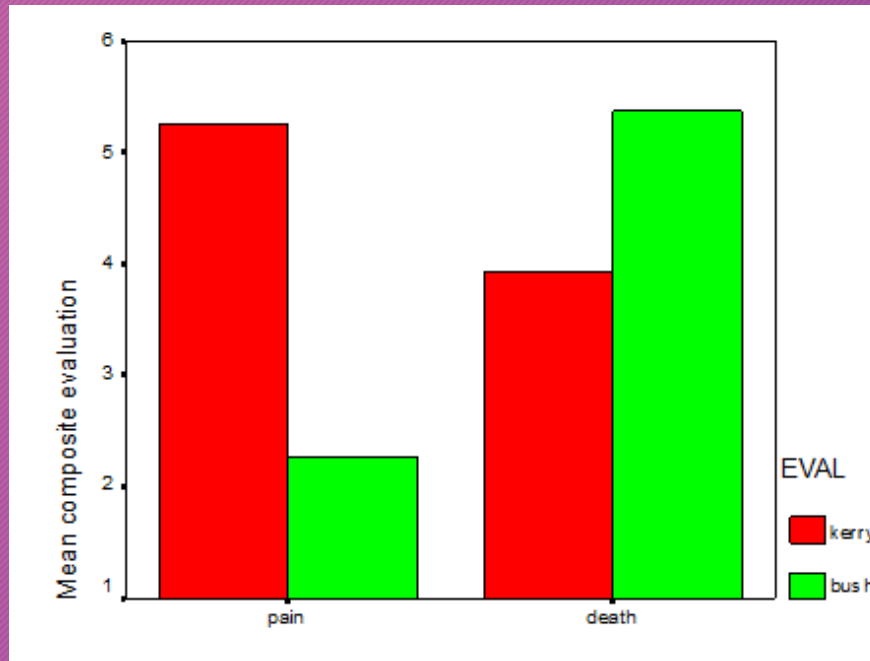
# YOU'RE HIRED! THE EFFECT OF MORTALITY SALIENCE ON SUPPORT FOR DONALD TRUMP

In fall 2015, Americans reminded of their mortality were more supportive of Donald Trump and more willing to vote for him:



Mean support for Donald Trump
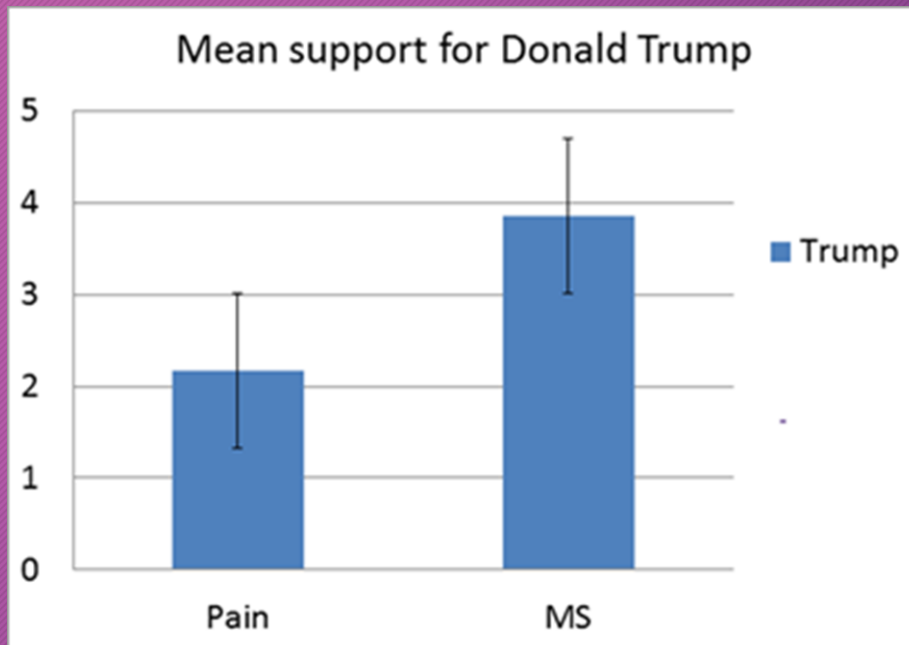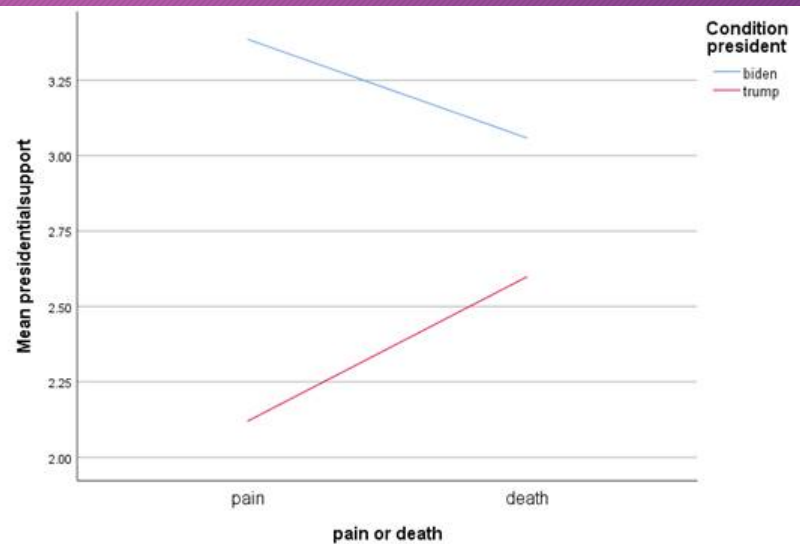
# 2020 Presidential election

White participants                                          Non-white participants

# Psychopathology as terror mismanagement

*All individuals are confronted with death anxiety; most develop adaptive coping modes—modes that consist of denial-based strategies such as suppression, repression, displacement, belief in personal omnipotence, acceptance of socially sanctioned religious beliefs that "detoxify" death, or personal efforts to overcome death through a wide variety of strategies that aim at achieving symbolic immortality. Either because of extraordinary stress or because of an inadequacy of available defensive strategies, the individual who enters the realm called "patienthood" has found insufficient the universal modes of dealing with death fear and has been driven to extreme modes of defense. These defensive maneuvers, often clumsy modes of dealing with terror, constitute the presenting clinical picture.*

Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy, 1980*

- The effects of mortality salience on spider-phobia
- Out damn spot! The effects of mortality salience on obsessive-compulsive behavior
- Hell is other people.  The effects of mortality salience on social anxiety
- Fatal distraction: The effects of mortality salience on psychological dissociation

# Terror Management Theory and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Terror management theory is focused on the role that awareness of death plays in diverse aspects of life. Here, we discuss the theory's implications for understanding the widely varying ways in which people have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that regardless of whether one consciously believes that the virus is a major threat to life or only a minor inconvenience, fear of death plays an important role in driving one's attitudes and behavior related to the virus. We focus on the terror management theory distinction between proximal defenses, which are activated when thoughts of death are in current focal attention and are logically related to the threat at hand, and distal defenses, which are activated when thoughts of death are on the fringes of one's consciousness and entail the pursuit of meaning, personal value, and close relationships. We use this framework to discuss the many ways in which COVID-19 undermines psychological equanimity, the diverse ways people have responded to this threat, and the role of ineffective terror management in psychological distress and disorder that may emerge in response to the virus.

- Pyszczynski, T., Lockett, M., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (2021). Terror management theory and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *61*(2), 173–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820959488

# Partisan differences in physical distancing are linked to health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic

Anton Gollwitzer, Cameron Martel, William J. Brady, Philip Pärnamets, Isaac G. Freedman, Eric D. Knowles, and Jay J. Van Bavel (2020)

- Numerous polls suggest that COVID-19 is a profoundly partisan issue in the United States. Using the geotracking data of 15 million smartphones per day, we found that US counties that voted for Donald Trump (Republican) over Hillary Clinton (Democrat) in the 2016 presidential election exhibited 14% less physical distancing between March and May 2020. Partisanship was more strongly associated with physical distancing than numerous other factors, including counties' COVID-19 cases, population density, median income, and racial and age demographics. Contrary to our predictions, the observed partisan gap strengthened over time and remained when stay-at-home orders were active. Additionally, county-level consumption of conservative media (Fox News) was related to reduced physical distancing. Finally, the observed partisan differences in distancing were associated with subsequently higher COVID-19 infection and fatality growth rates in pro-Trump counties. Taken together, these data suggest that US citizens' responses to COVID-19 are subject to a deep—and consequential—partisan divide.

# Changes in Americans' prejudices during the presidency of Donald Trump

Benjamin C. Ruisch and Melissa J. Ferguson (2021)

- "The presidency of Donald Trump represented a relatively unique event in modern American history, whereby a sitting US president made numerous controversial remarks about minoritized groups yet nonetheless maintained substantial public support. Trump's comments constituted a departure from the egalitarian norms that had long characterized American political discourse. Here, we examine the potential effects of Trump's rhetoric on Americans' attitudes, predicting that these high-profile norm violations may have reshaped the personal prejudices of the American people. In 13 studies including over 10,000 participants, we tested how Americans' prejudice changed following the political ascension of Donald Trump. **We found that explicit racial and religious prejudice significantly increased amongst Trump's supporters, whereas individuals opposed to Trump exhibited decreases in prejudice. Further, changing social norms appear to explain these changes in prejudice. These results suggest that Trump's presidency coincided with a substantial change in the topography of prejudice in the United States.**"

# Virtuous violence from the war room to death row. Paul Slovica, C. K. Mertza , David M. Markowitzc, Andrew Quista, and Daniel Västfjälla (2020)

- **"Two surveys of United States public opinion found that support for killing enemy civilians and combatants disproportionately with nuclear or conventional weapons was deeply divided along partisan political lines. Those approving such excessively lethal attacks tended to be Republican and conservative. They felt socially distant from the enemy, dehumanized them, and believed that the victims were to blame for their fate.** These same individuals also tended to support domestic policies that protect gun owners, restrict abortion, and punish immigrants and criminals (excessively). Understanding the origins and motives underlying the widespread support for such punitive behaviors is essential to mitigating violence that threatens millions of people and our democracy."

- **These findings were more pronounced among respondents who endorsed the statement: "I am one with Donald Trump"**

# Local existential threat, authoritarianism, and support for right-wing populism
### Robert Hinckley (2021)

- Drawing on terror management theory, the present study examines how local existential threat and authoritarian dispositions work together to shape public support for Mr. Trump and elements of more general right-wing populist rhetoric. Based on a national sample from early 2017, the results show that white authoritarians are especially likely to view Mr. Trump as a strong leader, support restrictions on the liberties of cultural minorities and embrace returning 'power to the people.' However, in areas with moderate or high levels of local existential threat – as measured by age-adjusted county mortality rates – non-authoritarians hold the same attitudes as authoritarians. This occurs because threatened non-authoritarians become more like authoritarians in their right-wing populist views. The importance of existential threat is further validated by showing that the attitudes of non-authoritarians in poor health were indistinguishable from authoritarians, even in counties with low mortality rates.

Original Article

# Fostering Existential Maturity to Manage Terror in a Pandemic

Linda Emanuel, MD, PhD,[1] Sheldon Solomon, PhD,[2] George Fitchett, PhD,[3] Harvey Chochinov, MD, PhD,[4,5] George Handzo, MA,[6] Tasha Schoppee, MSN, RN,[7] and Diana Wilkie, PhD, RN, FAAN[7]

## Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment in which existence is more fragile and existential fears or terror rises in people.

**Objective:** Managing existential terror calls for being mature about mortality, something with which palliative care providers are familiar and in need of greater understanding.

**Methods:** Using a case to illustrate, we describe existential terror, terror management, and existential maturity and go on to outline how existential maturity is important for not only the dying and the grieving but for also those facing risk of acquiring COVID-19.

**Results:** Next, we describe how essential components in attaining existential maturity come together. (1) Because people experience absent attachment to important people as very similar to dying, attending to those experiences of relationship is essential. (2) That entails an internal working through of important relationships, knowing their incompleteness, until able to "hold them inside," and invest in these and other connections. (3) And what allows that is making a meaningful connection with someone around the experience of absence or death. (4) We also describe the crucial nature of a holding environment in which all of these can wobble into place.

**Discussion:** Finally, we consider how fostering existential maturity would help populations face up to the diverse challenges that the pandemic brings up for people everywhere.

**Keywords:** attachment; existential maturity; presence; psychic disconnection; terror management; trauma

## Introduction

**D**URING TIMES of population-wide crisis, people take different paths; the crisis can promote descent into divisiveness and destructiveness or it can generate proactive cohesiveness that limits damage and augments learning and psychosocial resilience. We see in these extreme alternatives the playing out of two fundamentally different ways of responding to death. While humans all, by our nature, fear death, one approach is less emotionally equipped than the other is. We refer to the more equipped as existentially mature. For those providing care for the dying, finding ways to foster existential maturity is imperative. This article considers pragmatic and theoretical underpinnings of how people may be able to equip themselves with one of the main ingredients of palliative medicine—coming to terms with death—to help take a proactive, existentially mature approach. We use an anonymized case to illustrate how existential maturity worked for one person in a common situation during the spring of 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

### Case

*Kameron, at 65, was facing the COVID-19 pandemic alone in a small studio apartment in NY. He was in isolation both because he felt terribly ill, although he had been denied a COVID-19 test, and because of the shelter in place guidelines. His partner was stuck out of state since it began and the troubles in their decade-long relationship that had already been evident were leaving him feeling emotionally as well as physically isolated even after his physical symptoms lifted. Working as a musician and in the charity world until his organization "temporarily closed," Kameron had intense relationships in his work and personal life; people described him as*

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[2]Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, USA.
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[4]Department of Psychiatry, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
[5]CancerCare Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.
[6]Health Services Research and Quality at HealthCare Chaplaincy Network, New York, New York, USA.
[7]Center for Palliative Care Research and Education at University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA.

# Toward Existential Maturity

- "Come to terms with death.  Thereafter, anything is possible." Albert Camus
- Assuage existential guilt...
  - **"We are all guilty of crime, the great crime of not living life to the full." Henry Miller**
- Working through interpersonal relationships...
- Affirm a sense of meaning and value...
- Reform/rebuild your character/identity via a leap of faith....
  - in God (for Kierkegaard)...
  - In life (for Heidegger)...
- Result = humility and openness to a multi-dimensional reality...
- Anticipatory resoluteness with solicitous regard for others...
- ...life as an ongoing adventure perfused with unshakeable joy!

# Awe and Humility

"A humble person is first and foremost capable of tolerating an honest look at the self and non-defensively accepting weaknesses alongside strengths. This does not represent a sense of inferiority or self-denigration, but rather lack of self-aggrandizing biases. The propensity for seeing the self in true perspective is typically accompanied by an awareness of the self's smallness in the grand scheme of things. Humble people tend to be more sensitive and feel more connected to forces larger than themselves, be this force God, humanity, nature, or the cosmos. Finally, and relatedly, those who stand in humility exhibit a remarkable lack of self-focus and a talent for self-forgetfulness, for becoming "unselved". They are easily able to take themselves out of the middle of the picture and direct attention toward the greater world beyond. In seeing, honoring, and potentially contributing to something bigger than themselves, they transcend egotistical concerns and the attendant urge for defensive, self-serving maneuvers."

*A Quiet Ego Quiets Death Anxiety: Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer* (Pelin Kesebir, 2014, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(4), 610–23.)

# STORIES

Indeed, the world of the fairy tale has always been created as a counterworld to the reality of the storyteller by the storyteller and listeners. Together, storytellers and listeners have collaborated through intuition as well as conscious conception to form worlds filled with naive morality. Fundamental to the feel of a fairy tale is its moral pulse. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need.

J. Zipes, *The Cultural Evolution of Storytelling and Fairy Tales*, 2012

Fiction: "affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield."

Percy Shelley (in the Preface to the 1st edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*)

# ART MUSIC PLAY DRAMA

"I think we fly to Beauty as an asylum from the terrors of finite nature."
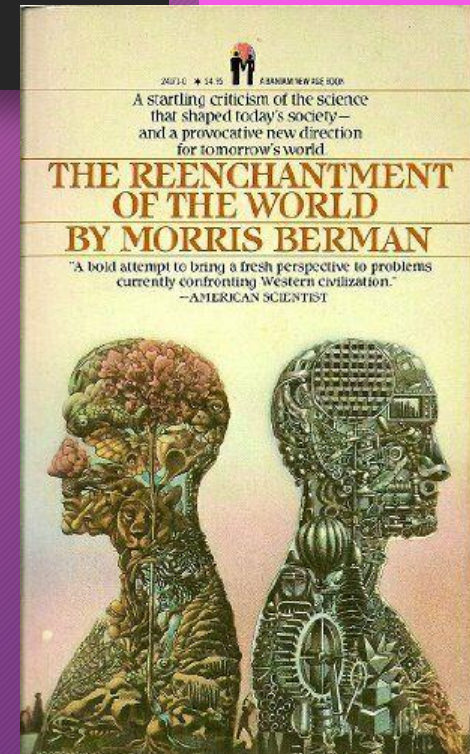
      Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Without music, life would be a mistake."

      Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols

"Septimus: When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be all alone, on an empty shore.
Thomasina: Then we will dance..."

      Tom Stoppard, Arcadia



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—AMERICAN SCIENTIST

# TENDERNESS, FESTIVITY, CELEBRATION, COMMUNITY

- "According to Durkheim, a religion comes into being and is legitimated through moments of what he calls "collective effervescence." Collective effervescence refers to moments in societal life when the group of individuals that makes up a society comes together in order to perform a religious ritual. During these moments, the group comes together and communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals. When individuals come into close contact with one another and when they are assembled in such a fashion, a certain "electricity" is created and released, leading participants to a high degree of collective emotional excitement or delirium. This impersonal, extra-individual force, which is a core element of religion, transports the individuals into a new, ideal realm, lifts them up outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy."

# Thank you!

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