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You can also watch the program described below (and many more than 150 of our previous monthly interview programs and also many special programs at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the TV programs link, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch. Many of our website's TV program listings also include links to documents describing the program in Word and/or .pdf format.

NOVEMBER 2016

“Social and Political Implications of Death Anxiety”

by Glen Anderson, this TV series' producer and host

The Olympia FOR's November 2016 TV program looks at the human condition – and at some of our social and political realities – from an unusual perspective. People's awareness of their eventual deaths – even subconsciously – influence their behavior in surprising ways. Empirical research proves this.

Our guest, Greg Bennick, helps us explore this topic. Greg Bennick has extensive experience as a humanitarian activist, world traveler, public speaker, punk rocker, and biographer. For two decades he has been communicating about social issues, and he has spoken in more than twenty-five countries. He co-produced a feature-length documentary film on the topic of this interview; *Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality*. Now he is writing the official biography of Ernest Becker, the person who really launched the efforts to study this. Greg has spoken about Becker in more nations around the world than anyone else. He serves on the Advisory Board of the Ernest Becker Foundation, www.ernestbecker.org.

Denial of Death – Death Anxiety – Terror Management Theory:

Becker was a cultural anthropologist who pulled together insights from other fields of study. He wrote books relevant to our discussion here:

- *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man*
- *The Denial of Death*
- *Escape from Evil*

Our interview guest, Greg Bennick, discussed these two short quotations from *The Denial of Death*:

1. “All human action is taken to ignore or avoid the anxiety generated by the inevitability of death.”
2. “The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it in some way that it is the final destiny for man.”

People working with Ernest Becker's ideas developed what they call “Terror Management Theory.” Greg summarized its meaning. We want to live, but we know we will die. This conflict produces terror, so people manage that terror by embracing cultural values or symbolic systems that give meaning and value to our lives.

Furthermore, people are afraid not only that our lives will not be long enough, but also not significant enough. We cope with this “death anxiety” by trying to give meaning to our lives. Much of that comes through caring for

children and grandchildren, and by adopting powerful parts of our culture (nationalism, religion, focusing on our occupational careers, etc.).

Some ways of avoiding the reality of our eventual deaths are called “anxiety buffers.” Greg discussed this and gave some examples.

In Greg’s film *Flight from Death*, someone says, “When the literal world fails us, we turn to the symbolic.” Greg discussed this – and also some of the problems arising from this. For example, humans create cultural systems, nationalism, religion, etc., and trust them to provide some kind of immortality by letting us believe in things bigger than ourselves. Every society creates systems that manage the society in light of death anxiety. These are ways to make us feel better about ourselves – that we are cheating death. We create culture to help us connect with a greater truth that we can agree on.

But when another person or group challenges our cultural systems, we feel threatened and tend to react against that person or group. Worldwide, over thousands of years, countless millions of people have died because of people’s attachment to their country or their religion in opposition to others.

For many thousands of years people have sought immortality in various ways – by building pyramids and massive gravestones that will persist long into the future – by creating myths and developing religions that include an afterlife – by producing great accomplishments that will outlast our lifetimes – and by producing children and grandchildren for the future.

Practical Evidence – Self-Esteem – Heroism – Immortality Projects:

Our interview further examined the meaning and implications of the “denial of death” and “death anxiety.” Besides fearing that our lives will not be long enough, people also fear that their lives will not be significant enough. We had already said that people cope with this “death anxiety” by doing things that will give meaning to their lives. People adopt powerful parts of their culture, such as nationalism, religion, the arts, and pride in their occupational skills.

Glen asked Greg to comment on these two psychological constructs:

Psychological construct #1: “Individuals need to maintain faith in a meaningful world view.”

Psychological construct #2: “Individuals need to feel as though they are valued and protected members – objects of significance within this world view.” Basically, this is about self-esteem.

Some of the ways people seek immortality – seek meaning for their lives – are positive, such as seeking self-esteem and taking heroic actions. (For this purpose, the word “heroic” does **not** necessarily imply good, but merely bold action intended to relieve death anxiety.) Death anxiety is a powerful motivator that can lead people to accomplish good results but also can lead people to do bad things.

People do good, meaningful work for their families, their communities, their professions, the arts, science, the benefit of the world, and so forth. Self-esteem is part of this, and with good self-esteem we can interact positively with other people and build a better future for the community and world. Specific major efforts have been referred to as “immortality projects” – ways to make our mark in the world in ways that will persist after we have died.

But death anxiety can also lead to some negative activities too. Some people who lack the self-esteem to do these positive things – and some people who feel their culture or worldview or national identity or religion are threatened – use violence to attack other people and other societies. In extreme cases, people hijack airplanes and fly them into buildings or commit suicide bombings or mass shootings.

A number of the people in the U.S. who committed mass shootings felt they were outsiders who were not being valued. They were seeking not only to vent their frustration but also to leave their mark on the world and make the world notice them and hear their names, so they shot many people and generated news publicity. It did not matter whether they also shot themselves or were shot by police after that. The important thing is that they had

done something bold that would make the world notice them and give them a kind of immortality through the news coverage in order to fill a life otherwise without meaning.

Even without such violence, some people who feel disempowered try to assert themselves and literally “leave their mark on the world” by writing graffiti on buildings. This is yet one more way to cope with death anxiety.

Nowadays we are experiencing rapid change in our world – rapid changes in technology, in social relationships across races, social understanding of sexual orientation, and rapidly changing political movements. These rapid and significant changes can be very unsettling. We discussed how death anxiety interacts with these.

“Mortality Salience” – Evidence from Empirical Research:

Sustaining the two psychological constructs I mentioned a few minutes ago allows people to function securely in the world. But if these are threatened, people feel threatened and feel they need to defend these. Social psychologists developed a hypothesis about “mortality salience.” Greg explained the “mortality salience” hypothesis, and then we explored the experimental research that has been providing practical evidence.

If culture serves a death-denying function, then reminding people of their mortality would reinforce their holding on to their own beliefs and rejecting people who are different. Social psychologists have been proving this through various kinds of experiments.

More than 500 experimental studies have proved the “mortality salience” hypothesis – that reminding people of death causes them to act differently just a few minutes later. A researcher divides a number of persons into two groups. Each group does a preliminary activity (*e.g.*, fill out a questionnaire or write a few paragraphs about a particular topic or watch some images on a screen) before being asked to do something else. For one group, their preliminary activity included something to remind them of death (*e.g.*, a questionnaire including questions about their own eventual deaths, or writing their epitaph, or seeing just a few death-related images among many other images on a screen), while the other group’s preliminary activity was similar but with other topics instead of any death-related ones). After this preliminary activity, all persons are asked to do the same task (*e.g.*, to consider the platforms of different hypothetical political candidates, or to give opinions about people of other races or religions). The persons who had been given death reminders tended to respond more defensively for their own demographic groups, more negatively toward people who were different from them, and more supportively to authoritarian political candidates.

One well-known study of this kind was designed and carried out with a number of municipal court judges in Arizona. Judges’ personal lives derive meaning from a commitment to justice, so lawbreakers violate the judges’ meaning system. All judges in this study filled out questionnaires, but for half of the judges, their questionnaires included something to remind them of their deaths, while the other half did not refer to death. Then the judges were shown information about the cases of a number of persons convicted of prostitution and asked to write down how much bail they would impose for each of those cases. The judges who had been reminded of their own deaths set much higher bail than the other judges did.

In another experiment, people standing on a street sidewalk in front of a funeral home answered questions about immigrants more harshly than people who were standing in a non-death-related setting.

Hundreds of experiments have shown that when people are reminded of their own deaths, they are more likely to act insensitively or aggressively toward people who are different from them.

“Us” vs. “Them” – Our Nation, Culture, Religion, etc. vs. Others:

During the early part of this interview we said that all species have an instinct to want to stay alive, but only humans know that each of us will die. We try to deny that hard reality, so in order to help us deny that reality, people devise various kinds of cultural systems.

The insights we shared during this interview suggested there are some dynamics about “us” versus “them” – people’s psychological needs to assert their own nation, culture, religion, and so forth against other people’s nations, cultures, and religions. We gravitate toward people who are similar to us, and we tend to oppose people who are different.

Furthermore, one way to feel immortal is to conquer or dominate someone else. When another person challenges our cultural system, we feel threatened and might react violently against that person. Research has shown that religious people reminded of death are more drawn to others of the same faith and negative to other faiths. Worldwide, over thousands of years, countless millions of people have died because of people’s attachment to their countries and their religions. Most armed conflicts are – at root – conflicts of ideology. In Greg’s film *Flight from Death* Sheldon Solomon (one of the great researchers in this field) summarized this as, “My God is better than your God, and we’ll kick your ass to prove it.”

A good remedy would be to honestly seek to understand people who are different from ourselves. Let’s honestly seek to understand other religions, other cultures and subcultures, and so forth. Also, let’s help people develop valid self-esteem, because this can reduce people’s tendency to marginalize other people.

We need to understand the actual formative experiences of people who become “terrorists” or who join “terrorist” movements. Let’s understand what they have been feeling and how their feelings led them to make their choices, including how their use of violence reflects their need for “heroic” actions (as discussed elsewhere during this interview) in light of the topic we discussed.

After 9-11 – “Terrorism” – “War on Terror.” etc.:

The attacks on September 11, 2001, significantly changed the U.S.’s culture and politics in several ways. Certainly the 9-11 attacks reminded us of our mortality. Politicians and news media vigorously painted these attacks as attacking our culture – and they repeated the horrifying images and fearful speech over and over and over and over again. Elites explicitly and powerfully tried to reinforce Americans’ world view. People bought flags. People turned to their religions – and against other religions. The U.S. government and many American people wanted to attack and kill foreigners, and a number of Americans killed completely innocent people here (including Sikhs, people from India, etc.) who seemed to represent “the other.”

Related to 9-11 attacks and responses, some people were willing to give their lives to protect and advance their worldviews. The 9-11 attackers did this. So did the Americans who joined the military. So did the Americans who ignorantly and violently attacked completely innocent people here.

When we sense that our culture or its values are threatened by another, our death anxiety increases significantly. We believe our culture is superior, so we want to degrade or even destroy the other one that we feel threatens ours. So we respond to “terrorists” with a “war on terror.”

After 9-11, George W. Bush emphasized that he would rid the world of “evil-doers,” and said that God had chosen him to do this. Before 9-11, Bush had one of the lowest approval ratings of any president in U.S. history. But after 9-11, his approval rating skyrocketed. We tend to support leaders who will protect us.

People see a harsh distinction between “good” (us) vs. “evil” (them). Authoritarian leaders promote this kind of thinking. Bush famously said, “You’re either with us or with the terrorists.” The Bush Administration and other elite-oriented politicians and mainstream media kept asserting, “After 9-11 everything changed.” They wanted us to accept the new authoritarianism, the suppression of our civil liberties, increased surveillance, the Patriot Act, endless war, etc.

The U.S.’s repression and endless wars remind us that Ernest Becker said that people actually cause evil when they take certain kinds of actions intended to overcome evil. Becker says our most violent behaviors arise from our death anxiety.

Implications for understanding racial bias, LGBTQ bias, etc.:

The insights we are discussing have strong implications for understanding various kinds of bias that exist in our culture, including:

- bias against races that are not white
- bias against sexual orientations that are not straight
- bias against other groups that are different from the dominant culture.

When Donald Trump says, “Make America great again,” some people recognize that he is actually saying, “Make America WHITE again.”

Research has shown that “death anxiety” is one factor in Americans’ negative attitudes toward poor people. Parts of our culture and some politicians blame poor people for their own poverty. This distances “them” from “us” nice people.

Self-esteem seems to be a buffer that helps people cope with death anxiety. It allows people to feel more secure and more accepting of people who are different from themselves. Someone has suggested that it might help to also remind people of our human connectedness with pre-human origins and relations.

Implications for violence locally/globally, including mass shootings and media coverage:

Within the concepts we discussed, much of the power is embedded in the reality that – even if we do not consciously think about our deaths – reminders of our mortality exist all the time in many ways, so we are often being “triggered” without our consciously being aware that we are being “triggered.” Even if we do not consciously think specifically about death, we are reminded of death all the time

For example, the news – both international news and local news – are full of reminders of death, including war, terrorism, murders, mass shootings, accidents, etc. Much of our awareness of death is subconscious rather than in our conscious awareness. Which news stories get the most coverage for as the lead articles? One famous journalistic insight says, “If it bleeds, it leads.”

Implications for political campaigns, etc.:

Some political election campaigns have understood about these concepts for decades. They have been exploiting these concepts to manipulate public opinion for “us” vs. “them” with harsh punishment against “them” (some kinds of foreigners, several despised groups within the U.S., etc.). This has been especially prominent in the campaigns of political candidates who are pro-war hawks and authoritarian.

Research – such as that described above – has proven that when people are reminded of death they tend to choose political candidates with more harsh, authoritarian platforms.

One classic case occurred during the older George H.W. Bush’s 1988 campaign against Michael Dukakis, who – while Governor of Massachusetts – had allowed a furlough for prisoner Willie Horton, who was African American. While on furlough, Horton committed a violent crime, so the Bush campaign created and aired a TV commercial designed to exploit people’s death anxieties, including fear of violent crime and fear of African Americans.

In 1964 one presidential candidate used fear to attack his opponent. A TV ad for Lyndon Johnson drew upon the public fear that his opponent, Barry Goldwater, was too hawkish to have his finger on the nuclear weapons button. The TV ad featured a little girl and a flower, followed by a gigantic mushroom cloud.

Many people have noticed that during the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump has been vigorously promoting fear of immigrants, fear of Muslims, fear of gays and lesbians, etc. But actually, the Democratic Party has been promoting fear, too: the Democratic campaign has been vigorously promoting fear of Trump.

When I told somebody about our TV topic, this person said we should be afraid of Trump. I explained why that would only reinforce and help Trump's campaign strategy of promoting himself as a tough guy who will protect us from people who are different. I told my friend that a better strategy to undermine Trump would be to publicize how much I enjoy having friends of different races, different national origins, different religions, and different sexual orientations.

These concepts are universal, not just in Western or industrial nations:

Scientific evidence shows that the concepts and realities we discussed during this TV program are part of human nature overall, not just an American thing or a Western thing.

Greg spoke to audiences in 23 cities across Russia a few years ago and was struck by how many people – during the question & answer time – told him that they were noticing these themes powerfully in Russia too. What they told him about their leaders' behavior was similar to the behavior of American leaders.

How Greg discovered Becker – and was welcomed into the Ernest Becker Foundation:

Greg told about his interesting first-hand experience. He has been a punk rocker and public speaker throughout most of his adult life. When he graduated from college a professor had given him three books as gifts. Much later he happened to see the professor and had to admit that he had not read them. So he did read them, and when he read Becker's *Denial of Death* he was fascinated by that book's insights. Then in about 1997 he went to an annual conference of the Ernest Becker Foundation. One of its leaders brought him out of the audience and invited him to tell about his experience as a punk rock band member and the lyrics of a punk rock song he wrote based on inspiration by Becker's insights. Many academics from around the world wanted his CD. During our interview he recited the lyrics of one verse from a song that lamented our condition and the tug of war between life and death. The song said we want more. He has written Becker-related themes into other songs too.

This example gives us the impetus to find additional ways to express these concepts through the arts and in many other ways in our daily lives, as people raise children, function in the community, and so forth.

How could we use any of these insights to improve American society and politics?

We could creatively use a number of the main insights and a number of examples to actually improve American society and American politics. Just a few examples include:

- We could reform the role of police from “warrior” to “guardian.”
- We could use insights about individuals' sense of identity and self-esteem to reinforce positive behaviors and reduce negative behaviors, and to reduce the marginalization of people who have been vulnerable and exploited.
- To build a more harmonious and nonviolent society, we could work to promote understanding and tolerance across differences.
- To help people serve society's best interests, we could promote positive “heroic” acts and “immortality projects” that give our lives meaning while also respecting other people's lives.
- We could do this within the U.S. and also internationally through a fair and nonviolent foreign policy.
- I invite people to use these ideas in our grassroots organizing for peace, nonviolence, human rights, social justice, the climate, and other progressive issues we work on.

How could these insights promote peace, social justice, environment, climate, etc.?

This TV program is produced by the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation, which works for peace, nonviolence and social justice. The concepts we are discussing have many implications. People who want peace protest against nuclear weapons in fairly conventional ways, but perhaps we could use these insights to develop smarter, more effective strategies.

Becker's ideas deal with subconscious issues. Ironically, nuclear weapons probably do provide a sense of security in people's subconscious. Protesters upset that subconscious sense of security and provoke fear, which might be backfiring on us. How could we devise better strategies and activities that would make it easier for the general public, the media and the politicians to understanding and committing to the need to abolish nuclear weapons?

Glen mentioned how during the nationwide Nuclear Weapons Freeze movement of the early 1980s, the Thurston County Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign won a 1982 ballot issue in a landslide. Instead of promoting a frightening image of "doom and gloom," our local Freeze campaign publicized the slogan, "Ain't it Great to Be Alive!" – and we won in a landslide with more than 62% of the vote.

Nowadays people also recognize life-and-death crises regarding the environment and the climate. We could use these insights to develop smarter, more effective campaigns for these and other crucial issues (racial justice, economic justice, etc.) I invite people to use these ideas in our grassroots organizing any and all of the progressive issues we work on.

The Ernest Becker Foundation and other good sources of information:

Ernest Becker developed these ideas from the early 1960s to the early 1970s. Now our interview guest Greg Bennick is starting to write a substantive biography of Ernest Becker himself and the ideas he explored and wrote about. Greg will spend about three years writing this biography.

The kinds of ideas we have been discussing – and other academic and practical aspects – have been publicized and promoted by the Ernest Becker Foundation (www.ernestbecker.org), which is based in Seattle and has phone (206) 428-1964. Their website offers plenty of interesting information.

I enjoyed watching the 90-minute documentary film Greg co-produced: *Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality*. It did a great job of explaining the ideas and giving examples. People can buy it through this link at www.ernestbecker.org : <http://ernestbecker.org/product/flight-from-death-the-quest-for-immortality/> Also, people can search for the film online and watch it through several sources.

To watch an interesting 4-minute video summary of Ernest Becker's most important concepts for free, please visit www.ernestbecker.org and click the "RESOURCES" tab. On the pull-down menu, click the "Terror Management Theory" link, and click the link for the 4-minute video, *The Surprising Ways Death Shapes Our Lives*. The exact link is at <http://ernestbecker.org/resources/terror-management-theory/> It is also on YouTube at https://youtu.be/Joalg73L_gw

You are reading this summary – and seeing these links – in the summary of this interview I wrote and posted next to the link for watching the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's November 2016 TV program on the "TV Programs" part of www.olympiafor.org.

You can get information about a wide variety of issues related to peace, social justice and nonviolence by contacting the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation at (360) 491-9093 or www.olympiafor.org