

Foreword

The first words Ernest Becker said to me when I walked into his hospital room were: "You are catching me in extremis. This is a test of everything I've written about death. And I've got a chance to show how one dies, the attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts his death."

When *The Denial of Death* arrived at Psychology Today in late 1973 and was placed on my desk for consideration it took me less than an hour to decide that I wanted to interview Ernest Becker. On December 6th, I called his home in Vancouver to see if he would do a conversation for the magazine. His wife, Marie, told me he had just been taken to the hospital and was in the terminal stage of cancer and was not expected to live for more than a week. Unexpectedly, she called the next day to say that Ernest would like to do the conversation if I could get there while he still had strength and clarity. So I went to Vancouver with speed and trembling, knowing that the only thing more presumptuous than intruding into the private world of the dying would be to refuse his invitation.

Although we had never met, Ernest and I fell immediately into deep conversation. The nearness of his death and the severe limits of his energy stripped away the impulse to chatter. We talked about death in the face of death; about evil in the presence of cancer. At the end of the day Ernest had no more energy, so there was no more time. We lingered awkwardly for a few minutes, because saying "goodbye" for the last time is hard and we both knew he would not live to see our conversation in print. A paper cup of medicinal sherry on the night stand, mercifully, provided us a ritual for ending. We drank the wine together and I left.

That day a quarter of a century ago was a pivotal event in shaping my relationship to the mystery of *my* death and, therefore, my life. I will carry for a lifetime the images of Ernest's courage, his clarity purchased at the cost of enduring pain, and the manner in which his passion for ideas held death at bay for a season. It is a privilege to have witnessed such a man in the heroic agony of his dying.

In the years since his death, Becker has been widely recognized as one of the great spiritual cartographers of our age and a wise physician

of the soul. Gradually, reluctantly, we are beginning to acknowledge that the bitter medicine he prescribes—contemplation of the horror of our inevitable death—is, paradoxically, the tincture that adds sweetness to mortality.

Becker's philosophy as it emerges in *Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* is a braid woven from four strands.

The first strand. The world is terrifying. To say the least, Becker's account of nature has little in common with Walt Disney. Mother Nature is a brutal bitch, red in tooth and claw, who destroys what she creates. We live, he says, in a creation in which the routine activity for organisms is "tearing others apart with teeth of all types—biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one's own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses the residue."

The second strand. The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. Human beings are naturally anxious because we are ultimately helpless and abandoned in a world where we are fated to die. "This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die."

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Ernest Becker were strange allies in fomenting the cultural revolution that brought death and dying out of the closet. At the same time that Kubler-Ross gave us permission to practice the art of dying gracefully, Becker taught us that awe, fear, and ontological anxiety were natural accompaniments to our contemplation of the fact of death.

The third strand. Since the terror of death is so overwhelming we conspire to keep it unconscious. "The vital lie of character" is the first line of defense that protects us from the painful awareness of our helplessness. Every child borrows power from adults and creates a personality by introjecting the qualities of the godlike being. If I am like my all-powerful father I will not die. So long as we stay obediently within the defense mechanisms of our personality, what Wilhelm Reich called "character armor" we feel safe and are able to pretend that the world is manageable. But the price we pay is high. We repress our bodies to pur-

chase a soul that time cannot destroy; we sacrifice pleasure to buy immortality; we encapsulate ourselves to avoid death. And life escapes us while we huddle within the defended fortress of character.

Society provides the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information-society and global free market. Since the main task of human life is to become heroic and transcend death, every culture must provide its members with an intricate symbolic system that is covertly religious. This means that ideological conflicts between cultures are essentially battles between immortality projects, holy wars.

One of Becker's lasting contributions to social psychology has been to help us understand that corporations and nations may be driven by unconscious motives that have little to do with their stated goals. Making a killing in business or on the battlefield frequently has less to do with economic need or political reality than with the need for assuring ourselves that we have achieved something of lasting worth. Consider, for instance, the recent war in Vietnam in which the United States was driven not by any realistic economic or political interest but by the overwhelming need to defeat "atheistic communism."

The fourth strand. Our heroic projects that are aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world. Human conflicts are life and death struggles—my gods against your gods, my immortality project against your immortality project. The root of humanly caused evil is not man's animal nature, not territorial aggression, or innate selfishness, but our need to gain self-esteem, deny our mortality, and achieve a heroic self-image. Our desire for the best is the cause of the worst. We want to clean up the world, make it perfect, keep it safe for democracy or communism, purify it of the enemies of god, eliminate evil, establish an alabaster city undimmed by human tears, or a thousand year Reich.

Perhaps Becker's greatest achievement has been to create a science of evil. He has given us a new way to understand how we create surplus evil—warfare, ethnic cleansing, genocide. From the beginning of time,

humans have dealt with what Carl Jung called their shadow side—feelings of inferiority, self-hate, guilt, hostility—by projecting it onto an enemy. It has remained for Becker to make crystal clear the way in which warfare is a social ritual for purification of the world in which the enemy is assigned the role of being dirty, dangerous, and atheistic. Dachau, Capetown and Mi Lai, Bosnia, Rwanda, give grim testimony to the universal need for a scapegoat—a Jew, a nigger, a dirty communist, a Muslim, a Tutsi. Warfare is a death potlatch in which we sacrifice our brave boys to destroy the cowardly enemies of righteousness. And, the more blood the better, because the bigger the body-count the greater the sacrifice for the sacred cause, the side of destiny, the divine plan.

Becker's radical conclusion that it is our altruistic motives that turn the world into a charnel house—our desire to merge with a larger whole, to dedicate our lives to a higher cause, to serve cosmic powers—poses a disturbing and revolutionary question to every individual and nation. At what cost do we purchase the assurance that we are heroic? No doubt, one of the reasons Becker has never found a mass audience is because he shames us with the knowledge of how easily we will shed blood to purchase the assurance of our own righteousness. He reveals how our need to deny our nakedness and be arrayed in glory keeps us from acknowledging that the emperor has no clothes.

After such a grim diagnosis of the human condition it is not surprising that Becker offers only a palliative prescription. Expect no miracle cure, no future apotheosis of man, no enlightened future, no triumph of reason.

Becker sketches two possible styles of nondestructive heroism.

The best we can hope for society at large is that the mass of unconscious individuals might develop a moral equivalent to war. The science of man has shown us that society will always be composed of passive subjects, powerful leaders, and enemies upon whom we project our guilt and self-hatred. This knowledge may allow us to develop an "objective hatred" in which the hate object is not a human scapegoat but something impersonal like poverty, disease, oppression, or natural disasters. By making our inevitable hatred intelligent and informed we may be able to turn our destructive energy to a creative use.

For the exceptional individual there is the ancient philosophical path of wisdom. Becker, like Socrates, advises us to practice dying. Cultivat-

ing awareness of our death leads to disillusionment, loss of character armor, and a conscious choice to abide in the face of terror. The existential hero who follows this way of self-analysis differs from the average person in knowing that he/she is obsessed. Instead of hiding within the illusions of character, he sees his impotence and vulnerability. The disillusioned hero rejects the standardized heroics of mass culture in favor of cosmic heroism in which there is real joy in throwing off the chains of uncritical, self-defeating dependency and discovering new possibilities of choice and action and new forms of courage and endurance. Living with the voluntary consciousness of death, the heroic individual can choose to despair or to make a Kierkegaardian leap and trust in the "sacrosanct vitality of the cosmos," in the unknown god of life whose mysterious purpose is expressed in the overwhelming drama of cosmic evolution.

There are signs—the acceptance of Becker's work being one—that some individuals are awakening from the long, dark night of tribalism and nationalism and developing what Tillich called a transmoral conscience, an ethic that is universal rather than ethnic. Our task for the future is exploring what it means for each individual to be a member of earth's household, a commonwealth of kindred beings. Whether we will use our freedom to encapsulate ourselves in narrow, tribal, paranoid personalities and create more bloody Utopias or to form compassionate communities of the abandoned is still to be decided. So long as human beings possess a measure of freedom, all hopes for the future must be stated in the subjunctive—we may, we might, we could. No prediction by any expert can tell us whether we will prosper or perish. We may choose to increase or decrease the dominion of evil. The script for tomorrow is not yet written.

In the end, Becker leaves us with a hope that is terribly fragile and wonderfully potent. "It is," he says, "the disguise of panic that makes us live in ugliness, and not the natural animal wallowing. And this means that evil itself is amenable to critical analysis and, conceivably, to the sway of reason." If, in some distant future, reason conquers our habit of self-destructive heroics and we are able to lessen the quantity of evil we spawn, it will be in some large measure because Ernest Becker helped us understand the relationship between the denial of death and the dominion of evil.

Those interested in the ways Becker's work is being used and continued by philosophers, social scientists, psychologists, and theologians may contact The Ernest Becker Foundation, 3621, 72nd St., Mercer Island, WA 98040 and receive a newsletter and notification of lectures and conferences.

Sam Keen

Preface

... for the time being I gave up writing—there is already too much truth in the world—an over-production which apparently cannot be consumed!

—OTTO RANK¹

The prospect of death, Dr. Johnson said, wonderfully concentrates the mind. The main thesis of this book is that it does much more than that: 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 noted anthropologist A. M. Hocart once argued that primitives were not bothered by the fear of death; that a sagacious sampling of anthropological evidence would show that death was, more often than not, accompanied by rejoicing and festivities; that death seemed to be an occasion for celebration rather than fear—much like the traditional Irish wake. Hocart wanted to dispel the notion that (compared to modern man) primitives were childish and frightened by reality; anthropologists have now largely accomplished this rehabilitation of the primitive. But this argument leaves untouched the fact that the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition. To be sure, primitives often celebrate death—as Hocart and others have shown—*because* they believe that death is the ultimate promotion, the final ritual elevation to a higher form of life, to the enjoyment of eternity in some form. Most modern Westerners have trouble believing this any more, which is what makes the fear of death so prominent a part of our psychological make-up.

In these pages I try to show that the fear of death is a universal that unites data from several disciplines of the human sciences, and makes wonderfully clear and intelligible human actions that we have buried under mountains of fact, and obscured with endless