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Our Flight From Death is Killing Us: Applying a Psychological Framework to a Christian Understanding of the Human Condition

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

OUR FLIGHT FROM DEATH IS KILLING US:
APPLYING A PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK TO
A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

All Scriptures references in the Hebrew language are taken from Leningrad Codex.

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My wife is awesome.

ABSTRACT

Our awareness of mortality motivates us to subconsciously act in ways that are damaging. This dissertation engages the problems to individual and communities generated by our unexamined awareness of death. This awareness motivates us to attempt to flee death's grasp—even though we know there is no escape. The flight from death robs us not only of our ability to live full lives but also robs us of our ability to faithfully follow Jesus into the world. At times, we even distort religion and use it to shield us from death. Faith practices can be manipulated to draw us away from death rather than help us confront it in a healthy way. Utilizing the best of psychological and sociological research, combined with a Christian semiotic, this dissertation advances a contemporary understanding of the human condition.

The deep wisdom in our faith tradition allows us to authentically confront the reality of our mortality. Moreover, when we ground this conversation in Scripture, we find new insights into biblical interpretation. With a powerful articulation of the human condition we are more fully able to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world around us: Our words of good news correlate with the contemporary human experience. The good news then becomes relevant to those with whom we seek to share our faith. Further, this dissertation examines the reactions of individuals and faith communities to poverty and homelessness. Death awareness causes us to shy away from these marginalized communities, but prepared by our psychological and theological understanding, we will be better able to follow Jesus into the world to love and serve our neighbors.

CHAPTER ONE

A PRECARIOUS PARDOX

One of the only certainties we can count on in life is death. We know we will die and yet we can imagine existence beyond ourselves. The anxiety that the knowledge of our certain death produces plunges us into a precarious paradox.¹ This paradox breeds fear. To alleviate this fear, our temptation is to flee from our knowledge of death.² It is my observation that fleeing from the reality of death robs us of being able to truly live, damages our lives of faith, and diminishes our ability to respond to issues of poverty in our community. This dissertation examines the consequences resulting from this anxiety and our attempts to assuage it. One of the solutions with which I will conclude is the practice or orientation of humility.

As a pastor I am given a privileged perspective into people's lives.³ I am invited into places of great joy and celebration. I am also invited into sacred moments of pain

¹ This paradox is one of the central claims Ernest Becker makes in *The Denial of Death*. This dissertation will rely on Becker's work and his articulation of the human condition. Of this essential paradox Becker writes, "The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it graspingly dies." Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 3. I chose to use Becker's work because I have found it profoundly helpful in a ministry context. It provides an academic architecture with which to understand the underlying motivations behind individual's actions. I do not see Becker's work as an attempt to create a therapeutic model, but rather providing a lens through which to see human behavior. As we will explore, death, and the anxiety it produces, is a significant feature of Becker's work. It is however important to note that he does not try to explain how all cultures everywhere deal with the problem of death but only expound on the foundational nature of death as a part of a common human condition. Theologian Douglas John Hall refers to Becker's work, stating "Our society, perhaps more than any other in history, is engaged in a massive denial of death. This was the point of one of the most insightful books written in our era, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*." Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 148.

² Becker illustrates this flight from death as a striving to achieve cosmic specialness or primary value in the universe. "We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness..." Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 4.

³ I am an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). I write as a practitioner of the Christian faith within a Lutheran tradition.

and loss. In these moments of *extrema* and in the moments of the mundane, I observe a problem that plagues most of those with whom I walk. They have a longing to thrive, a longing to arrive at *real* life, and there always seems to be another milestone, another *something*, that will usher in the life they have waited to live. It never happens. Even among those who are by all accounts successful and seem to have everything they would ever need, there is a longing for life. This longing for meaningful life is a central problem in the human experience.

The problem begins with death. Not just in the biological reality of death, but the existential dilemma death generates. It is our *awareness* and *response* to the knowledge of death that initiates this crisis. This problem may manifest in individuals, communities, and nations as racism, classism, or sexism.⁴ Our awareness of death nurtures an anxiety that we keep secret even from ourselves. It lies deep in the core of our existence and creates internal barriers that prevent us from entering authentic relationships and living the full life available to us.

Longing to Thrive

One example of how fleeing from death, ironically diminished the life a powerful figure from history is found in the first emperor of China. In 247 BC, the 13-year-old

⁴ Becker writes about the struggle for superiority in the context of Nazi Germany. I believe a generalization is appropriate. While he specifically speaks to the condition of the Jews or the Gypsies we might understand the same mechanism to apply to any group that threatens our prospects to achieve full life and eternal meaning. Becker claims: “all you have to do is say that your group is pure and good, eligible for a full life and for some eternal meaning. But others like Jews or Gypsies are the real animals, and are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and brining disease and weakness to your vitality. Then you have a mandate to launch a political plague, a campaign to make the world pure.” Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 93. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski also speak to the “isms” or stereotypes that lead to subjugation or inequality. “In fact, when death is close to mind, people prefer their out-groups to fit simple stereotypes. Following a death reminder, Americans prefer Germans to be neat and organized, male homosexuals to be effeminate, men to pay for dinner, and women to babysit the neighbor’s kids.” Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 135.

Ying Zheng inherited the kingdom of Qin. He worked ruthlessly to unite the surrounding kingdoms and created the empire we now know as China. “He proved to be a tyrannical leader, conquering the nine warring feudal states of the region and declaring himself the first emperor of a new nation in 221 BC.”⁵ Under his leadership he constructed great public works such as the Great Wall of China, the Terracotta Warriors, and other spectacles. He united his empire with alliances that endure even today. However, he also insisted on preserving his own life to the point of declaring a war on death. Creating the first Chinese empire was not enough of a legacy for Qin. He wanted immortality. He sent servants to the far reaches of the kingdom to find a way to make him immortal. Instead of discovering immortality, he died at the age of 50 after returning from a trip to the east coast of China to look for the island of the immortals.⁶

The story of the first emperor of China is a dramatic example of the anxiety created by the awareness of death. It compelled him to build a great wall to keep out invaders, moved him to commission life-size warriors made of clay to protect him in the afterlife, and drove him to find a way to preserve his life forever. His fear of death robbed him of a rich life, drove him to extreme violence and war, and in the end ironically denied him the sacredness of life he so relentlessly sought. His pursuit of immortality—his immortality project—robbed him of life.

Running From Death

You do not have to be an emperor to feel the pull that the fear of death places upon our lives. Typically people reacting to normal situations are affected by the fear

⁵ John Wilson, “Mortal Combat,” *The New Statesman*, September 6th 2007, 1, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/arts-and-culture/2007/09/shi-huangdi-qin-emperor-china>.

⁶ Ibid.

of death lurking just underneath the realm of consciousness.⁷ Understanding this fear will give us insight in to the experience of being human, and grant us ability to examine the manifestations of death anxiety. We will explore how unexamined death anxiety negatively impacts us as individuals and as whole communities.

A significant portion of this paper will concentrate on the work of Ernest Becker. His academic career was focused on understanding the inner workings of the human animal, particularly surrounding the question: why can we horribly mistreat one another? He examined the core motivations for human action in the world and determined that death anxiety provides an important role in the way we live and work together. The work of Ernest Becker and his articulation of this condition in *The Denial of Death* provides us with a raw and honest look at the human experience. Becker's perspective helps shape a theological response to death anxiety and its subsequent manifestations. Death anxiety produces a fear that can become all consuming, causing us to buffer ourselves from the reality of death. In some aspects this is healthy, our buffer mechanisms allow us to step forward into life rather than be mired in the paralysis of fear. The problem occurs when we focus our attention and energy on elaborate schemes to pretend that we will escape death—Becker refers to these schemes as *vital lies*.⁸ He also claims that we participate in these *vital lies* that shield us from the terror of death—even as we on some level know they are fiction. The vital lie allows us to repress the truth we know about ourselves. “The great boon of repression is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty,

⁷ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 174.

⁸ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), chap. 4.

majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act.”⁹ These vital lies may be relatively innocuous or innocent. They could be simple distractions that provide momentary respite from the terror of death. More typically they are massive undertakings that consume great amounts of energy and cultivate a capacity for great atrocity.

The anxiety manifested through the awareness of death is problematic and the actions we take to subconsciously find relief can be damaging and dangerous to us as individuals and to the people surrounding us.

We called one's life style a vital lie, and now we can understand better why we said it was vital: it is necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation. We don't want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. This power is not always obvious. It need not be overtly a god or openly stronger person, but it can be the power of an all absorbing activity, a passion, a dedication to a game, a way of life, that like a comfortable web keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself, of the fact that he does not rest on his own center.¹⁰

These vital lies help us pretend death will not affect us. They may not be grandiose or sophisticated lies, but they nonetheless distract us from the truth of certain mortality.

Becker provides tools for understanding the underpinnings of human motivation. For example, we can examine the relentless drive we observe in some individuals to achieve fame and fortune as an attempt to establish a sense of immortality. This way of thinking enlightens our understanding of why fashion trends in our culture become so important, or why driving the right car, or achieving the right degree, can be so

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

paramount in our lives. All of these examples can be connected to our sense of cultural significance and self-esteem, which in turn help buffer us from the anxiety of our death.

One of the significant features of this problem of death awareness is that we do not deal with it directly: We engage this problem symbolically. Our idols and immortality projects are nothing more than symbolic extensions of attempts to escape the human condition. As we engage this issue on the symbolic level we must be able to traverse the cultural landscape of our day to watch for manifestations of death anxiety. We must be detectives searching for cultural cues as to how the problem of the awareness of death is made manifest in our midst. This will take us to the halls of academia. But we will also wander through the print media for sale on the display at the checkout counter at the local store, we will walk the cosmetic aisle and examine the claims being made by nearly every product (whiter teeth, colored hair, no wrinkles—which means ‘no signs of aging or mortality!’). We will examine movies, zombies, and popular culture, and survey many relevant cultural symbols. In order to fully engage this problem we must become fluent in the symbolic language of our day.

Len Sweet’s articulation of semiotics and invitation into that field of study has been an invaluable tool for understanding the depth of this problem. He is a thoughtful and faithful guide into the world of semiotics and the engagement with the signs and symbols that surround us. In study with him we know that the work we do is connected to the mission of Jesus in the world, that theology is only done in the context of relationships, and in all we do we seek to incarnate the presence of the risen Christ. I am deeply grateful for his perspective and invitation to usher us as thinkers and theologians

into the world of semiotics. Len has provided a semiotic structure through which we can analyze, and more deeply understand, the issue of death in our world today.

We are in the life business, which is diminished when people spend their lives running from death; and in their ironic pursuit they actually fail to live. There is wisdom in the Christian tradition that connects us more fully to our mortality and frees us to live the lives God intends. The anxiety raised by the awareness of death motivates us to find any means to escape the human condition. We might translate this impulse into the Christian tradition as idolatry. We create things in which we attempt to find life, rather than seeking life in the creator. Becker writes, “The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free from the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.”¹¹ Already, the theologian can see common ground upon which to stand with the psychological articulation of the human condition.

As we navigate this terrain we will stay close to the wisdom of scripture. In several instances throughout scripture the issue of death is tangentially relevant if not the central theme. My claim is that death anxiety is the central problem of humanity and so we will examine that claim through the lens of scripture. In what is traditionally accounted as the “fall” in Genesis, I view as an initial encounter with the awareness of death. Jesus himself on several occasions offers to the disciples and the crowds actions or teaching that directly supports the issue of death anxiety being the central problem of the human condition. In days *before* the resurrection he tells the crowds and disciples that to be his follower they must take up their crosses and follow him. In this pre-crucifixion,

¹¹ Ibid., 66.

pre-resurrection, context this is the equivalent to saying, “take up your symbol of mortality and death—carry it with you—and follow me.” The salvation we experience in Christ is not exclusively eschatological but is also revealed in our following him and remembering we are mortal. That is, I believe, salvation both lies in the future and is realized in the present. Ted Peters writes, “Through faith in Christ we are citizens of two aeons, the futures and the present. We are justified because participation in the future consummation of God’s justice is given to us now through faith.”¹²

Hiding in Religion

When religion is co-opted as a feature of an immortality project the consequence for the individual and those around them can be tragic. Immortality projects are the symbolic projections we create and insert into the world to achieve a sense of death transcendence.¹³ The fear of death is so great in the human animal that the temptation to find relief from death anxiety leads us to turn even our systems of faith into idols.¹⁴

At this point I would like to offer another example, not from the history books but from personal experience.¹⁵ Bill was active in church as a young person. In his middle adulthood he became very involved in para-church activities, especially with youth. His focus was specifically on evangelism and conversion. As he grew a little older he developed a neurological condition that left him with debilitating migraines. The pain

¹² Ted Peters, *God—The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 53.

¹³ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 26.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 2:110.

¹⁵ The names have been changed and specifics made general, but perhaps you have seen this story play out in your ministry perspective or in your own life. We will see how the fear of death is so great in the human animal that the temptation to find relief from death anxiety leads us to turn even our systems of faith into idols.

was at times overwhelming and shook his understanding of faith to the core. He felt he had lived the “right” kind of life, did the “right” kind of activities, but now why should he suffer this way? His medical issue pulled back the veil of immortality. Once the veil is pulled back the knowledge of mortality came crashing in. Bill suffered a great sense of guilt that perhaps he had not prayed hard enough or done enough for others. He wondered if he had missed something along the way, or that his faith and trust in God did not protect him from this affliction. He felt ashamed of having rigorously proclaimed his faith to those around him and now doubting it so deeply. Bill found he had been caught up living a life of faith that was more about him and assuaging his anxieties than it was authentically connecting to the God revealed in Christ. He saw through the superstitious, good-luck-charm god he had created and was left with very little room for hope. Bill now struggles to find meaning in his old patterns of faith and is looking and longing for something more. When religion is co-opted as a feature of an immortality project the consequence for the individual and those around them can be tragic.

Religion can function nicely as a vital lie in which a person participates to shield themselves from the reality of death. This is a distortion of authentic faith and is an extension of the idol-making propensity in which we find ourselves mired. The vital lies in which we participate serve to help us avoid the reality of death but also to allow the illusion of immortality. We will refer to these as immortality projects in which individuals, or entire communities, participate to find the pretense of immortality. Religion can be co-opted as an immortality project. This co-opting ossifies the symbols, language, and practices of faith and gives rise to unhealthy religious practices.

The negative response to death anxiety impedes our ability to authentically follow Jesus. Following Jesus into the world takes us into places we might find disgusting, unclean, and unsavory. These places as we will discover have the power to remind us of death and we are tempted to run from any reminders of our certain biological fate. Yet, in Bonhoeffer's words, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹⁶ How can we authentically take up our call in Christ if our life is consumed with denying our death? The death anxiety and death avoidance tactics that lie beneath the surface of our consciousness can significantly impede our ability to authentically follow Jesus. We will examine the ramifications of acting on unexamined death anxiety as it impedes our ability to follow Jesus and heed his call to love and serve our neighbors.

Death anxiety is present in our everyday lives. We will examine how this death anxiety plays out in the faith context. I will address the problem of religion that is co-opted into a form of immortality project or idolatry. As we define these terms more robustly later you will see how the language of psychology, *immortality project*, and theology, *idol*, have a similar meaning from their respective fields. Whether we call them *idols* or *immortality projects* they each point to an attempt to free ourselves from the grip the fear of death.

This issue is especially tricky as the central symbols of faith and religion, the symbols that point us to life, can be ossified and subtly transformed into idols. For example, the Bible is a sacred and central symbol for the Christian faith that can be co-opted as a feature of an immortality project or an idol. There are people who hold the words of scripture so tightly and are so convinced their interpretation is correct they are

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

unable to hear any opposition. Out of their fear of death they have ossified a sacred symbol in the ironic pursuit of security. But there is inherent ambiguity in the scripture: there are verses and passage that seem to be opposed to one another.¹⁷ These ambiguities and discrepancies open a range of acceptable interpretation or meaning. This is one of the features that makes scripture so rich, it is not a list of rules but a collection of narratives. When it becomes ridged and inflexible its richness is lost. These narratives influence our lives because their symbolic content is flexible and they are able to be read alongside contemporary culture. There is a *livingness* in the scripture that allows the stories to speak to our own stories and experiences in life. When the words of scripture become enmeshed with an individual's immortality project, they become, what in the Christian language we would recognize as idols. This ossification of meaning leads the adherent to see any deviation from their interpretation as a threat to their underlying immortality project. This larger existential threat is a threat much beyond the differing opinion of how to interpret scripture but a threat to the very understanding of existence itself. You may have experienced this in a Bible study when you offer an idea and are immediately rebuked by someone who has a very strong opinion on what they believe the scripture *really* means. In this instance a sacred symbol becomes ossified and emptied of its symbolic content, which is a sure sign an idol had been made. Defensiveness is not *truly* around the words of scripture at all but more closely centered in defending the extension of the project that buffers their death anxiety. The sacred symbol is then nothing more

¹⁷ For example, Genesis 1 and 2 offer different accounts of the creation narrative, and James 2:20-21 claims that faith without works is dead while Ephesians 2:8 says salvation comes through faith which is a gift and not a result of works. These discrepancies reflect the many voices over the ages that have composed the scriptures. In these examples we see a dialog even within the scripture itself. Further, we might imagine ourselves as a part of that dialog as we bring our experience and understanding to the text.

than a prop to hold up the immortality project that they subconsciously hope will effectively buffer them from the terror of their own mortality.¹⁸

A challenge surfaces as the user believes they are the right and orthodox practitioner and they perceive any attempt to cut through the idolatry as an attack on their fundamental faith. These perceived attacks reinforce their already distorted position and encourage a further entrenchment in their polarized worldview. Another dangerous example is evangelism or missionary conversion. Ernest Becker posits that conversion has a massive bolstering effect on one's immortality project.¹⁹ That is, if I can convince you that my way of thinking is better than the one you currently occupy it reinforces mine all the more. When we are faced with a competitive immortality project one of the reactions predicted by Terror Management Theory is an attempt to convert the perceived other.²⁰ In this instance a person who has become consumed by a co-opted religious system is then primed to go out and convert others, not as an extension of care or inclusion, but as a reinforcement mechanism for their own idolatry. The great commission then becomes fuel to convert others to make one feel more secure in their denial mechanism rather than a genuine expression of sharing the gospel. The words of inclusion and invitation become weaponized and a particular faith perspective is foisted upon proximal victims.

When religion is co-opted as an immortality project or idol, evangelism becomes more about the one evangelizing and the conversation partner is reduced to a symbolic

¹⁸ Other sacred symbols can be ossified and drained of their symbolic content such as the creeds and the sacraments. This will be addressed later in the paper.

¹⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 255.

²⁰ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003). Kindle LOC 3267.

entity used entirely to justify an immortality project. I have to wonder when I encounter a street preacher, or a person handing out tracts on the sidewalk, if they are really as concerned about introducing people to the living God as they are about buffering their own death anxiety.²¹ We will explore this further and unpack the dangerous and negative ramifications of this co-opted religious expression.

Living with Our Neighbors

When we fail to recognize our mortality, or spend our lives running from death, we are fettered in our quest to follow Jesus. Bound in the fear of death, following Jesus into this world becomes difficult, if not impossible. A significant amount of Jesus' ministry happened on the margins of society. *People living in poverty, in homelessness, or on the margins of society, represent a challenge to our prevailing worldview.* They threaten the vital lies, or cultural fictions, by which we live. In the following I will support the claim that we cannot follow Jesus to the margins of society unless we are able to set aside our fear.

We each live by particular cultural fictions and those fictions must be protected and preserved in order for them to function in a way that assuages our death anxiety. As Becker suggests, all of culture is a fiction that assuages our death anxiety.²² A perspective that contrasts our closely held cultural fictions is perceived as a threat to this embedded worldview. The threat is to expose the vital lie as nothing more than an illusion.

A homeless person represents either a fracture or failing in a particular cultural fiction. Homeless people become an entity to be avoided or denied to preserve the

²¹ This is not to dismiss the project of evangelism—or sharing the good news—entirely. Rather to discern the underlying impulse that motivates an individual to share their faith. Faith shared with authentic love and concern is far different than faith shared out of a necessity to bolster an immortality project.

²² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 7.

integrity of a particular fiction. In the alternative, they can be excised from the body of society as a transgressor of sacred norms. This worldview leads to the criminalization of poverty and homelessness. Sadly, in the national news and in local communities, we see both avoidance and expulsion manifest quite frequently. Laws are passed under the guise of promoting community safety that unnecessarily burden or persecute the poor. There are cities that have all but banned the state of homelessness by making “public camping” illegal. This pushes the homeless community further from vital resources. We will examine laws passed in certain States that even make spending assistance dollars unnecessarily difficult to create a perceived protection for the taxpayers. This illustrates the extremes methods society may use to preserve a cultural fiction.

We are unable to enter into authentic relationships with those who symbolically threaten our cultural norms because they are in fact threatening the very fabric the veil we keep between us and the reality of death. “It is fateful and ironic how the lie we need in order to live dooms us to a life that is never really ours.”²³ Death avoidance mechanisms hinder our call to authentically serve and love our neighbors.

To mitigate the terror of having a cultural fiction exposed, we participate in cultural norms that preserve our vital lies. When we participate in cultural norms we are rewarded with a sense of well-being and belonging, which helps us transcend our death anxiety. If we fail to participate in the prescribed norms we are shunned, outcast, scapegoated, or even killed. For example, in the United States we know that “you can pull yourself up by your boot straps” or “if you work hard you can get ahead” and that

²³ Ibid., 56.

“this is the land of opportunity.”²⁴ These axioms have become fundamental in our cultural imaginations. They provide a safety net that allows us believe that if we work hard and stay determined we will be secure.

The prevailing fiction in which we participate suggests people who live in poverty are lazy, slackers, or moochers. Yet, the reality is often quite different. The reality of poverty is much more complicated. There are people who work hard and live in poverty; there are people who have sized every opportunity this nation has to offer and still find themselves in poverty due to health crises, economic downturns, or global job migrations. Degrading the poor as lazy allows us to place the blame for their failure with them rather than in the overlying cultural fiction. Thus our fictions are preserved—even at the expense of our neighbors. These character assassinations damage our ability to meet other people in authentic relationships, let alone our ability to help our brothers and sisters in need.

Finally, in our Christian tradition we have significant wisdom to draw from and practices that connect us more fully to our mortality in healthy ways. I do not offer a psychic solution or a way to out-think the human condition. The work of God in Jesus Christ on the Cross must remain the central source of our salvation. Any attempt to outthink the human condition or save ourselves, as it were, is nothing more than idolatry or an immortality project; our hopes are not cast on our best thinking. Yet, this work provides a new way to understand scripture, the world around us, and empowers us to more faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Using scripture as our guide, paying attention to the symbols and metaphors around us we will delve into the denial of death to uncover the

²⁴ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Safety Harbor, FL: Simon Publications, 2001).

theological and psychological ramifications. Once they are exposed, we can utilize the wisdom of our faith tradition and empower our communities to be free from the bonds of death, as Christ intended, and live in the joy of life. The goal after all is life, and life abundant.

In the chapters to follow I will introduce the basic work of Ernest Becker and the continuation of his academic legacy in what is known as Terror Management Theory. This work will reveal the flight from death impulse and show us how life is denied by this practice. Next, we will examine the use of signs and symbols (semiotics) in the context of immortality projects and how those inform our life choices and the religious practices in which we engage. Religious practices that obfuscate the reality of death will be examined and exposed, and healthy practices that create a healthy awareness and acceptance will be lifted up and suggested for contemporary settings. In particular, will examine the practice of the sacraments and see how they offer a healthy way to deal with the anxiety of death and move forward into life. Further, I will offer examples of how reading Becker alongside scripture can lead to new insights into our understanding of the texts. Finally, I will examine how our attempts to assuage death anxiety affect one of the essential practices of discipleship: responding to issues of poverty. I will conclude with some practical ways in which we might work as individuals and communities to avoid the worst ramifications of denying our mortality. My hope is that in this paper we can nurture a new awareness of what makes us tick, claim the fullness of life God has created us for, and work together to respond to issues of poverty in our communities in healthy ways.

CHAPTER TWO

A PSYCHOLOGICAL ARTICULATION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

We run from biological and symbolic death in a variety of ways. Running from death robs us of our ability to live. Ernest Becker used an interdisciplinary approach and drew heavily from the fields of sociology and psychology. He posited that fear of death motivates the human animal in profound and perhaps unexpected ways. His conclusions create an articulation of the human condition that is an important conversation partner with Christian theology. These insights into the problem of running from death inform our theology.

In this section we will explore some of Becker's essential ideas and the work that has followed under the title Terror Management Theory.²⁵ I will provide a brief introduction to Becker's life story that gives insight into how his own life experience might have motivated his academic ambition. In this section I will also provide a Christian theological connection. Finally, we will close with a critique of Becker's work from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective and a critique from contemporary Christian theologian, Brian Blount.²⁶ Through this exploration, we will create a hermeneutic through which to view the human condition.

²⁵ Terror Management Theory is a term coined by Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003).

²⁶ I chose a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective because both Lacan and Becker share a Freudian heritage. I believe this minimizes the academic translation one must undertake to move between the two author's respective works. Lacan's articulation of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, provides a critique of Becker's thesis of the human condition that is bound in fear of death. Further, Lacan, in my estimation, is nicely compatible with the endeavor to connect this work to the larger field of Semiotics.

Becker's Life and Work

I believe Becker's work provides a unique and powerful insight into the human condition. After witnessing horrific human behavior through experiences in World War II, he devoted his life to understanding how humans could inflict such atrocity on each another. In the course of his pursuit, he incorporated the work of Rank, Freud, Kierkegaard, and several others into what would become his own articulation of the human condition. This articulation is formulated in his book *The Denial of Death*.²⁷

Becker was born in 1924 to Jewish immigrant parents.²⁸ He was raised in Massachusetts, and as a young man he enlisted in the army and fought in World War II. He served in a second-line infantry battalion in Germany. Part of his military experience included liberating Nazi concentration camps after the war. Following this, he worked for the State Department in Paris. After a period of soul searching and reflection, he decided "he wanted to devote his life to understanding himself, the human condition, and the meaning of life."²⁹ He turned to academia.

Becker did not enjoy a stable career in academia. In his early thirties he attended Syracuse University, pursuing a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology. His work utilized an innovative interdisciplinary approach that was insightful and brilliant, but also made members of the traditional academy nervous. This may be why he never seemed quite comfortable in university culture. After he completed his degree, he taught for one year at

²⁷ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

²⁸ A close friend of Ernest Becker, Ron Leifer, has written helpful biographical details of Becker's life. The following is merely a summary of Leifer's work. All biographical information about Ernest Becker is taken from: Ron Leifer "The legacy of Ernest Becker" *Psychnews International* 4, no 2 (July-September 1997).

²⁹ Ibid.

Syracuse and then moved to the University of California at Berkley. At Berkley his classes were so popular that the administration had to constantly find larger venues for him so that all of the students could attend each session. The students enjoyed his interdisciplinary approach as well as his creativity in teaching. Yet, after two years, his contract was not renewed. In protest, the student body raised money to pay his salary as a visiting scholar. Their request was denied and Becker moved to San Francisco State College. He stayed there for one tumultuous year. During that year, students were busy in protest against the Vietnam War, so much so that then-governor Ronald Reagan called in the National Guard to keep order on campus. Becker did not feel he could “teach freedom with armed police outside of the lecture hall” and resigned³⁰

Becker then accepted what would be his last teaching post at Simon Fraser University in 1969. It was there that he was able to publish what would become his greatest works: *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*. In 1972, he was diagnosed with intestinal cancer and in 1974 he died at the age of 49. Two months after his death, *The Denial of Death* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. Becker was an academic outcast who never witnessed his work widely accepted.

Becker’s life experience helps to illuminate his academic contributions. He was never satisfied with cursory or simple explanations for human motivations but rather sought to uncover true human motivations. Perhaps he was so motivated because of his personal life experience, especially his experience liberating Nazi concentration camps.

³⁰ Daniel Leichty, “A four-part sketch of Ernest Becker and his work.” Ernest Becker Foundation Website. Accessed December 14, 2013. http://www.ernestbecker.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=234:a-five-part-introduction-to-ernest-becker&catid=1:about-the-ernest-becker-foundation&Itemid=11.

His quest became to find not only the conditions in which such horror could arise, but also the fundamental condition of the human animal that allows such horror to exist.

In the introduction to *The Denial of Death*, Becker wrote, “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 back and forth arguments about the ‘true’ human motives.”³¹ He believed that death was “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 men.”³² It is death, and its avoidance, that motivates the human animal to act in the world.

According to Becker, the great paradox of human existence is our ability to grasp the infinite juxtaposed with the certainty of our death.³³ The human animal has the capacity to imagine the infinite; we can remember the past and project our existence far into the future with unfettered imaginations. Becker describes this paradox: “The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it graspingly dies.”³⁴ Yet, all of this

³¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), ix.

³² *Ibid.*, ix.

³³ Throughout his writing Becker seems to take great delight in creatively and graphically describing this paradox. For example, he colorfully describes the human condition as simply “gods that shit.” Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 58. He later describes the plight of humanity as digestive tracts with teeth. Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 1.

³⁴ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

tremendous capacity is housed in a biological organism that will die.³⁵ This paradox is the source of great anxiety that the human animal works diligently to avoid.

To avoid being overcome by the anxiety of death, we invest in avoidance strategies. These strategies are any endeavor that helps one transcend death anxiety; anything that helps us forget that we are mortal. A vital part of the strategy for us to assuage death anxiety is to create systems of meaning or culture to establish a sense of place and importance in the universe. The role of culture is to organize the system of *meaning making* and create cultural norms by which we can safely participate. “Man is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter.”³⁶ The system of society or culture exists as a set of symbolic guideposts for human beings’ communal living. Becker asserts that this societal system also functions to facilitate the needs of the selfish human animal and their essential need for self-worth. He described the essential drive for meaning and self-worth as “heroism.”³⁷ This heroic drive is nourished in the realm of the symbolic and “can be fed limitlessly in the domain of the symbols and so into immortality.”³⁸

The projection of heroism into our daily lives becomes a primary, albeit unconscious, project. The work we engage to avoid the harsh reality of death and to bolster our sense of self-esteem happens on a two important levels: a personal level and a

³⁵ This statement implicitly raises the issue of mind body dualism and while this is an interesting topic it is outside the scope of this particular paper.

³⁶ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

societal level. In some ways the two are intimately connected and it may be unfair to try to separate them, but for ease of examination we will explore these two expressions.³⁹

The first expression of our dilemma manifests on an individual level: *Becker posits that death anxiety behaviors, and our subsequent response to it, are initially shaped in childhood.*⁴⁰ The child is born helpless and is utterly dependent upon the care of a nurturing adult. In their naïve brain they retain magical powers to manipulate the world around them. If the child “experiences pain, hunger, discomfort, all he has to do is scream and he is relieved and lulled by gentle loving sounds. He is a magician and a telepath who has only to mumble and to imagine and the world turns to his desires.”⁴¹ This experience of magical manipulative power is quickly replaced by the realization that without the presence of the nurturing adult the child will surely die.⁴² This creates a crisis for the emerging ego in which the anxiety must be overcome. Thus begins the journey for the emerging ego to repress the anxiety of death, and to bolster the self-esteem of the “I.” While this journey is initially shaped in childhood experience it is lived out in continued symbolic engagement in the world through adulthood. “We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But

³⁹ In chapter four of *The Denial of Death*, Becker writes about the two expressions of the individual’s strategy to avoid the anxiety of death. Of the individual struggle he writes: “We called one’s lifestyle a vital lie, and now we can understand better why we said it was vital: it is *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one’s whole situation.” Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 55.

⁴⁰ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness....”⁴³ This symbolic engagement with death continues to shape the individual’s reaction to death anxiety.

The second expression of this dilemma is that *death anxiety avoidance is also achieved on a societal level*.⁴⁴ The anxiety-reducing project is not limited to the individual endeavor but is vitally connected to our awareness of others. Culture itself is designed to be a death avoidance mechanism. It is filled with symbolic practices of interaction that help reduce death anxiety. “An animal who gets his worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn’t come off second best.”⁴⁵ Our social participation takes on a significant role in assuaging our death anxiety. “The fact is this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs, and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism.”⁴⁶ This heroism is essential for our ability to overcome the anxiety death brings about in us. The symbolic action system affords us a set of rules to play the game of life by in which punishments and rewards are perceived consistent. By following a set pattern of living one can successfully be rewarded with self-esteem bolstering returns that buffer death anxiety. This is seen in garnering the esteem of neighbors, perceived power or prestige. The contrary is also true, by deviating from societal norms the individual is punished with damaging blows to self-esteem. This

⁴³ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁴ The second expression we will explore is the societal strategy. This strategy works in concert with individual efforts. Becker writes, “We enter symbolic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness; but these relationships also bind us, the enslave us even further because they support the lie we have fashioned.” Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 56.

⁴⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

happens on a continuum from joking and mocking, to ostracism or banishment, including scapegoatism and death. These societal norms work to symbolically nurture the heroic significance of the individual while, ironically, limiting individual creativity and freedom.

Society is comprised of several cultural fictions. The cultural fictions created by society are unique to country and region, but the notion all of humanity lives according to them remain universal. “Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning. Every society thus is a ‘religion’ whether it thinks so or not.”⁴⁷ We live largely symbolic lives however conscious of it we are or not. And our engagement with these symbols helps to buffer the anxiety created by the fundamental paradox of existence: we are able to imagine the infinite but we certainly will die.

The ramifications of the denial of death, Becker believes, are the root of much of the evil and atrocity we experience as humans. These projects we engage to bolster a sense of immortality would not be an issue, or even very interesting, if they were harmless.⁴⁸ Becker argued in seeking to secure our sense of immortality in the symbolic or spiritual we inadvertently usher in a host of problems. These problems cut humans off from their true capacity as imaginative and curious creatures and diminish life’s potential. More than that, these projects are destructive to society as a whole. The destructive power can work within individuals, a society, or between societies that have competing

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ While Becker attributes a great deal of human evil to our subconscious death avoidance, there is contemporary research to suggest it might be used to bolster and reinforce positive, community building, behavior. His theory becomes not simply a diagnostic of evil but can also be used to understand altruism and beneficial actions.

immortality projects. Becker cites international wars as examples of how two nations with competing immortality symbolism resort to violence to assert symbolic dominance. “The fact is that self-transcendence via culture does not give man a simple and straightforward solution to the problem of death; the terror of death still rumbles underneath cultural repression.... In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more evil into the world than organisms could ever do by merely exercising their digestive tracts...man’s impossible hopes and desires have heaped evil into the word.”⁴⁹ Protecting the cultural fictions by which we live becomes a paramount endeavor and if that system is threatened we risk feeling fallible.⁵⁰

The damage is not limited to the competing individuals, but extends to people who are on the margins of society, the lower classes, and anyone who threatens to damage the immortality projects. Immortality projects are any of the existential attempts to either avoid death or buffer ourselves from the reality of it symbolically. People can become victims of individual and cultural immortality projects. Becker points out that when humans realize they lack the immortality that is characteristic of gods, their reflex is to prove “at least we can destroy like gods.”⁵¹ This reflexive action is to establish and assert a dominant immortality project. If a person or culture stakes its claim to immortality in a certain project, then competing projects threaten its claim. The person who feels threatened is driven to assert superiority over the person threatening their project. This makes the immortality project, left unexamined, one of the most dangerous

⁴⁹ Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 5.

⁵⁰ Throughout his work Becker talks about death as both a physical reality and a symbolic action. The symbol of death comes to stand in for meaninglessness or non-being. This is existentially terrifying for the meaning making human animal.

⁵¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 85.

aspects of the human condition and one that Becker claims is largely responsible for a good deal of the atrocity that has taken place in history.⁵² Left on this trajectory, the human immortality project will continue to be responsible for a good deal of the atrocities we will face in the future.⁵³

Terror Management Theory

Becker's understanding of the human condition laid the groundwork for empirical study of human behavior. Social scientists have been able to study and observe the phenomena Becker described. This next section will briefly highlight four contemporary areas of study: Terror Management Theory, Focus Theory, how Becker applies to cosmetic surgery, and the idea of the Polarized Mind.

Researchers Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski describe "Terror Management Theory" in their seminal work *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*.⁵⁴ These three have taken "a perilous leap from Becker's theorizing to empirical science."⁵⁵ Like Becker, they posited that a great deal of human behavior is directed towards staving off the anxiety and fear of death. These researchers set out to find an empirical link between Becker's theory and measurable response to death anxiety. They devised an experiment asking judges to fill out personality questionnaires and make a

⁵² Ibid., 5.

⁵³ "The thing that makes [humans] the most devastating animals that ever stuck [their] neck up into the sky is that [they] wants a stature and destiny that is impossible for an animal; [they] want an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is." Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 96.

⁵⁴ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003). Kindle.

⁵⁵ Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon, "A Perilous Leap From Becker's Theorizing to Empirical Science: Terror Management Theory and Research," *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker*, ed. Daniel Leichthy (London: Praeger, 2002), 5.

ruling on a hypothetical case.⁵⁶ They predicted that the judges who received reminders of their mortality would give more punitive rulings in their hypothetical cases. To do this, they arranged the packets and placed an additional exercise in half the judges' packets that asked:

- a) Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.
- b) Jot down as specifically as you can what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.⁵⁷

The hypothetical case was a straightforward ruling on setting bond for an alleged prostitute. It included a copy of the citation and relevant information about the defendant. The judges who did not receive the mortality reminder came back with an average of a \$50 bond recommendation. In startling contrast, the judges who were reminded of their mortality returned an average decision of \$455 for a bond recommendation. This result supported the researches initial prediction.

These three and several others have tested multiple scenarios over the years.⁵⁸ *Their basic findings indicate that a heightened awareness of mortality produces an exaggerated reaction to moral transgressors.*⁵⁹ Their work extended beyond the individual need to bolster self-esteem or assert a heroic self. They also studied the scope

⁵⁶ For a full description of this experiment see: Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), Kindle LOC 978.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg coined the term Terror Management Theory and have conducted numerous studies to support their claims. For further reading regarding their experiments I highly recommend the book published by the three researchers: *In the Wake of 9/11*. Others who have done research supporting Terror Management theory will be explored in the following chapters.

⁵⁹ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), Kindle LOC 1066.

of mortality salience effects to explain the “hostilities among nations by utilizing the notion that national identity is a large component of most people’s worldviews.”⁶⁰ They conducted a variety of experiments that demonstrate what they call “worldview defense.” Their subjects have indicated “more positive evaluations of those who help validate one’s worldview and more negative evaluations of those who challenge the validity of that worldview.”⁶¹ Their research has shown in countless examples that when people have a heightened awareness of death or even a subconscious prime,⁶² they are more likely to act out against those who threaten their worldview. The frightening aspect of this research is that this appears to be happening outside the realm of rational thought. For example the judges were not aware that their exaggerated punitive behavior was a result of experiencing a mortality reminder.

Terror Management Theory also reveals that death anxiety can be subliminally primed with out the subject’s awareness. An experiment was devised that allowed researchers to introduce a subliminal prime via a computer screen.⁶³ The participants were told they were participating in a word association experiment and asked to look at ten words in a particular order in a computer screen. Each word was flashed on screen for a half-second before the screen moved to the next word on the list. The participants were unaware that between each screen change they were exposed to an additional word for

⁶⁰ Mortality salience is when an individual becomes aware of, or is reminded, their inevitable death. Ibid., Kindle LOC 1084.

⁶¹ Ibid., LOC 1102.

⁶² Used in this context a *prime* is the act of preparing or bringing to the forefront. Just as one primes a pump to prepare it to produce water the researchers prime the metaphorical mental pump to produce death anxiety.

⁶³ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003). Kindle LOC 1340.

42.8 millisecond. For comparison, it takes between one and four hundred milliseconds for the human eye to blink.⁶⁴ The participants were divided into two groups. One group saw *field* as a neutral word in their subliminal exposure and the other group saw *death*. Neither group reported seeing the words in their subliminal conditioning. Following their respective exposure the participants participated in a worldview defense measurement. All of the participants were asked to evaluate pro and anti-American essays supposedly written by foreign students. The hypothesis being that the group that received the subliminal death prime would align with similar experiments utilizing a non-subliminal death prime. In those experiments the group who received the death prime indicated an elevated worldview defense. Their study indicated that subjects who received the subliminal death prime did indeed behave as expected. Their behavior conformed to the previous research that measured an elevated pro-America bias. “Exposure to subliminal death primes also resulted in elevated pro-American bias relative to the control condition, thus clearly establishing that worldview defense in response to thoughts of death does not require any conscious awareness of such thoughts.”⁶⁵ The result is astounding—even without being consciously aware of the prime our actions are affected by the death anxiety that lurks deep within us. “This experiment, and many others like it, show that unconscious death thoughts instigate distal defenses.”⁶⁶ In this experiment the subjects who were exposed to a reminder of their death responded in ways that more rigorously

⁶⁴ B10NUMB3R5, “The Database of Useful Biological Numbers.” <http://bionumbers.hms.harvard.edu/bionumber.aspx?id=100706&ver=1>.

⁶⁵ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), Kindle LOC 1380-1382.

⁶⁶ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 176.

defended their nation. This result gives us reason to extrapolate the study and wonder about our impulse to defend other cultural or religious systems to which we adhere. Given a reminder of our death are we more likely to defend our religion? To what end will we go to defend the cultural artifacts that help us assuage death anxiety?

Further, this study reveals that whether we know it or not we are reacting to the anxiety of the knowledge of mortality from which we cannot hide. Even if we bury this knowledge in the deepest regions of our consciousness we are still unable to avoid acting out of the tragic knowledge of death. Perhaps burying or avoiding the knowledge of death makes us even more prone to the destructive impulses this anxiety breeds.

Focus Theory

Early research in Terror Management Theory has shown a response but has not indicated a specific predictable reaction. Eva Jonas hypothesized that the response to the anxiety of death could be predicted using Focus Theory of Normative Conduct.⁶⁷ Because we are surrounded with competing worldviews all the time, they wondered which particular worldview would be exaggerated by the mortality salience prime. Or is there a predictable correlation between the exaggerated reaction and a supporting worldview? A group of researchers sought to explain the norms to which people will adhere in the face of an intentional mortality salience reminder. They predicted “although conflicting norms may coexist within a person’s cultural worldview, the norm that influences action following [mortality salience] should be the one that is most prominent

⁶⁷ C. A. Kallgren, R. R. Reno, and R. B. Cialdini, “A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: When Norms Do and Do Not Affect Behavior.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, no. 8 (October 2000): 1002-1012, accessed February 24, 2016.

in consciousness at the moment.”⁶⁸ Their research indicated that mortality salience is able to magnify the cultural norms most salient in their subjects. They were able to prime altruism as a social norm and when confronted with a reminder of death that social norm was enhanced. When pro-self-behavior was primed as a social norm the death reminder served to enhance selfish behavior in test subjects. “People want to live up to cultural standards and the standards that are relevant for terror-management processes depend on what standards are salient in a specific situation.”⁶⁹ The ability to prime altruism as a response to a death reminder reflects an understanding that has evolved beyond what Becker first articulated.⁷⁰

This suggests that the response to the anxiety of death is not a fixed response but fluid reaction. If the social context is such, generosity and altruism may be increased in an individual or in society. The opposite is also true: if so primed an individual or society may react with greed and self-preserving actions. The reaction to the fear of death is not a predictable turn to a specific norm but is highly contextual. The norm that is most prominent in the individual or society seems to be the one enhanced by death anxiety.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Eva Jonas et al. “Focus theory of normative conduct and terror-management theory: The interactive impact of mortality salience and norm salience on social judgment.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 6 (2008): 1241, accessed December 14, 2013.

Ibid., 1243.

⁶⁹ Becker was not optimistic about the response death anxiety breeds in the human animal. His work in *Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* entertain the negative ramifications of death denial activity. Becker writes, “The soberest conclusion that we could make about what has actually been taking place on the planet for about three billion years is that it is being turned into a vast pit of fertilizer.” *Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 283.

⁷⁰ The new work being uncovered in this field might give us reason to critique Becker’s initial assessment particularly around the response of love or compassion—a task to which we will tend at the end of this section.

⁷¹ This result reveals the importance of faith communities that model values consistent with Scripture. For example, if a community is able to make “love your neighbor as yourself” the typical proximal norm perhaps that behavior will be reinforced in its members on a more regular basis.

This notion will be important in our conversation about poverty and how death anxiety informs responses to poverty. Using focus theory we could plausibly predict that reactions rooted in death anxiety might be altruistic or well meaning if the proximal norm is such. However we might also plausibly predict the contrary, that is, a damaging or harmful reaction given the right proximal norms. Despite the outcome, either altruistic or harmful, the individuals prompting the reaction are treated symbolically as features of an immortality project. Whether or not the reaction has positive or negative outcomes the ability to respond *relationally* has been diminished. The gospel calls us to meet people as people—in our common humanity—rather than symbolic entities to manipulate to assuage death anxiety. This symbolic interaction will be an important feature of death anxiety response when we turn our attention to the ways individuals and communities respond to issues of poverty.

Another novel perspective on Becker's initial theory is an examination of the existential motive underlying cosmetic surgery. Kim-Pong Tam claims that “by modifying the body through cosmetic surgery, people can symbolically defend against their death anxiety.”⁷² By using surgical procedures individuals will be able to fully embrace cultural norms, however exaggerated, reinforcing self-esteem and buffering death anxiety. Tam's research illustrated that individuals when manipulated by mortality salience are significantly more likely to accept cosmetic surgery. The irony is that individuals will engage in risky health or life threatening behavior in order to bolster their symbolic defense against mortality.⁷³ This result points out that individuals responding to

⁷² Kim-Pong Tam, “Existential motive underlying cosmetic surgery: A terror management analysis.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43, no. 5 (May 2013): 947, accessed December 14, 2013.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 953.

primed mortality salience do not necessarily make logical choices that would result in maintaining or improving general health. In fact this study points out the opposite, that people will engage in risk-taking behavior in order to “gain a sense of symbolic immortality in the face of death terror.”⁷⁴

Kirk Schneider has built on Becker’s initial work in his book of *The Polarized Mind: Why It’s Killing us and What We Can Do About It*.⁷⁵ Schneider believes that the “polarized mind” is language for massive undiagnosed mental illness. This polarization is the elevation of a particular worldview to the exclusion of all others. The polarization behavior in Christian or religious vocabulary the polarization behavior might be called idolatry. “Cultures and individuals have the capacity to be polarized.”⁷⁶ Schneider posits that “at the core of social polarization, similar to the core of individual polarization, is terror.”⁷⁷ This terror is the fundamental connection to Becker’s work. Ultimately all terrors are rooted in the fear of death. Schneider also believes that this same terror of groundlessness that can lead to polarization can also be a source of great joy and freedom. “Joys, breakthrough, liberations, are based in groundless suspension which leads to open and free thinking. Faithful witness to groundlessness and beyond is essential to social and individuals moving beyond polarization.”⁷⁸ We can mentally connect Schneider’s articulation of groundlessness to Becker’s understanding of the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 953.

⁷⁵ Kirk J. Schneider, *The Polarized Mind: Why It’s Killing Us and What We Can Do About It* (Colorado Springs, CO: University Professors Press, 2013).

⁷⁶ Kirk Schneider, “The Polarized Mind: Why It’s Killing Us and What We Can Do About It” (Lecture, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, November 7, 2013).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

fundamental fear of death. There is certainly a terror that can make one feel like the foundations of the earth have come apart in the face of the reality of death. Schneider's work represents how Becker's initial theory is examined in contemporary scholarship. In new and meaningful ways we are able to understand the depth of the human condition.

The work of Becker and those who have followed in his footsteps have revealed a powerful picture of the human condition. The problem I articulated in the introduction is that people fail to thrive or find meaning in life. This sense of failure drives them to find the life they lack. Becker illuminates that drive as a flight from death, which ironically robs them of their goal of life. As people seek life by fleeing from death, the negative ramifications extend beyond themselves and damage relationships and communities. As we will examine later, this is especially poignant in how communities and individuals respond to issues of poverty. Those who are homeless, on governmental assistance, or rely on food banks, create a symbolic threat to our cultural fiction. They reveal the fictions to which we cling in order to assuage our death anxiety. This is not a welcome revelation and has the potential to bring out the worst of our nature in order to preserve and protect our illusions.

Critique of Becker

As we consider a critique of Becker I will begin with anecdotal experience from teaching and lecturing about this material in a wide range of venues. Inevitably, when I speak to a group about Becker's work I am met with resistance. There is almost always at least one person who responds by stating that they do not ever think about death during their everyday life. Therefore, in their opinion none of this can be true. There is an intuitive response for some that this just does not feel right and they initially reject that

Becker's work, and the subsequent work in Terror Management Theory, could accurately describe the human condition.

The other response I frequently hear is: "but I'm not afraid to die." Which for some may be true, there is a continuum of acceptance and health in regards to managing death anxiety. There may be some that have a healthy incorporation of mortality into their conscious lives. Becker's articulation of the human condition is not predicated on the notion that one lives in terror of their own biological death in their every waking moment.

The response to this critique is two fold. First, the notion of death is biological but also symbolic. I would bet that the same people who indicate they are not afraid of death would be adverse to the notion of being cut off from friends and loved ones, shunned, or marginalized—that is, being symbolically dead. Further, from an evolutionary perspective there is an innate drive of life in all the animal kingdom—including human beings. We might surmise that those who lacked this drive for life did not become ancestors. One may have an authentic peace about facing death, but that does not undermine Becker's articulation of denying death as the touchstone of the human condition of pain and evil.

Some object to the idea that anyone can define a universal human condition. This universal notion makes some people uncomfortable. The idea that there is a common thread across time and culture in the way people experience the problem of evil initially seems overreaching. For some there is a gut level reaction that rejects any universally applicable cultural construct. Becker is not suggesting that all cultures are the same, or that they are all governed by the same practices. The fact remains that there is yet to be

discovered a culture in which its participants do not experience death. The way each system responds to the problem is vastly different and occupies a range of healthy and unhealthy consequences. The point, I believe, where Becker shines is that in some way all cultures react to death. The manifestations may be radically different but the reaction to death is a cross cultural, universal, phenomena.

Becker's own work may have evolved further had he not died at a relatively young age. Speculations aside, there are places we can critique Becker's work even as we wonder how his work might have matured. In light of some of the recent research into death anxiety we see a more fluid reaction to mortality salience than simply a negative or damaging response. Especially from Eva Jones, there is a notion that the response to mortality salience can prime proximal norms—including altruistic responses.⁷⁹ It may be that a response to mortality salience can magnify what lies beneath the normally accessible conscience be that a damaging or altruistic behavior. Becker sought to define a "Science of Man"⁸⁰ and created a powerful academic argument for why evil exists. But perhaps that was only half of the story. Perhaps the denial of death serves more than as a function of evil but exaggerates our proximal subconscious impulses.

The other form of critique we should consider is from the field of psychology. Becker was an interdisciplinary thinker who employed a broad range of academic tools—including psychology. Jacques Lacan provides a psychoanalytical construct that affords us a place to offer a reasonable critique of Becker's work. It is helpful that both Becker and Lacan have roots in the psychoanalytical tradition that has evolved from Freud. This

⁷⁹ Eva Jonas et al. "Focus theory of normative conduct and terror-management theory: The interactive impact of mortality salience and norm salience on social judgment." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 6 (2008): 1241, accessed December 14, 2013.

⁸⁰ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 159.

gives common language so as not to be critiquing one construct with the terms of another. While a full treatment of Lacan is well outside the scope of this project a brief summary of his ideas will be helpful.

Rather than import Freud's tripartite directly, Lacan grounded his work in Freud and then offered his own construct.⁸¹ Lacan based his system on a dynamic tripartite that operate simultaneously. This is expressed in three terms: *the imaginary*, *the symbolic*, and *the real*.

It is the Real that is most helpful in critiquing Becker. The Real is "what is expelled when a signifier becomes attached to some morsel of reality: it is the bit the signifier fails to capture. Also, in terms of Hegelian dialectics, the Real must exist in tension with the other two—for something to exist, its inverse must exist as well; and for existence to be there must also be a state of non-being."⁸² The direct connection is the tension between Lacan and Becker being and non-being or death. Becker would surmise that the root of the problem of the human condition is the awareness of death, or what Lacan would call non-being. Lacan expounds upon the terror of the possibility of non-being, or death, in the experience of the Real. Becker's perspective that this is all rooted only in death fails to connect to the broader experience of the Real as Lacan would describe. As Lacan stated, "the featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic; it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word."⁸³

⁸¹ Freud's tripartite consists of: Id, Ego, Super Ego.

⁸² Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*, Oneworld Beginner's Guides (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 98.

⁸³ Ibid.

Death may be an essential component of the Lacanian Real but would perhaps miss the wonder and awe of the creative capacity the Real offers. A practicing Lacanian Psychoanalyst, Hilda Fernandez, writes, “Experiencing the Lacanian Real caused terror, awe, amazement or uncanny feeling, is always traumatic. Becker coded the Lacanian real by concept of death. But instead of continuing the tension of this question, he opted to give a monumental answer.”⁸⁴ It seems that Becker’s attempt to provide a monumental answer can be perceived from a Lacanian perspective to impoverish the ongoing tension between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary as a seamless experience. Lacan offers nuance in his description of the human that would be interesting to explore in light of Becker’s work. The two are not mutually exclusive but there is room for further research and connection between the two.

In his book, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, Brian Blount contends that death overwhelmingly consumes the typical American preacher’s agenda. “I was caught up with the reflection that popular culture and popular Christianity are both mesmerized by death and dying. Both appear to believe that one can only arrive at life by driving through death, that transcendent life is integrally bound up with the ever-presentness of death.”⁸⁵ In contrast to Becker, Blount claims that our culture has a problem of being obsessed with death rather than running from it and subordinating it to the realms of our subconscious. “Though allegedly alive, we, too, are preoccupied with death. Perhaps we are so capable in our popular culture of imagining the walking dead because

⁸⁴ Hilda Fernandez, “Ernest Becker and Jaques Lacan: ON the Symbolic Order and the Freudian Drive.” (Lecture, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Oct. 4, 2015).

⁸⁵ Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiv.

there are times when we who ostensibly comprise the living seem so much like them.”⁸⁶ I will discuss Zombie culture in the next section and offer an explanation of why they may not be an authentic connection to mortality but means of further distraction. Blount’s primary thesis is that preachers should not end with death but with resurrection, which is, from my perspective, a valid critique. While Becker spends a tremendous effort in understanding death even his goal was to find meaning and health in life. Blount’s claim of a cultural death obsession may critique Becker’s worldview. However, I would suggest a nuance that Becker is not positing a death obsession but death awareness that leads to richer life.

A Christian Connection

Let us now focus our attention on the compatibility of Becker’s language with the Christian tradition. In doing so we will connect the wisdom of the Christian faith tradition to the modern psychological articulation of the human condition.

It is important for the Christian theologian to be able to fully and accurately define the human condition. It does not make sense to proclaim a message of hope if one does not fully appreciate the cause of hopelessness.⁸⁷ Unless one understand the problem, speaking words of life become incredibly difficult if not impossible. Paul Tillich articulates this in his method of correlation.⁸⁸ The Christian message must correlate with

⁸⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁷ There may be a wide range of definitions surrounding hope and conversely hopelessness. For the purposes of this paper I will rely on Ted Peters’s articulation of hope. “Faith is one of the three theological virtues identified in the closing verse of 1 Corinthians 13; the other two are hope and love... We defined faith in terms of trust. When we mix in hope, faith becomes trust in God *for the future*... The symbol of hope is resurrection.” Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1994), 290. I infer from this by contrast that hopelessness is a failure of trust in God for the future.

⁸⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 83.

the language of the world and the experience of contemporary culture. There must be a connection to the experience of contemporary culture in our articulation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Becker's work allows a unique and useful perspective into the existential dilemma that defines and drives our culture. Understanding Becker's definition of the human experience allows us to directly face our own internal demons as well as proclaim freedom to the culture around us.

There is wisdom in the Lutheran tradition through the *Theology of the Cross* that offers a further theological connection to Becker's work. Martin Luther, in his Heidelberg Disputation (1518) wrote: "The theologian of the Cross calls those things that are good, good; and those things that are evil, evil. In contrast the theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil."⁸⁹ Becker's work helps the theologian of the Cross to properly call things that are good, good, and those things that are evil, evil.⁹⁰ The theology of the Cross demands a theologian call the thing that which is actually is. There is a demand to set aside pretense and false illusions of life—even within the religious system itself. Tillich is again helpful here: "From the Christian point of view, one would say that the Church with all its doctrines and institutions and authorities stands under the prophetic judgment and not above it. Criticism and doubt show that the community of faith stands 'under the

⁸⁹ Timothy Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 44.

⁹⁰ I find Ted Peters' definition of evil helpful to further understand Luther's articulation of the Theology of the Cross. I understand evil may not have a universally accepted definition so for the purpose of this discussion I will rely on Peters' articulation. "Our word *evil* can refer to both sin's effects and the suffering caused by our accidental course of nature, including disease, drought, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods." Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1994), 9. We might still further parse the further definition of evil but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Cross,' if the Cross is understood as divine judgment over man's religious life, and even over Christianity, though it has accepted the sign of the Cross.'"91

When we are tempted to hide from the reality of mortality under the umbrella of religion the judgment of the Cross shatters those illusions and demands we name the reality of our human experience: we are fundamentally mortal. Anything that deludes or detracts from that reality is subject to the judgment of the Cross. It is the Cross itself that makes clinging to false hope in the Christian religious life impossible. The Cross is a symbol that cannot be ossified as it is constantly crucifying false truth even about itself. It is hard to put up any pretense about the illusion of immortality when confronted with the gruesome symbol of the killing machine the Cross was originally designed to be.

Sin is the essential problem for the human being in Christian theology.⁹² For the theologian of the Cross it is necessary for us to identify and name the essential problem or dilemma in the human experience. Sin is a symbolic term that allows us access to the multivalent experience of pain, death, estrangement, disobedience; all of which and many more are contained within the symbol. St. Paul names the problem of sin in Genesis as the manifestation of the first earth creature's disobedience.⁹³ In his letter to the Romans he claims sin came into the world through Adam's disobedience but also that death came

⁹¹ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31.

⁹² Ted Peters draws a helpful distinction between sin and sins. "People who *commit sins* may themselves *be sinners* as well as part and parcel of a whole *nexus of sin*. All these together constitute the larger picture of sin." Further he adds, "The broken relationship with God, who is the source of all life, is what subjects us to death and to anxiety over the prospect of nonbeing. In this situation of estrangement, we act. And an act that expresses this estrangement is an act of sin." Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1994), 22,23. I believe it is this acting out of estrangement, which Peters defines as sin, is the essential problem for the human being in the context of Christian theology. I also add the caveat that I write from a Lutheran theological position.

⁹³ Romans 5:12-14.

into the world as a result of that first sin. In following sections of this paper we will explore some of the specific scriptural claims and their ramifications but for now the issue of sin is at hand. There is a significant connection to the Christian understanding of sin and the academic construct created by Becker in his understanding of the human condition as the denial of death. With some mental translation we can arrive at an understanding of *sin* and *the denial of death* as symbolic terms within their respective traditions that define the same human condition. “Sin is therefore in Becker’s understanding, as in that of the Christian tradition, essentially the turning of the individual away from God and towards the self and the world; the choosing of a self-centered rather than a God-centered existence...”⁹⁴ Becker’s work seems to be entirely compatible with a religious solution to the problem of denying death. “The primary weakness of the modern secular cultural fiction is that it cannot help solve the fundamental human problem, our existential dilemma; in fact Becker believes by focusing only on the level of empirical reality, it makes that problem worse...Becker claims it is in fact quite reasonable to choose the religious solution.”⁹⁵ A Christian theology informed by Becker would not shield us from the negative experiences we face as humans, even that of death. Rather, it would allow us to symbolically face the honest experience of pain, loss, death, and estrangement, and in the midst of that honest experience find a path of hope and the courage to say yes to life. This I believe is the raw power of the Resurrection. It is not a shield that denies that we will die or a delusion of immortality. The promise of life in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ does not deny we will

⁹⁴ Jarvis Streeter, *Human Nature, Human Evil, and Religion: Ernest Becker and Christian Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 159.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

all die but rather gives hope in life even beyond the death we must face.⁹⁶ By virtue of Christ's own death it further connects us to the reality of our own mortality even as we hold the promise of hope for life beyond death.

Becker equips us to be better theologians of the Cross. We can more accurately name the human condition by employing the psychological tools he offers. In the language of Luther this allows us to more specifically call the thing that which it actually is. We can more closely define sin in a way the world around us can understand.

With an honest articulation of the symbolic term *sin* we are left under the judgment of the Cross which strips away all our illusions of life achieved on our own, and ushers us into the reality of our dependence on God alone for life. We are not left in a state of despair and hopelessness but rather courage and hope. Acknowledging the reality of our death, and the consequences of our running from it, we can say yes to the authentic experience of this life and find great freedom. Further, the hope of the Resurrection gives us hope beyond the petty edifices we can create and turns us to the God of creation and life—even beyond death.

The perspective Becker offers also empowers us to be more effective at naming the idols to which we are tempted to fall prey. For example, following Kim-Pong Tam's work on understanding the motivation for cosmetic surgery, as explored previously, we might effectively name the idolatry of youth and its preservation. We might be able to speak to the underlying motivations of individuals willing to subject themselves to tremendous pain, lengthy recovery time, significant costs, as a sacrifice on the altar of

⁹⁶ There are passages of scripture that when translated into English lose important nuances. For example, in the gospel of John Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Perish is contrasted with eternal. This might lead to an artificial tension between death and immortality. A more nuanced, and I would claim orthodox translation, would indicate that this promise of life is not the same as a promise of immortality.

contemporary secular cultural fiction. We can see the power of the temptation to make as much money as we can at the expense of our own lives and also the lives of our families and communities as an elaborate scheme to find life in that which is created rather than the creator. The myth that we can find life and power and potency on our own is what lies at the core of Becker's work and is what is exposed by the theology of the Cross.

Combining these tools within the system of Christian theology allows us to more accurately name this sin that consumes our lives.

CHAPTER THREE

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

It may seem that a paper about the linguistic content of signs, symbols, and their distortion may be too esoteric for practical content. However, the practical ramifications for ministry are especially important. The proper use of signs and symbols can positively impact preaching, teaching and pastoral care. Conversely, there is also opportunity to employ symbols in a negative way. I hope to raise awareness and offer warning concerning the practice of employing sacred symbols in a way that uses religion as a place to hide from the reality of death.

The preacher has a unique opportunity to lift up symbols as of participation in the gospel message. This can happen as they point to physical symbols, such as the Baptismal font, the Cross, or the bread and wine; or as the preacher points to literary symbols such as the scripture, the creeds, and teachings of faith. For the preacher, the use of metaphor as symbolic speech is important as well. The preacher can use these tools that open hearts and minds to lives of faith, all the while resisting the temptation to literalize, or ossify, symbols. The preacher can also equip and encourage the assembly to resist that temptation in their own lives of faith. The practice of resisting the temptation to literalize symbol in speech sets a powerful example. In addition, intentionally holding open the multivalent content of symbols for the congregation models appropriate interpretation. It is a creative and joyful task to employ the symbols of faith that invite people into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers. The preacher can invite people into a life of faith all the while resisting idolatry.

Preachers and lay leaders are often viewed to as teachers. The educational setting is a terrific place to employ the right relationship between signs and symbols and unpack their varied content. This environment is often a place where people are open to learning new ideas and a wonderful low-threat place to talking about signs, symbols, and idolatry. When a person is in crisis—and flailing with a failing symbol—it is best that we provide comfort. This is why the educational setting provides a valuable opportunity to equip people with a healthy relationship to the symbolic and empower them to resist our idol-making propensity.

In a pastoral care context it is important to be aware of how people are employing symbolic language. If a care giver can be attuned to picking up clues that a person has ossified a symbol, a caring and life giving word can be given to break an idol and offer life. I had a conversation with one of my parishioners who, after the Good Friday service, struggled with the idea of life beyond death.⁹⁷ In that particular context he was ossifying the Cross as a symbol of death. While that is an appropriate connotation, the multivalent meaning must remain open. If the Cross is ossified as a sign of death its life giving power is diminished for that individual. Helping him see that the Cross is a symbol that is about more than not dying but living even beyond death was enormously helpful.

Everyday Signs and Symbols

Signs and symbols are prevalent in our everyday lives. Most often they quietly convey their meaning and go unnoticed. Yet, they powerfully shape our thoughts, direct our ideas, and even our actions. In this section we will define some basic terms and concepts of signs and symbols. There are several available definitions for *signs* and

⁹⁷ This was an informal conversation that took place in the Narthex at Mount Si Lutheran Church in North Bend Washington on April 3rd, 2015.

symbols. For the sake of clarity, I will offer a working definition for the purposes of this conversation. We will tackle the task of understanding how signs and symbols function in our culture and how we arrange them to make meaning. Once we develop the concept of sign and symbol we will be able to talk about how they offer a healthy access to the existential or transcendent nature of the human condition. We will also examine some signs and symbols from the Christian tradition. The sacraments, scripture, the creeds, and the sign of the fish are powerful symbols within the Christian faith tradition that help us understand both the positive and negative potential of symbols. We will also turn to the prevailing western culture in which I am rooted. One of the cultural features we will examine is zombies. The zombie genera is an interesting symbolic feature with in our current culture and offers an interesting way to understand some underlying cultural impulses. We will examine this popular cultural phenomenon as part of our exploration of symbolic capacity. We will also explore how the fear of death manifests itself in the way we engage symbolic content. While symbols are a powerful medium of conveying meaning and access to the transcended or existential experience of life they can also be misused or damaged. Damage is done to the meaning conveyed in a symbol when the symbol is ossified, or fixed to point to just one signified. It is possible this is done out of a simple misunderstanding of the nature of a symbol. However, I propose a more meaningful explanation rooted in the heart of the human condition—in our anxiety of death. We will explore the potential damage done the symbolic as a result of repressed death anxiety.

Human beings strive to make meaning and order. Viktor Frankl writes of this impulse, “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a

‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives.”⁹⁸ One of the defining and wonderful features of the human existence is our ability to tell stories. Humans over the course of recorded history have placed themselves in cosmic stories, personal narratives, and shared stories to make meaning in a world otherwise bereft of coherence.

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.⁹⁹

From the Judeo-Christian narrative to stories told by Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, we find written and oral traditions that place humans in context in the larger cosmos. It may be tempting to imagine that our propensity for storytelling and meaning making arise as a secondary function from our essential faculty. Yielding to this temptation limits or relegates story to “merely” entertainment, when in fact the opposite is true.¹⁰⁰ Story is an essential component of our human experience and necessary for survival. It is the primary vehicles through which we experience reality.

The basic means of communicating these communal and individual stories is through employing signs and symbols. In this first section we will work towards a working definition of sign and symbol.¹⁰¹ Following this we will explore how these means of communication are distorted by the anxiety derived from mortality awareness.

⁹⁸ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 99.

⁹⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3.

¹⁰⁰ Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: the Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2012), Kindle LOC 172.

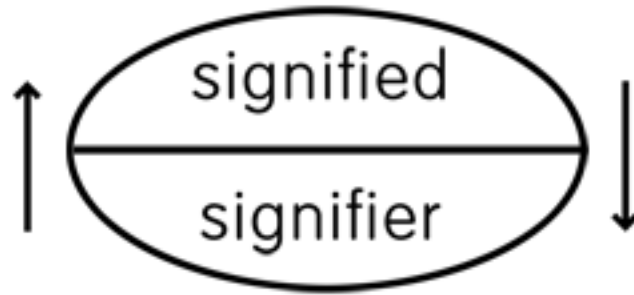
¹⁰¹ There are several definitions and exhaustive texts in linguistics and semiotics that thoroughly elaborate signs and symbols. While it is important for us to establish a common definition, an exhaustive definition is beyond the scope of this paper.

The anxiety we experience from our awareness of mortality is often a non-conscious experience. However, through the work we have previously explored in Ernest Becker and Terror Management Theory we know that it is a real and powerful force in the human animal. It is my proposal that our unexamined death anxiety affects the way we employ the basic building blocks of story and narrative: sign and symbol. We collapse the creative and multivalent meanings of symbols into a sign function in order that they may more effectively serve our immortality projects and assuage our death anxiety.


Signs

Signs comprise the most basic and essential components of communication. Each of the letters you are seeing are signs that combine to form words that connote meaning encircling a common definition. Signs and sign combinations allow us to convey literal and abstract meaning with remarkable efficiency. With signs we create shared meaning. For letters to be meaningful we all have to agree on what sound the individual letter represents. When those letters are combined to form words, we again have commonly agreed upon usage and definitions. These signs give us clues to follow pathways of meaning and give us the ability to share that meaning with others. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure offers a definition of a sign in a dyadic tradition.¹⁰² Quite simply a sign stands for something else. A sign has two parts: the sign itself (the signifier), and that to which it points (the signified). Saussure maps this signifier-signified relationship with an illustration:

¹⁰² Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.



There is an assigned relationship between sign and signifier. The assigned meaning remains static or the sign is rendered useless and discarded. This Saussurian dyadic diagram will become an important feature for describing how we collapse symbols into signs as a ramification of our unexamined death anxiety.

Signs point us to something else or contain meaning not necessarily physically or visually contained in the sign itself. For example a sign on a door in a restaurant, public building, or space with points us to the reality that behind that door is a bathroom facility. Further, the sign indicates that the bathroom facility is only to be used by men. Similarly, a sign like this  on a door points to the reality that behind this door is a bathroom facility only women should use. These signs simply and passively relay vital information for us to avoid awkward violations of social norms. These signs work because we have a common investment in their shared meaning to order social conventions.

Street signs point to reality beyond themselves in similar fashion. A red octagonal shaped sign with “STOP” printed boldly in the middle indicates a driver is to stop their vehicle at place signified by a line. This is a commonly used and navigated sign that conveys a simple meaning with remarkable clarity. It passively points to the reality that demands a driver stop at a specific location. This sign is effective because we have shared

public understanding that stopping in this specific location will provide safety benefit to the driver, other drivers, and pedestrians that may be present. We even have laws enforcing the validity of this sign. Failing to recognize its defined meaning may result in punitive action.¹⁰³

Common for all signs—such as letters, street signs, or direction signs—is that they passively convey information to the user.¹⁰⁴ They point to a reality beyond themselves and allow access to shared meaning. They are also fixed in their meaning. In some cases the law defines the meaning of the sign. Their meaning does not evolve or take on new connotations. This is necessary for their function, as stop sign must always mean one thing: stop. A sign on a bathroom door indicates the intended gender to use the facility, and only that. They convey information and social norms and conventions. Signs do not evoke debates or conversations about meaning, wider abstractions, or existential content. When they are outdated or fail to communicate relevant information they are casually discarded with little consequence.

Symbol

Signs and symbols share a common feature in that they both point to something else. Yet a symbol takes on a larger, if not more mysterious, sphere of connotation. A symbol contains everything that a sign contains, but also points to meaning beyond the literal shared meaning. Linguistically and semiotically there are several ways of understanding symbols as functions of signs, or as thing in their own right.

¹⁰³ Each state, or nation for that matter, may have their own specific laws regarding Stop signs. The Revised Code of Washington recognizes this in sec. 46.61.195.

¹⁰⁴ Steven Pinker, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 3.

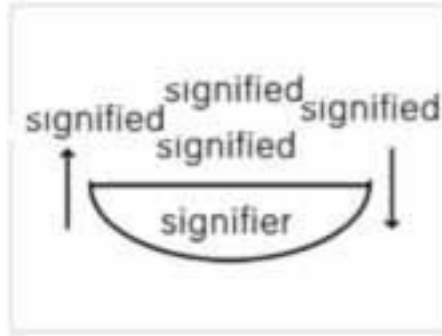
Theologian Paul Tillich posits that symbols participate in the reality to which they point, which is a helpful way of thinking about symbols as differentiated from signs.^{105,106} Because they participate in the reality to which they point they are necessarily fluid and multivalent in meaning. Like signs they function all around us, often unconsciously, allowing us direct access to meaning, abstract, and existential content. Because they are open meaning systems they allow us access, symbolically, to communicate features of interior life, human paradox, and existential crisis. Tillich claims: “Man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate.”¹⁰⁷ They can contain emotional and non-cerebral content (i.e. make us sad or happy), which allows us to participate in and share story and meaning. Where a sign has a closed signified signifier system, a symbol has a signifier and multivalent signified system. We saw Saussure’s dyadic sign diagram that reveals a one to one representation. For a symbol we might imagine the signifier pointing to a host of signified realities.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Abraham Heschel critiques Paul Tillich’s use of symbol as reducing God to fiction or child’s play. Aaron Mackler writes about Heschel’s critique in his article “Symbols, Reality, and God: Heschel’s Rejection of a Tillichian Understanding of Religious Symbols,” *Judaism* 40 (Summer 1991): 290-300.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 45.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ This figure is my adaptation of Saussure’s sign-signifier relationship diagram. I adapted it to show the distinction between a sign and a symbol for the purposes of this conversation. There are several ways to show these relationships but for the sake of clarity I will use this distinction consistently. Further exploration is beyond the scope of this paper.



Like signs, symbols continually operate around us in ways largely unnoticed. However unlike signs, symbols are open to existential meanings. Some examples may be helpful at this point. National flags are important symbols for nations. They contain information but also are laden with national pride and sentiment. The flag of the United States of America points to a literal reality. There is a place on a map that is divided into fifty states that are bound by common constitutional agreements, each participating in the larger reality of the United States. Beyond the tangible reality of the United States, the flag points to and participates in a host of emotional and existential meanings. The United States military salutes the flag as a revered and revered object. Flying the flag over public buildings and homes signifies more than the objective reality of the United States but connotes national pride in the freedom and liberty. If you ask someone on the street what the flag means, chances are you will more often get content beyond literal referents and hear sentimental or emotive claims. You may hear people respond with statements about freedom, liberty, unity, hard work, and other positive associations. As is the case with symbols, the meaning of the flag is not fixed and the symbol is able to contain opposing interpretations without losing its validity as a symbol. Others respond to the question about the flag with oppression, injustice, disparity, and other disparaging

remarks. The symbol is able to comfortably contain all these meanings, including its literal referent.

The Burn Test

When trying to distinguish between a sign and a symbol I propose a simple intuitive test. That is, ask yourself: “What if I burn it?” If I burn a stop sign there will most likely not be any public outrage. There may be concern about waste or safety but not moral indignation. It is a sign and, while a helpful one, does not carry vital symbolic content that allows me to access existential potential. Now, a more dangerous proposal: imagine burning an American flag. Images of burning American flags are effectively used to create outrage. In our thought experiment the idea of burning an American flag would cause others to be offended. This is a sure sign of symbolic content. The physical flag is not the only thing that is desecrated: the symbolic content lying within is also subjugated by the flames. Unlike our burning stop sign, the burning flag evokes emotions of outrage and unrest. This is a symbol that not only points to a literal referent, but participates in the reality to which it points. As such, burning it is an attack on the understood reality. This is especially potent when an individual or community is invested in the symbol.

Asking “What if I burn it” allows us to access the intuitive sense of what is invested in a particular object. If the answer is moral outrage then you are working with symbolic content, if the answer is less than that, you are most likely dealing with a sign/signifier relationship. It is important to be able to distinguish between a sign and a symbol. I propose that our death anxiety motivates us to ossify our symbols as this allows them to be more easily controlled in our buffer systems. An ossified symbol is rigidly

fixed to one meaning at the exclusion of all others. These hardened symbols are merely shells of what the potential of an authentic symbol should have. Importantly, an ossified symbol will remain a symbol in the “burn test.” Because the symbol has been ossified does not mean it will fail to allow the user to access their desired existential content. It may be ridged and inflexible but it remains a symbol however closed off to other symbolic content it has become. This becomes an important nuance in our sign and symbol distinction. A symbol that has become ossified as a part of an immortality project still retains the sense of a symbol to the user even though it is drained of potential content.

Signs, Symbols, and Distortions

It is a dangerous practice to ossify symbols, or harden them so they mean one thing exclusively. This distorts their symbolic content and beauty. We will examine this unfortunate practice in the following section.

Subconscious mortality anxiety directs us to collapse the multivalent potential contained in a symbol to more effectively employ it as a feature of our immortality projects. This distorts the meaning of symbols and distorts their creative potential. To support this claim I turn to Ernest Becker and the work in Terror Management Theory. Becker posited that there is a fundamental paradox that plagues humanity.¹⁰⁹ On one side, we are capable of infinite imagination, we have a consciousness that allows us to be uniquely aware of ourselves and we can imagine that self with infinite potential. The other side of that paradox is less pleasant: we are going to die. In our earthly experience we can grasp the infinite only to realize we are mortal. This paradox, Becker asserts, is a

¹⁰⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 3.

terrifying reality for the human being. “All creatures are driven by anxiety; for finitude and anxiety are the same.”¹¹⁰ Ted Peters further explores this connection between anxiety and finitude. He writes, “Although anxiety itself is not sinful, feeling anxious readies us for sin. At the root of anxiety is the fear of loss, especially the fear of losing ourselves in death. It is the fear of dropping out of existence, the fear of extinction or loss of our own being.”¹¹¹

Rather than being paralyzed by this fear humans create complex and extensive coping mechanisms. We cling to the infinite potential part of the paradox and repress the reality of death. Then we go on our merry way and, according to Becker, wreak havoc upon those around us as a result of our repressed death anxiety. We create a metaphorical armor that protects us from the overwhelming reality of mortality.¹¹² Each individual, even cultures, invest in immortality projects that veil the reality of the human condition. These immortality projects buffer us from the reality of our pending death—even if that buffer is blatantly fictitious.

Becker claimed a great deal of evil is done in reaction to death anxiety, whether done consciously or subconsciously.¹¹³ Several scholars continue the work of Becker under the title Terror Management Theory.¹¹⁴ These scholars trace the impulses of human action back to our fundamental paradox and resulting death anxiety. Their studies seek to

¹¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 2:34.

¹¹¹ Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1994), 11.

¹¹² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 43, 57.

¹¹³ Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 96.

¹¹⁴ These scholars include, but are not limited to, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, Pelin Kesebir, Sam Keen, Dan Leichty, Eva Jonas, Jamie Arndt, Paul Wong, Abram Rosenblatt, Ted Peters, and Richard Beck.

unveil the ugly motivation of death anxiety in a quantifiable way. For example, one study sought to examine an individual's willingness to desecrate a sacred or national symbol after having his or her mortality salience primed.¹¹⁵ They gave subjects a simple task and a few tools to accomplish the job. Some of the tools to accomplish their task were sacred symbols such as an American Flag and a crucifix. To accomplish the task they would have to use the sacred symbols and likely cause them damage. The subjects who received the mortality salience prime were far less likely to desecrate sacred symbols and the time it took them to accomplish the task was far greater than the control group.¹¹⁶ Mortality anxiety affects our interaction with our sacred symbols, even if it is an unconscious action.

For us to invest in a durable immortality project we must have some sense of control over that project and the symbols we employ, otherwise we face the terror of uncertainty. The immortality project must be defined and controlled in order to properly assuage our anxiety. Yet, we can only discuss matters of faith and ultimate concern, even immortality projects, symbolically. Following Tillich, it is symbolic language that allows us access to that which is infinite or of ultimate concern. Symbols are open to a host of interpretation and meaning. This is a problem for an immortality project, as it will interpret any competing definition as a threat to its success.

Ironically, while employing the language of the symbolic, as a function of an immortality project, in order to access that which we are ultimately concerned, we drain

¹¹⁵ Mortality salience priming is a tool used by researchers to distinguish between a control group and a study group. The study group is given a seemingly innocuous reminder of death that taps their subconscious mortality anxiety.

¹¹⁶ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), Kindle LOC 1103ff.

the symbolic of its multivalent meaning. These symbols become hardened and inflexible in an ossified state. An ossified symbol is much easier to control as a component of a robust immortality project. However an ossified symbol is really a sign in symbolic trappings. These ossified symbols create a closed system: they are not open to the multivalent meaning a symbol is intended to contain, but point to a literal thing or referent. This is damaging to our fundamental nature as storytelling, and meaning making animals. At best this offers false hope, in idolatrous immortality projects, and at worst it plants the symbols in the ground of obsolescence.

Clinging to an ossified symbol offers false hope. Our death anxiety drives us to create idols out of symbols in order to control them as functions of our immortality projects.¹¹⁷ Creating, albeit subconsciously, a closed symbolic system may facilitate an immortality project, but it creates a system of false hope. If a symbol is ossified it will fail to be open to new meaning and new situations in life's story. This failure is often revealed in the face of tragedy or death, when the veil of the human condition is pulled back and the paradox is exposed in its fullness. An ossified symbol, while pretending to access that with which we are ultimately concerned has a high likelihood of failing to provide meaning. If for example, one interprets the Cross exclusively as a sign that God loves them and will keep them safe, i.e. an ossified symbol, it fails when calamity and danger crop up. The meaning of the Cross as a symbol of God's solidarity with humans in the midst of pain and sorrow is cut off and inaccessible.

¹¹⁷ This suggests we can make an idol out of anything. Even symbols handed to us by the revealed God can be distorted to function in an immortality project. The Cross, Scripture, Communion, Baptism, can all be employed as literalized symbols to bolster an immortality project.

If a sign fails to point to the defined signified it fails to provide meaning and, when tested, creates an existential crisis. The false hope embodied in these ossified symbols can be translated as idolatry. These closed symbols are nothing more than idols in which we invest meaning to create life. Seeking life in that which is created rather than in the creator is a fundamental definition of idolatry. Whether it is an appropriated Christian symbol or melted down golden jewelry in the shape of a calf, life is being sought in a creation rather than the creator.¹¹⁸ Immortality projects can be understood, in my perspective, as parallel to the traditional Christian understanding of idolatry. Paul Tillich solidifies this connection between idolatry and ossified, or to employ his term *absolutizing* symbols. He writes, “All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself.”¹¹⁹

Obsolescence

There is great concern in contemporary culture about the future of the church. Perhaps part of this problem is rooted in the reality that a generation is failing to find the ossified symbols it has been handed meaningful? It is a problem of symbols and stories, not of a generation turning from God or notions of the transcendent.¹²⁰ If there is no room in the system for the sacred symbols to speak to future generations there is no compelling connection to their life’s story. This creates a tremendous transmission problem. Those to

¹¹⁸ Exodus 32.

¹¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 50.

¹²⁰ This is clearly not the case in a world where the self-help books are flying off the shelves. In most regions of the country there is a decline in church attendance but a rise in those claiming to be *spiritual but not religious*. People retain a sense of spirituality and in the face of an obscure symbolized system will leave and find something meaningful. People are hungry for symbols that will give their lives meaning and operational metaphors. This hunger has not abated but rather the source of nourishment has shifted from the traditional sources like the church.

whom we wish to transmit the story and practice of faith will not finding menacing in a closed symbolic system, however meaningfully it spoke to a previous generation. There must be room within the symbolic structure to allow for contemporary context and future expression. As in the aforementioned examples of the Cross or Holy Scripture, if they are ossified they will fail to be transmitted to future generations. When they become co-opted as a feature of an immortality project rather than open living symbols they will not only become idols they will fail to be a meaningful part of faith in the future.

A symbol that has been ossified is not able to speak to ultimate concern and will fade to obscurity. Like a sign that points to something irrelevant it is causally discarded. When we literalize symbols and drain them of their multivalent meaning, thus turning them to signs of idolatry, we also damage their ability to speak meaningfully to a future generation. This is the obsolescence that is the concern for the future of the church. Will we be bold enough to allow symbols to retain their symbolic content however out of control that may feel?

This creates a tremendous burden on the adherent to the ossified symbol; now they must work hard to convince others of the symbol's literal meaning. To draw from our earlier example of the American Flag, if a person adheres to a literal symbolic understanding than any other interpretation must be squelched or it threatens the validity of the adherent's immortality project.

Every conflict over truth is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over...immortality. If anyone doubts this, let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideological self-perpetuation to which he gives allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into a rage over fine points of belief: if

your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die*. Your immortality system as been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible.¹²¹

An ossified symbol is, ironically, more important to defend than the content or reality to which it points. The conflict between ideological disputes is not at its core about the content of the symbol but which immortality project is the most robust.

This is precisely the definition of polarization we heard from Kirk Schneider. The notion of defending and defining symbols at the exclusion any other possibility becomes a laborious task—one that makes authentic relationships extremely difficult. When one becomes polarized their singular task is to convince others they are right and to convert them to their way of thinking.

Allowing symbols to be multivalent is vital for the creative power of the symbol. Christian Scripture is another symbol that must be allowed to be multivalent especially in the face of alternative or competing interpretation. For example, Tillich states

Biblical literalism did a distinct disservice to Christianity in its identification of the Christian emphasis on the symbol of the Fall with the literalistic interpretation of the Genesis story. Theology need not take literalism seriously, but we must realize how its impact has hampered the apologetic task of the Christian church. Theology must clearly and unambiguously represent ‘the Fall’ as a symbol for the human situation universally, not as the story of an event that happened ‘once upon a time.’¹²²

Once the creation narrative becomes an ossified symbol it is static, thus meaningless, and impotent in translation. Future generations will fail to find their own “fallenness” in the story.

Cultural Symbols

¹²¹ Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 64.

¹²² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 2:29.

An interesting example of symbol is that of the “awareness ribbon.” The story of using a ribbon tied in a bow as symbol or awareness of a cause is varied but most sources suggest it started in the 1970s with the wife of a hostage held in Iran.¹²³ She tied yellow ribbons around trees as symbols of awareness of her husband’s condition and her desire to see him safely returned. Out of respect several neighbors adopted the practice and it evolved to any hostage or missing person. In 1986 the red awareness ribbon was adopted by the AIDS activist community to serve as a symbol of awareness of the anti-AIDS movement. This is a great example of symbolic evolution—a symbol cannot be contained to mean just one thing, but adopts and incorporates meaning that is culturally agreed upon and assigned to it. Today there are 48 “awareness ribbons” listed on Wikipedia as functional symbols of awareness for a cause.¹²⁴ This is significant to our conversation about symbols because it illustrates the livingness of symbols. A symbol is able to participate in and accommodate new meanings in changing contexts. Symbols are only as useful as the cultural investment allows; they are as meaningful inasmuch as they garner and utilize public support and connection. An individual may have a personally symbolic item, but that does not elevate that object to public or functional symbol.

Zombies

Zombies help us assuage our death anxiety. If we take Becker seriously, that all of culture is fiction designed to assuage our death anxiety, then popular culture should be a rich source of death denial activities. Skimming the magazines for sale at the checkout stand at the grocery store one certainly finds a host of denial mechanisms. You might see

¹²³ Sandy Fernandez, “Pretty in Pink,” *Think Before You Pink*, accessed April 21, 2014, http://thinkbeforeyoupink.org/?page_id=26.

¹²⁴ “List of Awareness Ribbons,” *Wikipedia*, accessed on April 24, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_awareness_ribbons.

recipes guaranteed to help you lose weight, tips to reverse the signs of aging, ways to feel youthful and young, as well as in invitation to live vicariously through the youth of today. One of the most powerful, if not counterintuitive, death denial mechanisms our popular culture offers is zombie culture.

It is counterintuitive because it seems to be directly confronting death—the reality of which we seek to avoid. A closer look at zombie culture provides clues as to how this symbolic manipulation of death allows us to assuage our death anxiety. It may be tempting to dismiss zombies as a meaningless popular culture fad but further investigation will reveal powerful cultural undercurrents germane to Becker’s work. Sociologist Todd Platts writes: “As part of an extended family of horrific antagonists, zombies have offered bureaucratically managed representations of cultural anxiety for more than 80 years. To ignore these mass-mediated cultural representations of fear and terror is to ignore one of the largest and most enduring cultural sites in which thought and discussion of and about fear and terror occurs.”¹²⁵

This culture is not relegated to movies or print, but includes lunch boxes, clothing, costumes, decorations, etc.... What is perhaps more disturbing than these harmless zombie accouterments is the emerging market for actual zombie killing tools. You can purchase actual ammunition for the purpose of killing zombies. This is from the Hornaday ammunition website: “Be PREPARED – supply yourself for the Zombie Apocalypse with Zombie Max™ ammunition from Hornady®! Loaded with PROVEN Z-Max™ bullets... yes PROVEN Z-Max™ bullets (have you seen a Zombie?). Make sure

¹²⁵ Todd K. Platts, “Locating Zombies in the Sociology of Popular Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 7 (July 2013): 547-60, accessed July 6, 2015, 549.

your ‘bug out bag’ is ready with nothing but the best!”¹²⁶ This is *live* ammunition available in many popular calibers. Similarly, the popular knife manufacturer Gerber asks, “What if it happens? What if our worst fears are realized? If the Dead walk, the continuation of the human race will become a daily struggle. Are you prepared to protect and defend your family and friends?”¹²⁷ This is perhaps a predatory brand extension to capitalize on popular zombie culture. This marketing strategy is revelatory as well. “Clearly, horror is an expansive reservoir in which all sorts of thematic work and cultural contests are articulated.”¹²⁸ There is a semiotic cultural clue revealed in this branding and marketing that allows us a glimpse into our cultural death anxiety.

In our cultural geography, zombies are a landmark that offers a way to deal with apocalyptic fears, death anxiety, and the dark side of the human existence. Typical of a horror genre, they allow the consumer to suspend the disbelief of mortality. Further the horror genre allows us to enter a mental space filled with symbolic tools to deal with cultural and individual anxiety. They are an open symbol: “What nearly all understandings and depictions of popular culture zombies have in common is a flexible creature designed to evoke our macabre fascination and whose likeness adapts to contemporaneous tumult, concerns about manmade and natural disasters, conflicts and wars, and crime and violence.”¹²⁹ Zombie culture remains flexible and is an open symbolic system. Zombies are able to represent a wide range of horror and terror and as

¹²⁶ Hornaday Manufacturing. <http://www.hornady.com/ammunition/zombimax>.

¹²⁷ Gerber. http://www.gerbergear.com/Apocalypse/Gear/Apocalypse-Kit_30-000601.

¹²⁸ Christine S. Davis and Jonathan L. Crane, “A Dialogue with (Un)Death: Horror Films as Discursive Attempt to Construct a Relationship with the Dead.” *Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping*, 20, no 5 (October 2014): 420.

¹²⁹ Todd K. Platts, “Locating Zombies in the Sociology of Popular Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 7 (July 2013): 550, accessed July 6, 2015.

such are a powerful symbolic entity. The list of things that scares us in real life can be assigned to zombies. They can become a stand-in for diseases such as cancer or AIDS; they might represent immigrants, or any of the real or potential threats we consciously entertain. The flexibility of the symbol allows for all sorts of attachment. Once we have assigned our particular fear to the symbol of the zombie that assignment allows us to symbolically manipulate or confront our fears. Thus we can symbolically run and hide, evade, or kill that which threatens our existential existence.

Zombies allow us to symbolically personify death and directly confront it. The problem from a Terror Management Theory perspective is this genre allows us to symbolically confront death as a zombie entity and defeat it. The possibility of victory is present as evidence in the “survivor” subculture in the zombie narrative. One can confront death as a flesh torn, ragged, non-conscience, entity and shoot it in the brain or chop its head off and defeat death itself. This creates the illusion that death is possible to defeat. In this narrative one can exercise the illusion that immortality can be achieved by staying one step ahead of the symbolically personified reality of death in the zombie. Rather than accepting death as a inevitable place on the continuum of life it is symbolically represented in zombies as that which can be defeated with the right skill and preparedness. Further, the reality of death can be avoided in a sense by outrunning or killing the zombie. Typically in this genre, one becomes a zombie by suffering the bite of another zombie.¹³⁰ Thus, avoiding the threat of a zombie attack becomes another symbolic means to avoid the fate of death. Death is symbolically personified as that

¹³⁰ As an open symbolic system this is not universally defined.

which can be avoid and existentially staved off by cunning and skill. Just as one can avoid the stumbling, flesh torn, ragged zombie, so to can one outrun death.

This genre creates a metaphoric parallel to the terrors we continually face: cancer, natural disasters, terrorism, accidents, and the real possibility of death. One may be cognitive of the fact they cannot out run cancer, or employ the best evasive techniques to escape an earthquake, but they can out run and defeat zombies, which existentially assuages my death anxiety.

What may at first glance seem to be a popular culture manifestation of death acceptance is actually an elaborate avoidance mechanism. We embrace the heroes in the genre that are able to defeat death. We flee from the personified symbol of death in the zombie as though death itself might be outrun. The symbolic system of zombie culture grants a refuge from the ever present terror of death manifest in a host of ways which surround us. Spilling over into ammunition manufacturing, knife making, and other cultural artifacts this genre is a powerful cultural denial mechanism.

Christian Symbols

Symbols, and the symbolic action of ritual, are essential components of the Christian faith. The symbols of faith give tangible expression of otherwise intangible, and inaccessible, content. Joseph Campbell writes, “For the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source.”¹³¹

¹³¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 4.

Through the symbolic actions in rituals, in scripture, and in sacraments, individuals and communities are able to access an interior faith life or what Tillich refers to as *ultimate concern*.¹³² These symbols allow us to access that with which we are ultimately concerned. Symbols tell sacred stories and invite the practitioner to participate in them. The symbolic content is essential for participation and transmission of the sacred elements of faith life. For the purpose of this paper we will briefly explore three fundamental Christian symbols. While not exhaustive, a brief examination of Scripture, the Sacraments, and the Creeds, and the symbol of the fish, will be helpful in naming the power of symbols to usher the practitioner into the realm of that with which they are ultimately concerned. Further, we can examine how symbols are distorted into an unhealthy expression as features of death denial. As this relates to the overall content of this paper, I propose symbols can be a healthy exposure to the reality of death or they can become distorted and idolatrous entities that artificially insulate the practitioner from mortality. Exploring these symbols will allow us to see how they work to buffer death anxiety in a healthy way as well as encourage healthy incorporation of mortality into life's story. We will also explore the unhealthy distortions of symbols that have become hardened or ossified.

Scripture

Scripture itself contains important symbolic meaning. It holds symbolic content that unites story and narrative, place, and identity for Christian practitioners. It has literal referents but also contains symbolic content that allows the reader to personalize or incorporate its meaning into their own narrative. Like a sign, the scripture points to

¹³² Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13.

specific and even historical events, but as symbol is never exclusively limited to specific historical referents. For example one may read the Emmaus story of two travelers walking with Jesus after the resurrection.¹³³ Their eyes were kept from recognizing their traveling companion as the risen Jesus. The story is set in a particular historical and geographic context. There are literal referents to which the story points and in that capacity functions as signs. The story also contains a significant symbolic capacity. Its generative power is a fecund source of metaphor in which the reader can extend his or her own life story. One may equally ask: “Literally, where is the road to Emmaus,” as well as ask, “Metaphorically, where do you find yourself on the Emmaus road?” Beyond a literal referent the reader can share their stories about being blind to the presence of Christ in their own journey, or perhaps share stories about their eyes being opened at the breaking of the bread and the revealing of the wounds.¹³⁴ Scripture takes on symbolic capacity and allows the faith practitioner to not only access the historical faith but the present or contemporary faith. This symbolic potential is essential to recognize that Scripture is more than historical information but the ongoing revelation of the living God.

Sacraments

The Christian tradition offers wisdom that we can apply to the problem of death anxiety. The sacraments can be ritual practices that usher us more fully into the human condition—including the awareness of death. When we are tempted to avoid the reality of death the sacraments help us resist the temptation to co-op our faith practice as an

¹³³ Luke 24:13ff.

¹³⁴ Luke 24:30-31. Len Sweet offers a beautiful interpretation of this story. As Jesus lifts and breaks the bread the natural movement of his hands would reveal the scars of crucifixion on his wrists. It is in the breaking of the bread and the revealing of his wounds that his traveling companions are able to see the risen Christ.

extension of an immortality project as they make us more fully aware of our own mortality. Rather than shield us with delusions they open our eyes to the reality of life-which includes our death. The practice of the sacraments can be a healthy way to remind ourselves of our mortality and give us hope even in the face of the awareness of death.

Religion is not a place to hide from death but a place to find hope.

Sacraments are the central ritual action in the Christian church that allows participation in the life of the faith community and in the life of God.¹³⁵ They are not only tangible objects, but tangible objects that accompany ritual words and movements. For the purposes of this paper we will examine the two sacraments practiced by the Lutheran faith tradition with which I am most familiar. Dismayed by the lack of understanding of the essential elements of faith, Luther wrote the Small Catechism as a means of instruction of what he considered a largely ignorant laity.

Baptism

Luther defines the sacrament of Baptism as: “Not merely water, but it is water used according to God’s command and connected to God’s Word.”¹³⁶ Set in the context of worship baptism is an orchestrated ritual of prayers, readings, and actions that all form the sacramental action that symbolically ushers the faith community and the individual into God’s story. Luther claimed baptism “signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous,

¹³⁵ I am writing this from a Lutheran perspective. My goal here is not to offer a full sacramental theology but to lift up sacraments as a symbolic means through which practitioners engage faith. While other denominations and traditions may understand the nuances, and number, of sacraments differently my hope is to be general enough to find common ground and meaning for the purpose of this paper.

¹³⁶ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1979).

to live forever in God's presence."¹³⁷ Joseph Campbell offers powerful insight to the ritual symbolic action. "Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new....When our day is come for the victory of death, death closes in; there is nothing we can do, except be crucified—and resurrected; dismembered totally, and then reborn."¹³⁸ For the Christian, baptism is the daily dying, dismemberment, and rebirth. Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.¹³⁹

For Paul, the achievement of baptism is the newness of life and the participation in the resurrected life of Jesus. But it should not be lost that a significant portion of the symbolic action of baptism is about uniting the baptized to Christ in death. I have had the privilege of presiding at numerous baptisms of both adults and children. It is not a day most parents, sponsors, or perhaps even pastors typically associate with death. However, I think there is a deep wisdom in the symbolic function of baptism that connects us to the reality of death. The good news is that Christ died and we are united with him in a death like his, albeit symbolically in baptism, and now Christ lives and because we have been united in his death we will be united in his resurrection. Life is the promise of baptism but life beyond an inevitable death. Resurrection life is not to be confused with immortality. The promise is not that you will slip the bonds of death but rather that the

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 16.

¹³⁹ Romans 6:1-5.

baptized might find life beyond death. Baptism allows for a symbolic yielding to death which frees one from the slavery of striving to symbolically overcome death.

The sacrament of baptism induces an important component of humility into one's life story. Kesebir defines humility as, "the ability to see self in true perspective."¹⁴⁰ That is humility allows people to see themselves as they really are, setting aside the story of ego and the self-esteem buffers that have been so carefully crafted. "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."¹⁴¹ The most self-aggrandizing story we delude ourselves with is that we will not die, or that we can somehow transcend the limits of death. Baptism cuts through that self-aggrandizing story by demanding that we acknowledge we will die. This puts the baptized in a beautiful posture of humility that allows them to incorporate an honest assessment of life and death. Rather than living a delusion of immortality, Baptism puts to death all the self-aggrandizing narratives by which we live, and invites humility. This humility becomes a powerful buffer against death anxiety. But this anxiety buffer does not propel one to mindlessly do damage to neighbors or self as we have seen in other anxiety buffer strategies.

Baptism is a symbolic action that cultivates this posture of humility. It is a tangible means through which the individual and the community experience God's grace and see death in its proper perspective. On a symbolic plane it is an act of submission and

¹⁴⁰ Pelin Kesebir, "A Quiet Ego Quiets Death Anxiety: Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 4 (2014): 610–623.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

death that has the power to incorporate mortality into life's story in a healthy way. The act of baptism occurs once in my theological tradition and then one spends a lifetime remembering and nurturing that baptismal identity. The practice of baptism does not end with the event itself but is essentially a beginning of a lifestyle of baptismal practice. In the Lutheran tradition all ages are eligible for baptism. If a child is unable to answer for themselves parents and sponsors fill the role. The commitments made by the baptized or on their behalf are the ignition into the practice of following Jesus into the world.

In my Lutheran tradition these are the commitments made during the sacrament of Baptism:

to live among God's faithful people; hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.¹⁴²

This includes a practice of remembering mortality: in the waters of baptism we remember we are mortal. This induces a powerful humility that affords a posture to resist the horrible ramifications of death denial. The action of baptism includes elements of death and drowning. It is a ritually symbolic death and daily reminder of the reality of our own inevitable literal death.

Eucharist

In Luther's Small Catechism he wrote concerning the Eucharist: "Instituted by Christ himself, it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink."¹⁴³ It is not merely the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine that comprise the sacramental action, but it is the words,

¹⁴² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

¹⁴³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1979).

prayers, and actions that all work together for the efficacy of the event. Luther writes, “We are told in the words ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins.’ By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.”¹⁴⁴ The Eucharist is a symbolic event that allows the participant to symbolically engage the problem of sin, the power of forgiveness, and the promise of new life.

Participating in the Eucharist requires the consumption of the flesh and blood of Christ. Participating in bodily elements of the incarnate One ritually connects us to our own bodies and the reality of our finitude. Every time we partake of the Eucharist we are reminded of Christ’s death and ultimately our own pending mortality. This action is a mortality reminder—one not framed in hopelessness or despair—and can open our minds to the reality of death in a healthy way. As in Baptism, the connection to Christ is a connection of hope and life. The death we must face can certainly destroy us if we flee from it. But embracing that death set in the context of the new life in Christ becomes a hopeful endeavor. We are opened to the reality of own death and trust that even beyond death ours is the God of life. The forgiveness of sins that is promised in the words of institution affords us God’s grace and frees us from guilt and shame. The connection to the body of Christ, that is the bread, wine, and the community, frames our hope in the context of mortality and yields us a glimpse of the life that is to come.

One of the most important features of these two sacraments is their symbolic content that is open to a multivalent sphere of meaning. They share the sign/signifier relationship of a sign but also host a sphere of multivalent meaning of a symbol. The

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

allow engagement with the meaningful existential questions of human life, and allow access to that with which we are ultimately concerned. The sacraments also allow for a healthy incorporation of mortality into life's story.

Apostle's Creeds

As the early church emerged as a distinct entity from its Jewish roots it became necessary to affirmatively qualify this new organization. As it was all fairly new nothing had become conclusively orthodox and there was not a definitive standard of what would be mainstream. Various theologies and schools flourished—often at odds with one another. In the early church, around 150AD, there were two movements that challenged what would become the orthodox position. Gnostics and Marcionites both made claims that conflicted with the more mainstream theological claims. In an effort to establish orthodoxy, against the Gnostics and the Marcionites, the Apostle's creed was formulated and became a symbol of faith.¹⁴⁵

Originally this creedal formula, or symbol, was used in the context of baptism. It was presented to the candidates in the form of three questions. If they happened to harbor Marcionite or Gnostic heresy they would be unable to faithfully affirm the three articles.

Do you believe in God the Father almighty?

Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the quick and the dead?

Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 63.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

While there is not an associated object or tangible item, the words themselves take on a symbolic summary of the faith and point the bearer or the receiver to what would be defined as the orthodox understanding of faith. It is not an exhaustive summary or explication of faith but a symbolic form that conveys a larger connotation of subscription to orthodoxy. The creed was used as a symbolic means to distinguish a believer from those who subscribed to alternative heresies circulating at the time.

Used as an affirmative symbol of identity it points to the history of the Christian faith. It opens one to the history of the Christian faith and points to the orthodox channel of belief and practice. By confessing the creed one makes an identity claim, in saying, “this is what I believe.” Tragically, the creed can also become an ossified symbol—hardened by our fear of death. Rather than an open Christian symbol and an affirmative identity claim in its ossified state it becomes used as a weapon of exclusion. The articles of the creed no longer speak to the identity and faith forming, “I believe” but rather become a “you must believe this to be one of us” propositional statement. Ideally the Creed is an open fluid statement of affirmative belief. “Today the Apostle’s Creed, like the Nicene Creed, is an expression of the identity of Christianity throughout the changing centuries, and over and above the widely varying interpretations of the faith.”¹⁴⁷ The Creed can symbolically connect one to the world and to the continuity of the historical faith. But ossified as an ideological tool of one’s immortality project it becomes distorted and can be used to bring destruction others.

Fish

¹⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles’ Creed, in the Light of Today’s Questions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 13.

Symbols are dynamic in their capacity to convey meaning. Sometimes they are recast or re-appropriated. An example of this symbolic dynamism in the Christian tradition is the symbol of the fish. While this is not an exhaustive history of the symbol of the fish, hopefully it is enough to show the power and flexibility of symbols. They can be rearranged and recast given new contexts and communities that surround them. This is the case for the fish as it became a symbol for the early emerging Christian community. This symbol illustrates the power of a healthy open symbolic system that can adapt and continue to allow one to access the realm of transcendence throughout the ages. The symbol of the fish also affords a nice connection to Terror Management Theory.

The symbol of the fish was in use before it acquired a Christian connotation. Artagis was a Syrian goddess of fertility, protection, and well-being.¹⁴⁸ Her temple included a fishpond that contained fish that were revered as sacred. The fish pointed to her life giving fertility and the water that is necessary for life especially in the desert. The fish is an ancient symbol of Christianity that was first appropriated from the cult of the fish mother. The simple outline of the fish symbol included in its original imagination the connotation of a swollen pregnant belly.¹⁴⁹ This led to early Christian use incorporation by putting an image of the Christ child in the swollen shape of the fish connoting the fecundity of the symbolic potential of the incarnation.



¹⁴⁸ Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 43.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

The fish was one of the ancient symbols used to communicate that one was a follower of Jesus. The symbol held the capacity for multivalent meaning but was essentially a quick way for followers to identify one another. This was important during early Roman occupation when Christianity was seen as a politically subversive ideology and was persecuted as such. The followers of Jesus could use this seemingly innocuous symbol to indicate their fellowship with one another without the use of overt or detectible symbols.

The fish was one of the earliest Christian symbols, and for that reason appears frequently in communion scenes as well as in other contexts. The significance of the fish, apart from its connection with the miraculous feeding of the multitudes, was that the Greek word for fish—*ichthys*—could be used as an acrostic containing the initial letters of the phrase: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”¹⁵⁰

In *The City of God*, Augustine writes briefly about the use of the fish as a Christian symbol.¹⁵¹ He does so in the context of writing about the early church prophetess Erythraean Sibyl. One of her poems of prophecy for Christ employs the acrostic: IChThUS. The first letter in the first line of each of her verses employs a letter that read together to give the reader the symbol of the fish in addition to the literal content. This gives us the impression that very early in the history of the Christian tradition this symbol was employed by those faithful to Christ.

The importance of symbolic flexibility is also present in the description of this particular symbol. It contains multivalent meanings: communion, baptism, miracles, and the person of Jesus. We could go so far as to reference all the fish stories in the scripture and examine how they might be contained in the symbol. The symbolic potential is

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵¹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 790.

seemingly limitless yet the central symbolic theme remains Jesus Christ. The faithful adherent uses this symbol in its multiplicity of meaning to primarily convey their practice of discipleship.

The example of the fish in the history of the Christian tradition and its ability to be relevant is particularly interesting in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In this region, as in ancient Syria, the symbol of the fish holds important meaning apart from the Christian tradition. The Salmon, or the Swimmer, holds significant place in foundational stories of creation and the life of creation sustained.

Salmon are Christian

The Christian symbol of the fish can be enriched by the native mythology of the Pacific Northwest's salmon. We have an example of a symbol that was adopted by the early church that has been a part of its history since nearly the beginning confronted with the new symbolic information contaminated in the stories of the people of the Pacific Northwest. This engagement provides to possibility for potential to be contained in the symbol for the Christian in the Pacific Northwest. In this example we can even point to areas of symbolic overlap. In the northwest mythology the salmon is a symbol food and sustenance. In the Christian tradition we have seen the connection of the fish to the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes with fish and bread.

For the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest, salmon are considered an important source of food as well as a feature in the spiritual practice of daily life. The Salmon occupies an important role in stories of people indigenous to the West coast of the United States. Rarely a primary actor, the salmon, is a sacred source of food, a symbol of hospitality, or a symbol of abundance. If not treated with reverence and care,

the salmon may decide not to return to their streams thus depriving the people of an essential source of life. Their return to the streams of their origin was a welcome event in the life of the small fishing villages that dotted the coastline.

From the Quinault people on the Washington coast, we hear a creation story with Eagle and Raven arguing about which way the rivers should flow. Eagle and the others thought the ease of travel would be marvelous. “All but Raven thought that one side of all rivers should run up the mountains and the other side should run down.”¹⁵² Raven worried that “the salmon would have no place to stop. They will go up as far as the falls, and then they will come right back again. Where will they spawn? And how will the new people catch them?”¹⁵³ Eventually all the other animal people agreed with Raven, that the rivers should flow one way. Raven conceded that there should be little eddies in the one way rivers, “They will make the salmon go slower. The people can fish there, too....That is why all rivers now run one way. That is why the salmon go all the way up to their home river to spawn.”¹⁵⁴

In another story from the indigenous people of the Columbia River we hear about how Coyote changed the course of the river. Four sisters had a fish trap and they wouldn't let any fish come up the river. He said, “I've got to get busy and see into that, so that everybody can have fish. Not just the sisters.”¹⁵⁵ Coyote transformed himself into a wooden gown and infiltrated their camp. He transformed himself into a man and

¹⁵² Ella E. Clark, *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, CA: University Press, 1953), 86.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 92.

destroyed their dam and fish trap. As he walked away from the camp the salmon followed him. “Whenever he got hungry or tired, he would stop and call to some of the salmon in the river. A big salmon would jump out. He would eat it, roast it, eat it, and rest a while.”¹⁵⁶ As he traveled he found a family camped along the river. He fell in love with one of the daughters and asked the old folks if could marry her. “We’ll have to ask the girls the old man said. So he asked them. ‘No’ the girls said, ‘we want to be free for a while.’”¹⁵⁷ This made Coyote angry so he broke up the river and threatened to make them go hungry. As he went down the river he continued to fall in love until he met one of Beaver’s daughters. He had finally found a successful partner in love and they were married. They made their home near Kettle Falls, where Coyote made a dam. “That’s as far as the salmon could go. So all these years that is as far as the salmon would go up the river.”¹⁵⁸ Coyote made sure there was enough salmon for all the people of the village and even beyond. Then Coyote appointed his father-in-law, the Beaver, to be chief of the salmon. With this appointment he gave him the charge: “you must share the salmon with everyone who comes. There will always be enough for everyone. You must never be greedy with it, and you must see to it that no one else is greedy.”¹⁵⁹

In this story of the Coyote bringing salmon to the Beaver people we can hear the Eucharistic undertones. Especially at the end when Coyote give the Beaver the charge to share this abundance, make sure everyone has enough, and warns him against greed.

There are strong parallels to the Christian practice of the Eucharist. The bread of life is

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

the salmon in the story, and there is enough for everyone. There is a reverence and respect of for the meal and an awareness that there is always room for the stinger at the table. Greed is prohibited in both our Eucharistic practice and Coyote's salmon fishery.

With reverence and appreciation for the indigenous people that were here long before, perhaps a symbol we share can be mutually enriched. This symbolic expansion might help us understand the ways in which Christ is present in our contemporary culture. An example of a reverent incorporation of the Pacific Northwest indigenous symbol of the Salmon into the Christian symbol of the fish can be found in the work of Ken Olson. He was a pastor, a poet, and a deep thinker, who spent a great deal of time in Southeast Alaska. He saw the symbol of the salmon to be a rich symbol of life that easily connected with his own Christian theology. A poem from his collection:

Those Priestly Ones
 Then...the salmon creatures
 Waited upon the seeming blasphemy
 And painful arts of being human,
 While within that longing
 profoundly holy was yet expressed
 In eager reaching,
 Wanting still those dark thoughts
 To fall away like flapping ravens;
 And so, in endless purpose
 To give life for life
 By pressing earth's cold-waters' sands
 With bodies spend and useless,
 Believed in such acts of the impossible
 As birth from on high and resurrection.¹⁶⁰

Pastor Olson saw the power and potential of the symbol of the salmon as a metaphor for the power of the resurrection, thus connecting it to the ancient practice of the Christian symbol of the fish but with new and richer meaning. This allows for richer

¹⁶⁰ Ken Olson, *Salmon Journey—Against the Current: Quest for Christian Life*, ed. Tim Olson (Edmunds, WA: Lee Brewer Publishing, 2015), 30.

faith engagement as the richer symbolic content allows deeper access into the existential plane. Incorporating the Pacific Northwest symbol of the salmon into the Christian symbol of the fish enriches the faith practice of followers of Jesus in the Pacific Northwest. This of course is done with deep reverence for those who were here long before us. The enriching of the Christian fish with the indigenous practice of the Pacific Northwest should never be ossified as such exclusively.

Similarly, author David James Duncan offers a reverent explication of the symbol of the fish, particularly the Salmon of the Pacific Northwest. He writes:

As a huge fan of the gospels I must add that when salmon feed their young bodies to kingfishers and otters and eagles, and their larger oceangoing bodies to seals, sea lions, orcas, and their magnificent, sexually driven, returned-to-the-river bodies to bears and Indian tribes and sport fishers and fly fisher, then even their spawned-out bodies to salmonberries, sword ferns, cedar trees, mosses and wild flowers, they have served us, from one end of their lives to the other, as a kind of gospel themselves.¹⁶¹

Symbolic systems are dynamic and open to wide sphere of connotation we can see the potential for meaning in incorporating the indigenous symbol of the salmon into the practice of the Christian fish symbol.

The symbol of the salmon as a part of the Christian tradition of the symbol of the fish further connects us in a health way to an awareness of our own mortality. In the Pacific Northwest, the salmon is a vital fishery but as David James Duncan alluded to, the salmon's entire life cycle is vital to our healthy habitat. I find the end of their life cycle a poignant connection to the cultivation of the awareness of mortality in the symbol of the fish. Salmon, unlike most fish, migrate back to the streams in which they were

¹⁶¹ David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays: Churchless Sermons in Response to the Preachments of the Fundamentalist Right*, paperback ed. (Great Barrington, MA: Triad Institute, 2007), 167.

hatched. Their return to the fresh water streams marks the end of their life journey. And while they are perhaps spared the existential experience of their journey, we are not and we might learn a thing or two from their unswerving courage to swim back up their natal stream to die. Their journey is not just to their death but it is also a journey to life. Many salmon at this point of their journey are eaten by bears or eagles, as they are an easy catch at this stage in their lives. But a significant majority litter the banks after spawning and with their bodies they replenish the nutrients in the soil and streamside ecology. We can hear the Eucharistic echoes in this story as with Christ's story. We hear these words of institution every Sunday, "He took some bread gave thanks and broke it, saying take and eat here is my body broken for you." As the salmon die on the banks of the streams and rivers it is their bodies that are broken for the life of the world to come. This does not replace or supplant the messianic primacy of Christ but perhaps expands our operational metaphor and conversational capacity.

The history of the symbol of the fish is an important example to illuminate the power and dynamic capacity of symbols. It continues to be an evolving and living symbol and still points us to and participates in relevant signifiers.

Conclusion

Symbols offer us a window into to the enormity of the universe and usher us into the power and potential of the human condition. Not shying away from the essential paradox of our infinite imagination and our biological mortality, they escort us fully into it.

Religious symbols are double-edged. They are directed toward the infinite which they symbolize *and* toward the finite through which they symbolize it. They force the infinite down to finitude and the finite up to infinity.

They open the divine for the human and the human for the divine.¹⁶²

Proper employment of the symbolic demands both a grasp of the finite conditions in which we find ourselves, and openness to the infinite that we fleetingly grasp.

Our symbolic engagement with the world has incredible potential to usher us more fully into the paradox of our human experience and move forward into life. Or our symbolic engagement through the readily available cultural symbols can distance us from this paradox and in turn diminish our capacity to truly live. As in the symbolic flight from death in the impending zombie apocalypse we can be blinded to the reality of mortality as a part of our own human condition. Our engagement with symbols can distort and distract us from authentic life or they can usher us more fully into what it means to live.

Another example of a symbol that can bring about a healthy death awareness in the Christian tradition is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is the symbolic gateway to the season of Lent. This ancient practice in the liturgical calendar begins a season of repentance and penitence. The season is forty days long, mirroring Jesus own journey into the wilderness for forty day after his baptism. On Ash Wednesday the assembly is symbolically ushered into the season of Lent by receiving the sign of the Cross on their foreheads. Tracing the sign of the Cross that was placed there on the day of their baptism, they again receive the Cross, traced in ash. The words, “from dust you came to dust you shall return” are spoken as a reminder of mortality. This symbolic action evokes closeness to the condition of mortality and helps incorporate a healthy sense of death awareness into ones life story. The culmination of the season of Lent is Easter Sunday where the resurrection is celebrated. The promise of life is celebrated. This life that is

¹⁶² Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 66.

promised in the power of the resurrection is not immortality but new life beyond the gates of death. The promise of new life does not trump the reality of death rather gives one hope for life beyond. On Ash Wednesday one willingly symbolically dies and on Easter Sunday one symbolically rises from death into life.

Our idol making or immortality project-perusing propensities diminish the capacity of the symbol and reduce it to something less able to communicate the divine. This diminishes the story telling animal we were created to be and reduces us to immortality project protectors, which is no way to really live. An ossified symbol may be an effective tool in our immortality project, but it fails to deliver its content of the divine, or access to our ultimate concern. By falling prey to this temptation we lose the meaning we so desperately crave. Ironically, our pursuit of life in this manner is a false trail and only leads to further despair and isolation. We lose the creative and life giving access to the divine if we lose our ability to communicate symbolically and along the way we create idols that will fail to sustain and be lost in obsolescence.

Awareness is the first step in overcoming the drive to literalize or ossify symbols. Being aware of the problem is a way to overcome the persuasive anxiety our awareness of mortality raises in us. Nurturing a practice of openness to the symbolic power of words, story, scripture, and metaphor is essential. We do this in religious ritual, prayer, and communal worship. In the context of community we are able to see beyond our own immortality projects and in the context of the global community we are able to see beyond our cultural immortality projects. This allows our symbols to convey the fullness of their meaning and connect us authentically to matters of faith and ultimate concern. In

their fullness they are able to offer durable hope and meaning that can be transmitted to contemporaries and future generations.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE

Scripture can be a mysterious, confusing, and complex collection of documents. Nonetheless, through the generations of faith it has continued to speak life and proclaim the good news. Douglas John Hall claims, “it took divine inspiration to write these words and it might just take divine inspiration to hear them.”¹⁶³ The theologians’ task becomes to reach into the depth of scripture and proclaim law, gospel, and life into contemporary context.

If theology becomes disassociated from scripture and practice it ceases to be theology. We might categorize such musing as philosophy or part of some other academic program. Theology must be connected to the words of scripture for it to have any relevant claim of God’s story as it is connected to the human story. “Christian theology is the explication of the basic symbols found in scripture, appropriating them to the current context within which the theologian is working.”¹⁶⁴ Scripture then, becomes both the source and norm of faith. To authentically engage the work of Becker in a Christian theological conversation it must connect to scripture.

Becker, although aware of the great theologians, did not see his work as a uniquely theological endeavor. While not explicitly theological, his perspective does provide an insight into how we read scripture. Scripture is the story of God and God’s people throughout the ages and thus, we would expect, if Becker is right, that scripture would address the problem of death. In the following we will examine Genesis 1-3,

¹⁶³ Douglas John Hall. (Byberg Preaching Conference, Cannon Beach, Oregon, Jan. 2008).

¹⁶⁴ Ted Peters, *God--The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 34.

Exodus 32, Ezekiel 37, John 13, and Matthew 16. These five passages will help us see the connection to Becker's work in scripture. Death and issues of mortality are addressed in scripture, and in these selections we will make some explicit connections.

One of the critical components of the Reformation in the middle ages was a refocus on scripture itself. Martin Luther, one of many voices of Reformation, named not only the importance of scripture but also advocated for scripture to be placed in the hands of the laity.¹⁶⁵ This call back to the plain sense of scripture is a powerful reminder, even in our own age, of the importance of scripture as the first language of our faith and critical to the transmission of faith throughout the ages.

Martin Luther extolled the importance of scripture in the Reformation and claimed, "True theology is practical, and its foundation is Christ, whose death is appropriated to us through faith...Accordingly, speculative theology belongs to the devil in hell."¹⁶⁶ Scripture must be the foundation for any attempt to talk about God but, as Luther points out, theology must be practical as well. There is a harmony that must be tended. If a theological work does not have anything to say about practical life it is dangerously removed from the human condition and is on the verge of meaninglessness. A connection between scripture, theology, and the lived practice must remain strong. My goal in this chapter is to briefly outline the importance of Becker and how we might see this work as an interpretation of the human condition as revealed in scripture.

¹⁶⁵ Luther wrote strenuously about the importance of the literal, or plain sense, interpretation of the text. He placed great importance on letting the text speak for itself rather than relying solely on historical or doctrinal interpretations. He advocates for the text in several writings but for a clear example see his letter to Emser in Leipzig "Concerning the Letter and the Spirit." Timothy Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 74-103.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talk*, trans. Helmut T. Lehmann and Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 22.

Brief Outline of Becker and Initial Connection Scripture

As a young man Ernest Becker enlisted in the military and served to liberate concentration camps. He witnessed, first hand, one of the most egregious tragedies perpetrated in modern history. This experience permeated his academic work. As a cultural anthropologist he sought to uncover a “science of man.”¹⁶⁷ He wanted to know what made the human animal tick, and specifically he wanted to know what made the human animal capable of such great horror and evil. He suspected this capacity was not limited to one distorted or sick mind but was imbedded in the human condition itself. He saw first hand the incredible atrocity humans can inflict on one another. Which is a problem that begs for a theological response. As responsible theologians we must allow our response to be informed directly by scripture. In this chapter we will explore a few selections of scripture and examine how they speak to the problem Becker articulated.

Scriptural Engagement: Creation Narrative Genesis

The creation narrative has long been held to contain the story of the *fall* that is the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were expelled from the garden of paradise. This story is directly connected to the problem of death.

The first chapter of Genesis is the account of the beginning of God’s creative action. In this account the heavens and the earth are created, land is separated from the waters, light is distinguished from darkness, and animals are brought forth.¹⁶⁸ Once those creative tasks are completed God says, “let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he

¹⁶⁷ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973).

¹⁶⁸ This text is too large to fully consider within the scope of this paper. Rather than treating the entire text, I will draw out and examine specific passages within that larger context.

created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). Interestingly, this account is recast in the beginning of Chapter 2. God’s generative creating power is recounted. God planted a garden and in it planted the man made from the dust of the earth. Filled with verdant and vibrant images the reader is ushered into an original vision of paradise. In verse 2:7 “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” In this account human beings are intimately connected to the “stuff” of creation having been formed from the dust of the earth.¹⁶⁹ This creation from the dust of the earth has dramatic symbolic ramifications. Dust, ground, and dirt, are often metaphors for death in the scripture.¹⁷⁰ In this story what was obviously lifeless was given the breath of life and became living. It is my conclusion that mortality from this moment of creation was a part of the human story. However, at this point in the narrative, the newly created earth creatures are unaware of this condition. God and the earth creature walked the garden, God commissioned the earth creature to be the caretaker to till and keep Eden.

Symbolic Death

The following is a rough literal translation of the original Hebrew text, which text will help illuminate the connection between Becker and the creation story. Specifically, consider the following verses as they pertain to the introduction of death to the story.

Genesis 2:16-17

תֹּאכַל אֶכֶל הָעֵץ מִכָּל לְאֹמֶר הָאֲדָמָה עַל אֲלֵהֶם יִהְיֶה וְיִצְוֹ

¹⁶⁹ As Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden in Genesis 3:19, God says to them “from dust you came to dust you shall return.” Suggesting that they were always mortal “stuff” of the earth.

¹⁷⁰ Deuteronomy 28:24, 32:24, Job 2:12, 10:9, 17:16, Ecclesiastes 12:7, 1 Corinthians 15:47.

And God The Lord commanded over the man saying from any tree of the garden freely you may eat

תַּמּוּת מוֹת מִמֶּנּוּ אֲכָלָהּ בַּיּוֹם כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל לֹא יָרַע טוֹב הַדַּעַת וּמַעַץ

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil not eat of for in the day you eat after dying you will die

In verse 16, “God commanded the man ‘you may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’” (translation mine). This is the first instance of death in the scripture. Until this point we have heard of God’s generative and creative capacity and now in verse 17 the notion of death has entered the cosmos narrative. This is a significant revelation in the course of the scriptural trajectory, however it goes largely unnoticed until chapter three when the serpent speaks to the yet unnamed woman.

God’s warning is clear, “do not eat the fruit of this tree or you will die.” Yet, as the story unfolds, they do eat the fruit of the tree and the man and woman do not instantly die as the first gloss of the text suggests. In fact, the serpent is the one who seems to be the most clear in chapter 3 when it says, “‘you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (Genesis 3:5).

This discrepancy leaves room for insight that Becker offers about death and the connection between awareness of mortality and the human condition. In 2:17 God says, “For in the day you eat of it you will surely die.” The man and woman do not immediately die when they later eat the fruit. It is my claim that God’s warning is not about a biological death in 2:17 but an initial awareness of death, that is, a symbolic death. We might read that verse prepared with our understanding of death from Becker

as, “for in the day you eat of it you will surely know you will die.” This opens the possibility that when God speaks of death it transcends biological death and includes symbolic death. This challenges a traditionally held interpretation of the human condition described in this text.¹⁷¹ Symbolic death is a powerful consequence of their disobedience. The introduction of this nuance between symbolic and biological does not lessen the blow. Paul Ricœur writes about symbolic death: “To think of myself as one of these dying people is to imagine myself as the dying person I shall be for those who attend my dying.”¹⁷² Death, in all its symbolic capacities, is a terrible consequence.

Becker writes of the *fall*,

He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name...the fall into self-consciousness, the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature, had one great penalty for man: it gave him *dread* or anxiety...but the real focus of dread is not the ambiguity itself, it is the result of *the judgment* on man: that if Adam eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge God tells him, “Thou shalt surely die.” In other words the final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one’s own death, which is a peculiar sentence on man alone in the animal kingdom.¹⁷³

Turning to Genesis 3:6-7, we read that they newly created couple partakes of the fruit of the tree that was forbidden. “In doing so their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked....” It is interesting to note that the first thing this couple, later named Adam and Eve, notices is their bodies, specifically their nakedness. This is an important

¹⁷¹ The translation and interpretation of these verses have become the foundation for traditional theological claims concerning “original sin.” Augustine claims that humans as originally created state knew neither death nor decay. (City of God XIII, 20). Had humans remained obedient they would have remained in their immortal blissful state in the Garden. From this original sin all of the first humans progeny also inherit this sinful state upon which they pile their own unique sins. From this original sin the immortal state of the original humans was destroyed and mortality entered the human condition. It is my contention that death had always been a part of the story of the cosmos and in their disobedience it is awareness, or symbolic death, to which their eyes are opened.

¹⁷² Paul Ricœur, *Living Up to Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 12.

¹⁷³ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 69-70.

connection because Becker treats the awareness of the body as the front line of the awareness of death and mortality. He writes of children and their discovery of their bodies as the initiation into the “weight of the dualism of the human condition... The child is overwhelmed by experiences of dualism of self and the body from both areas, since he can be master of neither.”¹⁷⁴ Our bodies are intimate reminders that although we can imagine the infinite we are intrinsically connected to the dust of the earth. Becker continues, “Often the child deliberately soils himself or continues to wet the bed, to protest against the imposition of artificial symbolic rules: he seems to be saying that the body is his primary reality and that he wants to remain in the simpler physical Eden and not be thrown out into the world of ‘right and wrong.’”¹⁷⁵ The body is the first thing the man and woman notice when their eyes are opened.

The warning God gives to the man is emphatic in Genesis 2:17. The Hebrew phrase “תָּמוּת מוֹת,” literally translated “dying you will die,” is redundant for impact and emphasis but the specific ramification is not necessarily clear.

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they did die; only it was a symbolic death that was their introduction to the awareness of their condition of mortality. The truth they became aware of when they ate the fruit was the reality of their impending death. This understanding allows us, from scripture, to directly access the claim Becker makes in defining the fundamental paradox of imaginative life and certain mortality, as the crux of the human condition. The knowledge of death enters the human condition; that knowledge is itself the source of tremendous

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 29.

anxiety. Once the humans partake of the forbidden fruit their eyes are open to the reality of their own death and they then spend their lives trying to either undo that knowledge or escape its bonds.

The Problem of the Serpent

This proposed way of reading the story also deals with the problem of the serpent. Genesis 3:1 indicates the serpent is the most עָרִים, that is, subtle or shrewd, of all the creatures. עָרִים could also be rendered as naked or exposed. This stands in symbolic contrast to the nakedness of Adam and Eve as they stand before the tree bearing the forbidden fruit as their eyes are about to be opened. It is the one who is most naked that leads them into the awareness of their nakedness.

In the narrative arc God commands the man not to eat the fruit and the consequence of transgression is death. The woman later talks with the serpent and the serpent seems to contradict God's initial consequence. Living up to its description, it shrewdly (nakedly), discloses to the woman the ramifications of her, and inevitably the man's, transgression. This is not an act of deceit or malice; in fact it is unclear if the serpent has an agenda at all. When the two humans eat the fruit they *do not* drop to the ground dead, but their eyes are opened to the knowledge of good and evil. If we claim that God's initial consequence was immediate death the obvious problem is God is not honest in delivering consequences. This also makes the serpent, traditionally held to be the villain, the only one who is speaking with integrity. If we allow insight from Becker as we read the Genesis narrative we might read God's initial consequence as the initiation of the awareness of mortality rather than an immediate death sentence. It is the awareness then of mortality that ushers in the problem, or fall, in the human condition.

In the traditional reading of this story it seems to be the serpent who is the most honest. God says, “If you eat this fruit you will die.” Later the serpent speaks to the woman, showing her how beautiful the fruit is and how delightful to the eyes. The serpent says, “Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?” “No, we may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden but God said ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *nor shall you touch it*, or you shall die.’”¹⁷⁶ Notice how the woman embellishes the initial command to include even touching the tree bearing the forbidden fruit. The serpent replies, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” In the traditional interpretation this is the most accurate account of the command and the ramification of transgression.

If we allow the consequence of death [מות תמות] God establishes in the initial command in 2:17 to mean more than literal biological death these problematic inconsistencies are resolved. The serpent then is not the necessarily the most accurate voice in the story, and is only echoing God’s original consequence. The serpent, being shrewd, is only unpacking the ramifications of eating the forbidden fruit and expounds to the woman, “Your eyes shall be opened and you will know, like a god, good and evil.”

Becker posits that it is the awareness of mortality that ushers in the categories of good and evil. “The thing that makes man the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants a stature and a destiny that is impossible for an animal; he wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally

¹⁷⁶ Italics mine.

is.”¹⁷⁷ With the bite of the fruit came the awareness of death, and from that came the ability to desire a destiny that is not ours to obtain—immortality. This creates in the human imagination a heretofore unrealized distinction between good and evil. We cling to that which promises life, however delusional, and name that good. That which reveals our mortality we name evil and shun or destroy. Unsatisfied with this condition, humans inflict great evil on the earth and one another, ironically in the pursuit of a perceived good. “As human beings with a taste for the infinite, however, we transmute this natural desire for survival into the more grievous perils of history, replete, with injustice and war.”¹⁷⁸

Kierkegaard’s work in *The Concept of Anxiety* helps illuminate this nuance in the creation narrative. “The consequence is a double one, that sin came into the world and that sexuality was posited; the one is to be insuperable from the other. This is of utmost importance in order to show man’s original state. If he were not a synthesis that reposed in a third, one thing could not have two consequences. If he were not a synthesis of psyche and body that is sustained by spirit, the sexual could never have come into the world with sinfulness.”¹⁷⁹ Further he writes, “Man can attain this ultimate point only in the moment the spirit becomes actual. Before that time he is not animal, but neither is he really man. The moment he becomes man, he becomes so by being animal as well.”¹⁸⁰ This moment of becoming is still placed in the context of creation. From this perspective,

¹⁷⁷ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 96.

¹⁷⁸ Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 64.

¹⁷⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert Anderson, vol. 8, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation On the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 48.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

partaking of the forbidden fruit could be seen as a part of the creation story. It is important to notice the condition of the sexual that arises here as well. The condition and appearance of bodies are paramount to Becker's understanding of the human condition.

The concept of sexuality, especially the awareness of nakedness, is important in the Genesis creation narrative as well. The awareness of their nakedness becomes a symbolic cue to the reader that they are aware of their bodies and their mortality they inherently inhabit. This body distinction, and body awareness, is an essential crux in the paradox between the awareness of mortality and the imagination of the infinite. "This contradiction express itself in the profound Scham [shame] that conceals this contradiction and does not dare to understand it. In the erotic, the contradiction is understood as beautiful, for beauty is precisely the unity of the psychic and the somatic."¹⁸¹

The first two chapters of Genesis are not then, the account of creation followed by chapter three which documents the creation's undoing. *But rather, the third chapter, which documents the ramifications of the awareness of mortality, becomes firmly planted within the ongoing story of creation.* The account of Adam and Eve eating fruit from the forbidden tree is part of the culminating account of creation rather than its anticlimax. Reading the story this way allows us to realize the insights Becker articulates about the human condition from a scriptural vantage. That is, the story of Genesis is an account of *how* things are, rather than an explanation of *why* things went *wrong*. This is the important distinction between reading the creation account as a description rather than a diagnostic. Kierkegaard writes fiercely, "Were I allowed to make a wish, then I would

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 69.

wish that no reader would be so profound as to ask: What if Adam had not sinned? When someone asks a stupid question, care should be taken not to answer him, let he who answers becomes just as stupid as the questioner.”¹⁸² The challenge is not to return to Eden but to realize it never existed.

In reading Becker and Genesis together we find several points of connection. We must be careful not to overly read an agenda into the text. Yet, in the light of this contemporary psychological and anthropological we might illuminate the story in new ways. Becker and those who followed his work in Terror Management Theory have opened tremendous insight into the human psyche. This allows us to look at the creation narrative in the story in Genesis and understand the brokenness of the human condition in new ways. The story of Genesis takes on a descriptive rather than diagnostic narrative. The story is less concerned with the question of why sin and evil exist in the world. Rather, the story serves to name the reality that sin and evil exist in the world as ramification of our awareness of death. This reading also more easily connects with the contemporary scientific understanding of evolution, specifically the evolution of brain function concerning consciousness and self-awareness. Grappling with such issues, de Chardin claims, “Man now sees that the seeds of his ultimate dissolution are at the heart of his being. The End of the Species is in the marrow of our bones!”¹⁸³

These insights Becker offers into our reading of Genesis also remove the possibility of returning to a state of Eden as a result of our own best thinking or great

¹⁸² Ibid., 50.

¹⁸³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 314.

capacity. That is it describes the human condition as we experience it rather than being concerned with the theodical question of why sin is a part of the human experience.

Using the insights from Becker we realize ours is a human condition that cannot be “out thought” but is rather an integral part of our nature. This directly challenges the traditionally less orthodox, Pelagius’ understanding of “original sin” or “the fall” as it contains a temptation to believe that if we arrive at the right diagnosis we can avoid such evil.¹⁸⁴ One might be tempted to think a pre-fall state of humanity might be possible to attain as a result of best behavior or right thinking. A descriptive reading with the insights Becker offers ushers us into the reality that our propensity to avoid death, and the awareness of it, is the fundamental source of anxiety that motivates the human animal. We are stuck in this condition as a result of our mortality awareness however repressed we seek to keep that awareness.

Augustine

St. Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis has influenced the majority of Christian history. An intense scholar with an artistic flourish his work has certainly shaped the trajectory of biblical interpretation for the early Roman Catholic Church all the way through the Protestant reformation. Yet, with contemporary insight we might challenge some of the ways he has shaped our thinking. I am interested in challenging Augustine’s influence on developing the notion that upon eating the forbidden fruit death entered the human condition, and the notion of hereditary sin that is sin entered the world in Adam and has been subsequently bequest to following generations.

¹⁸⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 214.

Platonism shaped Augustine's understanding of the soul.¹⁸⁵ Immortality of the soul was a foundation upon which a good portion of his doctrine stands. If we challenge that understanding with insight from Becker we might be able to find an articulation of the human condition that speaks more relevantly to the human experience of today.

Augustine address the issue of the immortality of the soul and the mortality of the body in chapter XIIII of *City of God*. He makes the case for two deaths, or death in two parts. The first is the immortality of the soul that only experiences death, or a kind of death, when God leaves it. This is distinct from biological death, he writes that the soul, "can never fail to be living and sensitive."¹⁸⁶ The body however experiences death more readily: "the body is mortal, because it may be destitute of life, and left quite dead in itself."¹⁸⁷ Of this two part nature of death Augustine writes, "Therefore the soul lives by God, when it lives well (for it cannot live without God working good in it): and the body lives by the soul, when the soul lives in the body, whether it live by God or no."¹⁸⁸ In this understanding of death it is possible to live a soulless life that is in a living body but with a soul from which God has departed. Similarly, the body may die but the immortality of the soul remains intact as long as God remains connected to the soul.¹⁸⁹ Death is not a binary condition for Augustine rather it is a problem that stems from the platonic notion of the immortality of the soul. If the soul is immortal and separable from the body but is

¹⁸⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1972), XIII, 16.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., I, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., XIII, 2.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

also capable of a kind of death itself, a four part—and unnecessarily complex—system is necessary.

- Both body and soul live in the fullness of God
- The body dies and the soul remains eternal
- The Soul dies, or is forsaken by God, and the body remains alive
- Both the body and the soul die and experience death and forsakenness

My hope is to relieve the burden of this complex system of death and kind-of-death by challenging some of Augustine's assumptions as well as some of his conclusions.

One of the primary assumptions that must be dealt with is the fundamental approach to the text itself. Is the reader's orientation to the text as a literal or symbolic account? In his writing, Augustine seems to subscribe to a literal interpretation, or at least an interpretation that is grounded in a literal historical account.

As we have previously discussed, the creation narrative—specifically the portions where the human beings are created—makes no explicit mention of their immortality or any intent to make them immortal. In the second chapter of Genesis, God crafts the first human from the dust (עֶפֶר). The essential material from which God chose to create the first human is dirt, dust, or rubble. This earth creature is given the breath of life, up the nose, and became a living being (Genesis 2:7). There is no indication that this earth creature is intended for immortality. Yet, Augustine argues:

We must therefore admit that the first human beings were created under this condition, that they would not have experienced any kind of death, if they had not sinned; and yet those first sinners were sentenced to death, with the provision that whatever sprang from their stock should incur the same punishment. For whatever was born from them could not have been different from what they themselves had been. In fact, because of the

magnitude of their offence, the condemnation changed human nature for the worse; so that what first happened as a matter of punishment in the case of the first human beings, continued in their posterity as something natural and congenital.¹⁹⁰

In this statement, Augustine is claiming that the first human beings would have remained immortal had they not sinned. Further, the ramifications of their sin extend to their children and to all subsequent generations as a congenital consequence.

Augustine claimed that the first human being's were created immortal. I am proposing an alternative interpretation of that story. Given insight from Becker's articulation of the human condition paired with the plain sense of the text an alternative interpretation is necessary. The does not mention a concept original immortality nor is there any mention of the consequence of their disobedience to be carried out in the subsequent generations.

Perhaps, to the contrary, given the material of their creation, the dust of the earth, mortality was always a part of the divine plan.¹⁹¹ This sacred knowledge was withheld until the taste of the forbidden fruit. Then the *awareness* of mortality enters the human condition and the reaction to that awareness sets in motion the metaphor of the fall. Their eyes are opened to the reality that they are animated dirt creatures that will eventually rejoin the dust from which they came. The terror that is rooted in this humble condition is what Becker articulates as the crux of the problem of being human.

¹⁹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 512.

¹⁹¹ The Hebrew word [עֶפֶר] is often translated dust but also bears the connotation of earth, dirt, or rubble. It appears many times in Job as a symbol of death and morning. Isaiah employs this noun as a symbol of repentance. In Genesis 3:16 God promises Abram to make his offspring like the dust of the earth. Which is to suggest there will be very many. This indicates great quantity but gives no indication of longevity.

Sin Inheritance

Another significant feature of Augustine's doctrine is that of the hereditary nature of sin; because Adam sinned the sinful nature is passed on from generation to generation. Passages from St. Paul's letter to the Romans have been used to support this notion as well. He writes in chapter five, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). This passage seems to re-affirm Augustinian doctrine of death entering the world through sin and sin consequently inherited from generation to generation. A close look at the context of the passage suggests that St. Paul is primarily making a Christological claim. Sin and death entering the world through Adam is an unintended consequence in his metaphor. St. Paul established a foundation upon which Christ can be understood as salvific for all. Which is his agenda over making a claim on the sinful condition of humanity. Lull and Cobb in their commentary on Romans write, "Paul's focus was not on 'human nature' but on sin entering 'the world.' ... Today much of what Paul meant by being under the dominion of sin can be understood in socio-psychological terms."¹⁹²

Becker lends legitimacy to challenge the traditional Augustinian sin-inheritance metaphor as it fails to fully connect to the plain sense of the text. There is no explicit mention of inheritance of sin in the creation narrative and significantly it is not mentioned when Cain kills Able in Genesis 4. Jarvis Streeter points out "The two primary texts upon which the doctrine of original sin has been based are Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12-21,

¹⁹² John B. Cobb and David John Lull, *Romans*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 83.

neither of which in the understanding of contemporary biblical scholars provides corroboration for the Augustinian doctrine.”¹⁹³

Despite criticism we still find in Augustine, perhaps, openness to the awareness of mortality a vital part of the human condition:

You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit. And man who is a part of your creation, wishes to praise you, man who bears about within himself his mortality, who bears about within himself testimony that you resist the proud. Yet, this man, this part of your creation wishes to praise you.¹⁹⁴

Despite Augustine’s claims of original immortality we can still detect themes resonant with Becker. Here he is speaking of mortality as a vital component of the human condition all the while extending praise to the God of all creation.

Exodus 32: 1-20: Idol Making Propensity

Human beings have a propensity to escape the reality of death. In order to achieve this escape we create fictions that will help us elude what we know to be true. That is, now that we are conscious of death we either try to forget we know or doggedly pursue immortality. As previously mentioned this is a largely symbolic endeavor. What Becker and Terror Management Theory would call immortality projects the Christian theologian might identify as idols. Both of these terms are referring to a symbolic entity that promises life in that which is created (rather than in the creator for the Christian theologian). One of the most dramatic examples of this idol making, immortality project pursuing, propensity in scripture is from the Exodus story.

¹⁹³ Jarvis Streeter, *Human Nature, Human Evil, and Religion: Ernest Becker and Christian Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 113.

¹⁹⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 43.

By the time we reach Exodus chapter 32 God has delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. This was no easy or pleasant task. One may recall the long and arduous work Moses, empowered by God, engaged on the people's behalf. Moses led the people through the plagues, the red sea, and the wilderness, to liberate them from bondage and death in Pharaoh's Egypt.¹⁹⁵ Moses is summoned to Mount Sinai to meet God. The other leaders accompany him for part of the journey but he alone is commanded into the presence of the Lord that was like a devouring fire on the mountaintop. He was there for forty days and forty nights. While on the mountain God instructed Moses about the law that would become the normative way of life for the recently delivered Israelites. The most famous, and perhaps significant, event on this journey up the mountain was the delivery of the Decalogue. The words that would become known as the Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, were given to Moses as a sign of their life together with God.

Illustrating the incredible idol-making propensity built deep into the human condition as a ramification of the awareness of mortality, the people of God waited at the base of the mountain. The people saw Moses' delay, *כִּי־בָעַשׂ*. The word rendered as "delay" also has roots in what might be translated "shame." The sphere of connotation this word bears connects their awareness of Moses' delay to not only a failure of chronographic expectation but also a sense of humility or shame.¹⁹⁶ This sense of shame draws us back to our conversation about the creation story in Genesis. Shame is a central component of both stories, in Genesis 2:25, we read "The man and woman were naked

¹⁹⁵ Another interesting analysis around Pharaoh's own immortality projects might be offered. The Israelites bondage and slavery in Egypt could be interpreted as an immortality project induced oppression.

¹⁹⁶ J. Gerald Janzen, "The Character of the Calf and Its Cult in Exodus 32," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (Oct. 1990): 599.

and unashamed.” The same root, בָּיֵשׁ, is used here with a negator to indicate they were *unashamed* of their nakedness. This perceived lack or inadequacy created an anxiety in the people waiting at the base of the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said, “Come make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Genesis 32:1).

Their request of Aaron is a curious recasting of a promise God made to them in Exodus chapter 23:20: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.” Their request to have a god made to go before them mimics the promise God made to go before them earlier in the story. This is a military and strategic request for safety and assurance. “The identification of Yahweh as ‘man of war’ in the old poem in Exodus 15:3 is also narratively implied in the preceding chapters. The motif of Yahweh, or the angel of Yahweh ‘going before’ the people (Exodus 13:21, 14:19), for example, has clear military connotations.”¹⁹⁷

The people became tired of waiting for God, or at least Moses. There is a perceived gap or breakdown in their symbolic system. Moses was late; he might be dead, lost, or have given up his responsibility of leadership. Forty days was a long time to wait. Their impatience got the better of them. So they melted their golden jewelry and made a figure of a calf. This action was specifically forbidden in the recently revealed covenantal law. Significantly, this action came from the people in a request to Aaron. Aaron was Moses’ helper and partner in the Exodus leadership structure. Relenting to the demand of the crowd, he made a mold, cast the image, and the people erroneously proclaimed, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

32:4). They had forged for themselves a new symbol of power to protect themselves from the nagging feeling of inadequacy and impotency in the wilderness. In this new symbol they found the lure of the promise of power and immortality. Becker writes of this need for an idol, “We need a concrete object for our control, and we get one in whatever way we can.”¹⁹⁸ For the people of God camped along the base of Mount Sinai this meant melting down golden jewelry to make the image of a calf. The people were pleased with the institution of the idol.

The very next day they declared a festival to the Lord (Exodus 32:5). Which raises the issue of to whom this day is declared. Aaron claims this festival to “לַיהוָה”, literally to Yahweh, which would suggest an orthodox impulse. But the object of their attention is the symbol of the golden calf. This semiotic gap provides an interesting insight into the problem of the human condition we have been defining using the work of Becker and Terror Management Theory. With Moses, their heroic figure, gone they are left without the symbolic structure that has heretofore assuaged their death anxiety. Rather than exalting Aaron, he became complicit in the new tactic to craft a durable symbol over which they have complete geographic control. The golden calf cannot wander off into the wilderness and leave them behind, but has the potential to go with them, even in front of them, wherever they may go. It may be in this case that their perceived loyalty remains with Yahweh but their symbolic connection is the newly formed golden calf. The Lord has expressly forbidden this practice in the command there will be no idols “in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). This speaks to the impulse or desire to

¹⁹⁸ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 144.

have a durable, even idolatrous, symbolic entity that points one to the divine. However noble their intentions, their actions violated the Lord's command. The symbol that serves as an idol has too great a potential to be the thing of worship itself and lose its semiotic connection to that which it originally signified.

God warned Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.' The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation'" (Exodus 32:7-10). Resisting the temptation to be the sole progenitor of a great nation, Moses interceded to the Lord on the people's behalf. Eventually, the Lord's anger was subdued and Moses went down the mountain to vehemently express his discontent with the people's actions. The impulse they followed can be interpreted in light of Becker's articulation of the human condition. In the absence of their heroic figure that symbolically pointed them to the Lord, they made their own object of significance.

Whose Problem

The idol-making propensity is a defining problem that is at the center of the human condition. We still seek to project ourselves with cosmic specialness and uniqueness, still seek that which will fundamentally assuage our death anxiety. The object may not be a collectively constructed golden calf but in our contemporary culture it could be the collective idol of Wall Street, cars, houses, bank accounts, academic

degrees, or other potential expressions of idolatrous immortally projects. “By means of the techniques of ritual men imagined that they took firm control of the material world, and at the same time transcended that world by fashioning their own invisible projects which made them supernatural, raised them over and above material decay and death.”¹⁹⁹ This is a problem that plagued the people of God as they waited for Moses at the base of the mountain and it remains our problem today. It would seem in the long scope of history we are just as fickle and insecure as our ancestors in faith who gathered around the base of Mount Sinai. We are creatures that crave the safety a robust symbolic order provides. And when those symbolic orders are absent or challenged we may find ourselves at our worst.

The problem of the anxiety of death has been charted in scripture in stories like this one from Exodus 32. In reading these stories we are able to glean from the wisdom of this tradition and perhaps become aware of our own idol making impulses. A question, inspired by the metaphor of the people at the base of Mount Sinai, that might make its way into our ethical matrix is: “is this a golden calf for me/us?” That is: am I making this person/object into an idol that I expect to give me illusions of immortality and existential grandeur? We might be able to read this story as in some way our own and glimpse our own failings and shortcomings in this regard. In this way the biblical narrative can challenge our own assumptions about why we are motivated to do what we do in the world. Keeping this story alive in our imaginations and allowing the metaphor to live in our hearts may help us avoid the negative ramifications of death denial.

¹⁹⁹ Ernest Becker, *Escape From Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 7.

Ezekiel 37: The Valley of Death and Hope for Life

Another powerful example where the scriptures address the problem of death appears in Ezekiel chapter 37. This account offers stunning contrasts between life and death and ultimately leaves the reader with a thread of hope of new life. The chapter starts with the hand of the Lord, which has come upon Ezekiel, leading him out into the middle of a valley. This is the typical prophetic formula which indicates to the reader Ezekiel is not acting on his own but has become an instrument of the Lord. He is led to the middle of a valley and we might easily imagine this place to be hot, dry, and dusty. Life is harsh if not impossible to sustain; the text builds a contrast between life and death. Further, this valley is full of bones, very many and very dry. The Hebrew writer uses the emphatic, *רַב־מְאֹד*, to emphasize there were *very* many bones and they were *very* dry. Ezekiel has been led to the *middle* of this scene; he is not participating on the periphery, but right in the midst of the dry dusty bones in the dry desolate valley. With the lack of water and the prevalence of bones, death weighs heavy on the scene already. God addresses Ezekiel as: *בֶּן־אָדָם* (literally son of man, or descendant) that is translated in the NRSV as “O Mortal.” This address is aimed at one who descended from those who are now deceased and who will one day himself be deceased. It’s a curious, if not humbling, salutation that seems to emphasize Ezekiel’s mortality. It is all but impossible to remove Ezekiel’s experience from our own. God addresses Ezekiel as “the mortal one” and at least sharing his human experience the reader is also asked to consider that title. This reminder of mortality is aimed at Ezekiel but might easily conjure up our awareness of our own mortality.

The phrasing of this address, “O Mortal,” (which is prevalent throughout the book) further emphasizes the situation of mortality in the valley of dry bones. The human condition we explored in Genesis 2:16-17 has come to full fruition. The awareness of mortality, the bite of the forbidden fruit, has ransacked the life for which God created man and woman. Robert Jenson writes of this account:

For it has come to this: Israel as a whole and as such (37:11) is—as Ezekiel so often threatened—well and truly dead, a strewing of remains no longer even skeletal, so definitely of the past that the bones have separated and preserve no personal identities—no one can point and say “Alas, poor...I knew him well.” The word of Gen. 2:17 has finally been fulfilled: the clash between God’s will for his human creatures, by which alone they live, and their refusal to follow that will, has been worked out in the history of Israel and has come to its inevitable conclusion.²⁰⁰

So then, what is the hope for life? The Lord asks Ezekiel, the mortal one, to ponder “can these bones live?” (37:3). In the middle of the dry and dusty valley, filled with very dry, very dusty bones, what about life now? Ezekiel doesn’t answer the question but instead turns it back to the Lord: “O Lord you know.” The Lord’s next command telegraphs the answer. “Prophecy to theses bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live” (37:4-5). This is an interesting re-casting, of sorts, of the Genesis 2 creation narrative: “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). The breath of life, *חַיִּים נְשָׁמָה*, from Genesis perhaps stands in linguistic contrast to the breath or spirit, *רוּחַ*, which is promised in Ezekiel. Nonetheless the breath of life, or the living breath, is promised to the dry and scattered bones.

²⁰⁰ Robert W. Jenson, *Ezekiel*, Brazos Theological Commentary On the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 281.

The courage of Ezekiel to say yes to life in middle of all the evidence to the contrary is a tremendous witness. The contrast between life and death is significant in the lifeless valley, yet Ezekiel has the courage, or humility, to speak to word of life the Lord has put on his lips. He did not run from or shy away from the place of death but rather into the midst of it spoke life. This is deeply resonant with the work of Ernest Becker and Terror Management Theory. In a grand and dramatic narrative Ezekiel stood in the place of mortality and witnessed to the breath of life that God had promised. There are Ezekiel moments for us today, following wars, violence, or natural disasters, when that question—“can these bones live”—might ring in our own ears. Becker would posit that our denial mechanisms would propel us to symbolically avoid death and somehow find refuge in even a fiction laden cultural system. The question remains: can we stand unflinchingly in the place of death and resolutely speak to the breath of life even with a whisper?

For some, the decline of the Christian Church stands as a symbolic death. The Pew Research Center has surveyed the American cultural landscape and found a numerical decline in faith participants as well as a contrasting increase in the non-affiliated groups.

But the new survey of 35,000 Americans by the Pew Research Center finds that the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Pew Research Center, *America's Changing Religious Landscape* (May 12, 2015).

This is perhaps an ecclesiological Ezekiel moment. Rather than pretending away the decline, or explaining why it doesn't matter, we can stand in the place of this symbolic death and not shy away. Similar to the Theology of the Cross that Luther articulated, Becker invites honesty and clarity. Like Ezekiel, we stand firmly grounded in the middle of this valley—avoiding nothing—yet filled with enough courage to witness to the breath of life promised by God. Our valley is not filled with bones, but with decaying hulks of unused cathedrals, with the boarded up country churches, with the empty pews. Our task is not to run, not to shy away, but take full account and with great courage cling to the promise of life.

After all, we are in the life business. But a life spent avoiding death is no life at all. Although, one might exist in this state but we would be remiss to call that condition the optimum life. Becker invites us out of this trap of death avoidance and helps us articulate the essence of the human condition. As we turn our attention to scripture we find places that confirm and support what Becker has defined as the essential human condition. Ezekiel is a positive example of the scripture demanding we take seriously our mortality and acknowledge the reality of our own death. But, this is not the final word. Beyond the reality of death is the promise of life. It is this sort of life that has promise. It is not the promise of immortality, or the removal of death, but life even though we will die. This passage from Ezekiel lays bare the idols of immortality we might be tempted to create, invites us to consider our mortality (the core of the human condition), and in that context hope in the promise of the breath of life.

John 13:1-17: Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry was his ability to cross the boundaries between clean and unclean. This social dichotomy creates metaphorical borders: overcoming them is nearly impossible. In the scripture it was the priests who were charged with determining who was ritually clean and, conversely, ritually unclean.²⁰² Those who had been declared unclean were marginalized from the community and were forced to live separate from the community.²⁰³ These boundaries become an integral part of the social norms that were the convention of Jesus' time. For him to cross those boundaries was more than transgressing the rules but violating the cultural norms which in part assuaged their death anxiety. In our examination of Becker's work we discovered that all cultural norms, including Levitical law, provide a symbolic means to quiet the anxiety of death that lurks beneath the surface of our awareness. Diseases and uncleanliness reveal the fallibility of the body and the condition of mortality. But they also represent a symbolic death as a loss of control, status, and place in "clean" society. This clean/unclean purity system in part kept the community safe from communicable diseases but beyond the practical safety aspect it served to provide a cultural fiction of death denial. In his willingness to cross the clean and unclean boundaries Jesus showed us a way to acknowledge our death anxiety and move forward into life. What Jesus revealed and then called us to imitate was love.

In the days before the crucifixion Jesus observed the festival of the Passover with his followers. According to the gospel writer, he knew his hour had come and he would

²⁰² Leviticus 13:3.

²⁰³ Leviticus 13:45-46.

soon depart from the world. With this knowledge in the readers mind, the sense of urgency or ultimacy of Jesus' words and actions is heightened. In a sense, this is Jesus' last testament before the crucifixion in John's gospel. The text explicitly points out that he loved those who followed him. It is important to note that this love even extends to the disciple who will betray him, as the devil had already put this notion in Judas' heart. As they shared a meal, Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and used it to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:4-6). In an intimate and powerful way Jesus radically crossed over the boundary of clean and unclean. Love was the bridge that created the space for the intersection. Simon Peter raised an objection with his false rhetorical question, "are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus spoke to the heart of his fear, "you do not know what I am doing but later you will understand."

Jesus then proceeded to break the bread and shared a meal with the disciples. And he said to them: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). Modeling this boundary crossing behavior, he then commanded them to follow his example. He continued to share the meal—even with the one who would betray him. After the meal Jesus gave them a final commandment. "I give you a new commandment, that you should love another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). This final commandment before the crucifixion is perhaps the culmination of all he has taught and modeled for the disciples up until this point. His command is that they love one another but more than that they are

to love in the way in which he loved them. It is in the washing of the feet that this radical love is most proximally displayed in the preceding narrative. Jesus command might be interpreted as, “you should love one another with the foot-washing-boundary-crossing-love with which I have loved you.”

It is by this, radical boundary crossing love, that everyone will know these disciples are followers of Jesus. This will be the mark of Jesus’ disciples: radical love. Interesting to note there is no other outward mark or display that will make Jesus disciples stand out or be unique other than action of love to which he commands them. For the followers of Jesus the mark of discipleship is not in a haircut, dress, jewelry, or diet, or subscription to the law. The mark by which to the world will know they are Jesus followers is love. And it is love that casts them into relationships, propels them across social and cultural boundaries, and pulls down the damaging borders erected between individuals and communities.

The love that Jesus modeled for his followers, of which we must include ourselves, empowers us to live beyond the anxiety of death. Social norms and cultural fictions designed to assuage our death anxiety would divide or polarize individuals or communities. In our contemporary society we do not deal with the present threat of leprosy or other Levitical cleanliness issues but think of those whom our culture declares unclean. We might imagine the homeless, the poor, those living with HIV or AIDS, the under or unemployed, as unclean by our cultural standards. The radical love to which Jesus calls us enables us to cross our own cultural defenses and death denial mechanisms in order to authentically love and serve our neighbors. By maintaining this practice of love we might more fully integrate mortality into our life’s story and authentically love

one another. Following Jesus command empowers us to avoid the negative ramifications of our death-denying propensity.

Matthew 16: 24-26: Take Up Your Cross

In our discussion of the gospel of John we saw that Jesus leads us across boundaries of clean and unclean, beyond our fear of death, to authentically love and serve our neighbors. Jesus invites those who would follow him to take up their Cross. From a literary perspective, Jesus is speaking to an audience that does not have the context of the resurrection into which they can place the Cross. From their viewpoint I presume they would not understand the Cross as anything more than a gruesome symbol of death. From this I draw connection to Becker's work. What Jesus is asking the disciples to do is engage this symbol of death and mortality as they follow him. Along with the story of the crucifixion and resurrection, this passage from Matthew illuminates the significance of the Cross in the journey to follow Jesus.

The story of Jesus' teaching concerning the crucifixion begins in Caesarea Philippi in Matthew 16:13-20. Jesus took the disciples to this out of the way town and asked them "who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13). They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:14). In this statement they suppose this would connect Jesus' identity to John the Baptist, a contemporary prophetic figure who has reclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Matthew 3:1-3 we read: "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

These verses are a recasting of Isaiah 40:3 that locates the identity of John the Baptist with Isaiah, the great prophet of old. The disciples include that others say Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, which continues to locate Jesus identity within the prophetic tradition.

Then Jesus turns the scene from an abstraction to an intimate question, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). No longer able to hide behind what *other* people think the disciples now have to answer for themselves. Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). This is the first time in the gospel of Matthew that the disciples claim that Jesus is the Messiah—the anointed one of God. I believe this question of identity is important because of what follows. Jesus immediately tells them what must happen in the days to come. He speaks openly about the suffering he must undergo, that he must be condemned, killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:21).

The gospel writer builds the messianic expectation with the dramatic questioning in Caesarea Philippi and then defies that expectation with the talk of Jesus’ imminent death. We can draw from the book of Isaiah some of the expectations of the messiah. Isaiah chapters 9-11 speak to the promise of God contained in the Messiah. For example, Isaiah writes: “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea” (Isaiah 11:10-11).

In Matthew 16 Jesus recasts that messianic promise by discussing his rejection, condemnation, and death. We might imagine this statement also recasts what it means to be follower of the messiah. Imaginations of grandeur stirred by being the ones who follow the messiah are now dashed by Jesus' statement that he will be rejected and die. What was perhaps an opportunity to garner the good graces of the one who has come to make all things right, and in so doing secure a place of prominence, is now an invitation to follow Jesus to the Cross. It is, however, vitally important that we notice Jesus is not recasting the promise of messianic victory, but only the means through which it will be established. The metaphor of triumphant-warrior-messiah who has come to exact justice and restore the people of God is recast in terms of humble-servant-messiah. The promise of restoration and justice remain, but the path by which they will be accomplished is the Cross.

Peter decided this would not do. He pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. This is an interesting contrast to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah a few verses prior. Following Peter's rebuke, Jesus forcefully remarks, "Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Matthew 16:23).

After he rebukes Peter, Jesus turns to the rest of the disciples and says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their Cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Again, this invitation might conflict with their previous imagination of what it meant to follow the messiah. Jesus is not proclaiming a path to glory in the conventional sense but rather asking the disciples each to take up their Cross as they follow. Given the pre-resurrection literary context, the Cross bears an entirely

different sphere of connotation than it does for the post-resurrection faith practitioner. I believe this affords an interesting conversation point with the work of Ernest Becker. Jesus is asking the disciples to take up a symbol of mortality and death and to bear that reality as they follow him. Given this statement, we might be drawn to believe Jesus is symbolically revealing to the disciples, and to us, that he has *not* come to make promises of immortality but rather just the opposite—to *more* closely connect us to the reality of death. The denial of death becomes an impossible task if one takes Jesus commission seriously. In this pre-resurrection context Jesus is revealing a promise of life much deeper than the illusion of immortality. Taking up the Cross and following Jesus the disciples are invited to really live. Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will find it. For what will I profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Matthew 16:25-26). We can hear the echoes of this sentiment in Terror Management Theory. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski write in their book *The Worm at the Core*:

Cultural worldviews and self-esteem help manage this terror by convincing us that we are special beings with souls and identities that will persist, literally and/or symbolically, long past our own physical death. We are thus pervasively preoccupied with maintaining confidence in our cultural scheme of things and satisfying the standards of value associated with it. But preserving this faith in our cultural worldviews and self-esteem becomes challenging when we encounter others with different beliefs. Sinister complications almost inevitably ensue.²⁰⁴

Maintaining the cultural worldviews and self-esteem to overcome the terror of death becomes an all-consuming task. Inviting the disciples to take up the Cross as they follow can be read as an invitation to set aside the busy work of maintaining cultural worldviews

²⁰⁴ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 127.

and self-esteem bolstering projects in order to fully live. Unencumbered of the weight the tasks Solomon et al. refer to as “pervasively preoccupying,” there is freedom to follow Jesus.²⁰⁵

The Cross is a central symbol in the content of the Christian message. In his Heidelberg Disputation, Luther claimed the language *Theologian of the Cross*.²⁰⁶ He writes, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.”²⁰⁷ The commitment to the theology of the Cross is a commitment to the truth over the illusion of fiction no matter how alluring. Terror Management Theory might make similar demands from a secular existential perspective, that we commit ourselves to uncovering the illusions we pursue to garner self-esteem or bolster our cultural worldview. It is the Cross—and commitment as Jesus commissions to carry it—that allows us to fully enter the human condition aware of mortality unabashed. Douglas John Hall writes, “And therefore the faith that emanates from this Cross is a faith that enables its disciples to follow the crucified God into the heart of the world’s darkness, into the very kingdom of death, and to look for light that shines *in* the darkness—the life that is given beyond the baptismal brush with death—and only there.”²⁰⁸

Jesus’ identity as Messiah is revealed and clarified in the journey to Caesarea Philippi. Further his disciple’s identity in him is revealed and clarified in his invitation to

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Timothy Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 31.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 32-33.

take up the Cross as they follow him. As we will explore further later, bearing the Cross also necessitates a posture of humility. Humility can be an antidote to the damage caused by the inflation of the self.

Jesus commissions to his followers to bear the Cross, even in this pre-resurrection context, invite us to participate with one of the central symbols of the Christian faith. This radical action demands a radical honesty about oneself. It is after all a ridiculous notion that one could bear the Cross all the while holding pretense about their own condition. Jürgen Moltmann writes in *The Crucified God* about this radical honesty the Cross demands.

The knowledge of the cross is the knowledge of God in the suffering caused to him by dehumanized man, that is, in the contrary of everything which dehumanized man seeks and tries to attain as the deity in him. Consequently, this knowledge does not confirm him as what he is, but destroys him. It destroys the god, miserable in his pride, which we would like to be, and restores us to our abandoned and despised humanity.²⁰⁹

The Cross shatters any illusions of greatness, self-righteousness, or immortality. Both Terror Management Theory and the theology of the Cross demand a brutal honesty concerning the human experience and predicament.

Conclusion

The wisdom we can glean about the essential nature of the human condition from Becker's science of man can aid us in reading scripture. These psychological and anthropological insights help us draw out of the scripture a further understanding of humanity's sinful or estranged state. These insights do not replace the need for the Scriptural narrative. The power of story connects our minds and our imaginations and

²⁰⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation of Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 71.

provides an operational metaphor for our life today. The story places us in time and space in relationship with God and one another. Reading our sacred stories alongside the best modern scholarship can help us draw out deeper insights and interpretations that connect with modern context. The creation account in Genesis give us the scriptural narrative, which read alongside Becker, offers a beautiful description of the predicament of the human dilemma. Read as a description rather than a diagnostic this story offers a poetic metaphor that allows us to see the reality of the human condition. This story of the human condition is revisited time and time again throughout the scriptural narrative. In Exodus we see the dramatic creation of an idol that serves as a symbol for God—even while Moses is on Mount Sinai speaking directly to God. Their fickle and impenitent nature is more deeply understood in light of the denial of death scholarship. Read alongside these psychological and anthropological insights we can more thoroughly appreciate the wisdom of this faith tradition as it prepares us to integrate mortality into a vigorous life story. Ezekiel offers a stunning example of the integration of death into life's story in chapter 37. Called to the valley of dry bones, to the very place of death, he is charged to speak life even into all the evidence to the contrary. This is not done in a death denying way but rather in a death embracing or accepting manner that then offers the potential of real life. Setting aside the denial mechanisms and avoidance tactics, and fully confronting the reality of death—the valley of dry bones—we are then ushered into the capacity for life unencumbered. The burden of death avoidance is heavy and the cost is, ironically, life. In the gospel of John we hear Jesus' call to love. We are to love the world in a way in which we are drawn across boundaries of disgust into life giving relationships.

Finally, in the gospel of John we hear Jesus commission to those who would be his followers, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). This is the ultimate call to discipleship—take up the symbol of death and mortality, carry it with you, as you follow me to life. The Cross, as I see it, becomes that which shatters any illusion we can make it on our own, destroys any selfish ambition or pride, and allows us to authentically live in loving relationships with our neighbors. The Cross is an essential part of the love Jesus shares with the world that draws across the boundaries of disgust and into the life God has prepared for us.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESPONDING TO POVERTY

Death awareness can affect the way individuals and communities engage issues of poverty and homelessness. I have seen my own community respond to issues of homelessness and in a manner deeply rooted in a denial of death anxiety rather than the objective issues at hand. Several congregations in the Snoqualmie Valley provide space in their buildings to be used as an overnight winter shelter. The organization Congregations for the Homeless coordinates these efforts and manages the shelter operations.

Congregations that have elected to be host sites must conform to certain permitting processes as required by the cities. Part of the requirement to host a shelter in the city of North Bend, Washington is that the hosting organization must hold community meetings to talk about the proposed shelter site. These meetings are publicly advertised and households within a quarter mile of the site itself are directly invited. The first year we proposed to use Mount Si Lutheran Church as a host site we conducted the proper community meetings. The meetings were well attended by neighbors and citizens of the community who were largely opposed to, or concerned about, the shelter. They brought conceptions of homelessness that were largely erroneous and fueled not only by misinformation but by a deep anxiety. This anxiety is rooted in the perceived symbolic threat the homeless represented to prevailing collective and individual immortality projects. The objective reality is not that terrifying. The overnight population consisted of ten to fifteen guests who were allowed in the building between 8:30 pm and 7:30 am. Overnight staff monitored and managed the facility the entire time. A meal was served at

9 pm and lights were turned out at 10:30 pm. In the morning, guests departed quietly into the community to engage their daily activities.

One of our city leaders stood behind the microphone shaking in anger at the prospect of having a homeless shelter, hosted in a church fellowship hall, in his community for forty-five days. The anger this prospect provoked seemed quite out of proportion to proposal at hand. There were also individuals who spoke passionately in support of the shelter proposal. Their commitment and enthusiasm seemed out of proportion to the proposal at hand, similar to the anger response. The proposal of giving homeless people a place to stay during the coldest months of the year brought out exactly what Becker and Terror Management Theory would predict in a death anxiety response. The problem with either an altruistic or a destructive response is it is still rooted in a symbolic extension of the immortality project, or death denial behavior. This response failed to recognize the individual beyond the symbolic projection—that is it fails to authentically recognize the other as human being and neighbor.

We can use the tools from Becker, Terror Management Theory, and the biblical narrative, to examine how communities respond to issues of poverty. Perhaps we can use these tools to critique and challenge responses rooted in death anxiety and draw out healthy and wise decisions. This is of particular importance to those who claim to follow Christ.

Addressing the problem of poverty is no easy task. A host of political, social, and economic factors must be considered. Responses will necessarily manifest in a variety of ways. While there is no easy fix or solution, ignoring the problem and hoping it goes away is not a faithful response either. This section attempts to explore some of the

decisions communities make in response to poverty in light of the fundamental human condition. Ernest Becker articulated the human condition as a paradox that plagues our subconscious. We are caught between the ability to imagine the infinite alongside the biological certainty of death. To avoid our anxiety that this paradox raises we create psychological systems of buffers.²¹⁰ These buffers work to reinforce our self-esteem and give us a sense of self-importance. This extended self-esteem allows us to exert ourselves beyond the possibility of death in order to avoid the terror of mortality. Previously, I have discussed Becker's articulation of the human condition, how this premise affects our ability to derive meaning from signs and symbols, and how this perspective is reflected in scripture. In this section I will attempt to move beyond abstract construct to practical elements of life in community. Specifically, we examine how this notion of the denial of death as an articulation of the human condition impacts communities responding to issues of poverty.

Jesus Leads Us Across Boundaries

In the gospels, Jesus is often leading the disciples into places they would no doubt be uncomfortable. The story of the woman at the well comes to mind. In the fourth chapter of the gospel of John we hear the account of Jesus and the disciples returning to Galilee. The most direct route, geographically, took them through Samaria. This geographic convenience however led them through an uncomfortable cultural boundary. The story says in verse nine, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." Perhaps giving us a clue to the tensions that lie across this cultural boundary. Jesus penetrates the norm with his very presence and leads the disciples into Samaria. He meets

²¹⁰ I understand these *buffers* to be mental strategies employed consciously or subconsciously that work to mitigate the existential terror brought about by death awareness.

a woman at the well in the midday and strikes up a conversation. She is taken aback by his actions and asks him, “How is it that you, a Jew as a drink of me a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9). She indicates the two offenses are that they are of incompatible cultures but also that she is a woman.

There are two boundaries crossed with his presence and initiation of relationship—gender and cultural. Using the tools of Terror Management Theory we might imagine the threat of a competitive cultural worldview might bring out a death anxiety response in Jesus or the disciples. However, Jesus models a relational orientation that ushers him, and eventually the disciples, beyond a death anxiety response. He engages the woman at the well in a common humanity and offers her the waters of eternal life. This is not a political moment, this is not a commentary on the state of the relationship between Galilee and Samaria this is a human-to-human moment. Jesus leading the disciples, and those who count themselves of that number today, across societal and cultural conventions might be uncomfortable and be met with resistance. His example moves us beyond our death anxiety response and into an authentic relationship with one another. We might be led into places that make us uncomfortable yet we can move beyond our base death anxiety response and find a value in these authentic relationships. This becomes a model of responding to poverty for individuals and communities. Working alongside those in poverty, or those who live in homelessness, can be uncomfortable and may draw us across contemporary cultural borders.

Symbols of Failed Cultural Fiction

Families and individuals living on the economic margins, or literal margins, of our communities are symbolic. They are symbolic of the frailty of our economic systems

and the cultural fiction to which we cling ever so tightly. Encountering a symbol of economic and cultural frailty orchestrates a symbolic death that breaches our own death transcending mechanisms. People who are different from us, or march to the beat of a competitive cultural fiction, can be perceived as a symbolic threat. Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg posit that there are five essential responses to a symbolic threat: conversion, derogation, assimilation, accommodation, or annihilation.²¹¹ Employing these five responses individually or in combination works to assuage our death anxiety and repair the frailty in our defense systems.

Poverty is a multivalent issue. There is no easy way to define or understand the features, symptoms, and causes of poverty. The fact that there are people who live in poverty is related to political policy, economic systems, family systems, and choices of individuals. As an individual it is not my intent to harm the economic well-being of my neighbor, and yet the role I play in systems larger than myself may have that consequence. These large, global even, economic and political systems can create conditions of poverty for some. But as individuals, “Most of us do not play that causal role as individuals, but rather as parts of ongoing historical processes and social structures—economic, political, military, and other social systems.”²¹² So while we acknowledge that the issues are complex we are not left mired in paralysis but continue acknowledging the intricacies at hand. The goal of this section is not to tackle the entire systematic issues of poverty but to attempt to distinguish some sentiment from actual features.

²¹¹ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: the Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), Kindle LOC 660ff.

²¹² Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological and Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 26.

Poverty is an issue that affects all of us. We may not be those individuals who live in poverty yet we all experience peripheral consequences of poverty. According to the 2014 census data, in 2013, there were 45.3 million people in poverty, which is 14.5 percent of the population. Children are affected more significantly than the rest of the population with poverty rates hovering just below 20 percent for the population under 18 years old.²¹³ These percentages represent a significant number of people in our communities. When one out of every five children in our school system is living in poverty, is perhaps under or malnourished, and is affected by the stress of poverty, all the students realize the ramifications of poverty in the classroom. With that many potential neighbors, co-workers, and members of our community living in poverty everyone is in some way touched by the issues poverty raises.

There are governmental and social systems in place to alleviate the most drastic effects of poverty but obviously it is still a reality of everyday life.²¹⁴ This means there are individuals and families that live with the constant threat of food and shelter insecurity. We are all affected by poverty with this number of potential neighbors, friends, and colleagues living in substandard economic conditions. It is also important to note that poverty is not a binary situation. One is not either in poverty or not, but rather is faced with a continuum of economic agency. Individuals and families may inhabit different places on this continuum in various stages of life or during the span of a month.

²¹³ Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013," Census.gov, September, 2014, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p60-249.pdf>, 12.

²¹⁴ Examples of these governmental strategies include Social Security, Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).

There are many myths surrounding the issue of poverty. These popular misconceptions are damaging to those living in this state that makes community responses all the more challenging. For example there is the common conception that poor people are lazy. One of the guiding narratives in American culture is that you can “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” or we that live “in the land of opportunity.”²¹⁵ There is a prevailing cultural fiction that makes us believe if you work hard you can get ahead and buffer yourself from the realities of poverty. Even in the midst of the recent global economic downturn in 2007 many Americans still hung fervently to the promise of the American dream. Katharine Seelye writes in a 2009 New York Times article:

Americans have always believed in possibilities. And they have consistently said over time that they can start poor in this country and become rich, regardless of the economy or their circumstances. The 72 percent who feel that way today is down from the 81 percent who felt that way in 2007, but 72 percent is still a very high percentage, especially given the downward economy.²¹⁶

This sentiment reinforces the notion that if you are poor it is your fault; you have failed to work hard and take advantage of the opportunities afforded to you. The fact that 72 percent of Americans believe they could start poor and become rich regardless of the economy or their circumstances reveals the power of the cultural fiction by which we live. There is a durable belief that if you work hard you can get ahead even though the economic reality does not reinforce that optimism. This shows the power of symbolic narratives that comprise the fiction by which we live. Even in the face of contrary evidence they will persist because they offer the larger perceived benefit of assuaging death anxiety. The symbolic narrative will be upheld and defended in order to preserve

²¹⁵ Katharine Q. Seelye, “What Happens to the American Dream in a Recession.” *New York Times*, May 7, 2009, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/us/08dreampoll.html>.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

the cultural fiction. In this case the good story serves to reduce our death anxiety and that is worth far more than whatever the truth may be. Hopefully, by taking up the call to follow Jesus and utilizing the work of Becker we can move beyond our failing cultural fictions into authentic and helpful relationships.

One of the solutions to endemic poverty is public assistance. On state and local levels there are governmental responses to poverty and attempts to alleviate the most drastic consequences. Opponents of these social assistance programs accuse them of teaming with fraud. There is a popular public perception that these programs are being taken advantage of by people who are lazy and refuse to subscribe to the work ethic promulgated by the American Dream. How much of this narrative is part of our cultural fiction? What does the data really show us?

While there may be fraud in the social welfare systems, it is relatively small and insignificant in the economy of scale. In 2013 the USDA claimed that eighty-two percent of the money given to participants in the welfare system was spent at large grocery stores and supermarkets. Within these large corporate systems fraud is low—less than half of one percent.²¹⁷ The majority, or the illegal use of benefit money typically takes place at smaller independent business like corner stores and convenience stores. In these cases the abuse rate is around one cent on the dollar.²¹⁸ Any rate of fraud is a problem, yet the punitive response that affects all welfare recipients seems disproportionate.

²¹⁷ FNS Office of Communication and Governmental Affairs, *USDA Releases New Report On Trafficking and Announces Additional Measures to Improve Integrity in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, USDA, August 15, 2013, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2013/fns-001213>.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

What is more shocking is the number of people who work hard and yet fail to make a living wage. According statistics from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 23 percent of those living in poverty were considered “working poor.” That is, they maintain full time work and still fall below the poverty line. Yet, images of Ronald Reagan’s “Welfare Queen”²¹⁹ still dominate public opinion. For example, the Kansas Legislature passed House Bill 2258 which limits Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Food Stamp) benefits to \$25 per day and forbids use of benefits in

Any retail liquor store, casino, gaming establishment, jewelry store, tattoo parlor, massage parlor, body piercing parlor, spa, nail salon, lingerie shop, tobacco paraphernalia store, vapor cigarette store, psychic or fortune telling business, bail bond company, video arcade, movie theater, swimming pool, cruise ship, theme park, dog or horse racing facility...²²⁰

It is worth noting that the highest amount a family of four can receive under this program is four hundred and ninety seven dollars per month. This is about four dollars per day per person, which is insufficient to pay rent, let alone visit a psychic or purchasing, or cruise ship travel from land locked Kansas is banned under this bill. Yet, these safeguards were put in place to protect the taxpayer from the perceived frivolous spending the impoverished may be tempted to engage.

Myths of Poverty

The myths surrounding poverty have real ramifications for our community, especially those living in or trying to escape the bonds of poverty. So why are these

²¹⁹ Josh Levin, “She Used 80 Names,” *Slate*, Dec. 19 2013, accessed April 24, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html.

²²⁰ Kansas State Legislature. *Senate Substitute for House Bill No. 2258*, Kansas State Legislature, accessed April 24, 2015. http://kslegislature.org/li/b2015_16/measures/documents/hb2258_enrolled.pdf.

myths so prevalent or popular? Why aren't they easily dispelled with a clear articulation of fact?

Responding to the complex issue of poverty is made more complex considering the death-denial response posited by Becker and Terror Management Theory. Becker posited that death is the central problem for human beings. Death is more than just a physical reality; it is also symbolic. We symbolically die when we are faced with isolation, annihilation, impotence, or anything that would challenge the immortal imagination we conjure.²²¹ Death is a terrifying reality that is so insurmountable that it would be paralyzing. As a way forward we find means to buffer ourselves from the obvious condition of mortality. We participate in cultural fictions that help us alleviate the anxiety of death and step forward into life. Becker writes, "Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning."²²² This takes place only in the symbolic; culture symbolically assuages the fear of death that lurks deep in our hearts. Tillich writes, "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate."²²³ We cling to symbols that offer death transcendence and avoid symbols that remind us either symbolic or physical mortality.

²²¹ Becker claims that "the self is not physical it is symbolic. It is "in" the body but it is rarely integrated with the body; like dominoes in a box, not like tightly woven tapestry." Ernest Becker, *Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective On the Problem of Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 32. Becker further sites an example of French financiers "who threw themselves from tall building because something happened to the numbers in their bank accounts. It is just as William James had said: *they were* the numbers, and *their* value had gone down to zero so they were already dead." Ibid., 33.

²²² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 7.

²²³ Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 41.

These symbols move and work together to offer a relief from the fundamental anxiety Becker posits lies at the heart of the human condition.

These symbolic reactions happen below our level of consciousness—beyond the reach of thoughtful engagement. Yet cultivating an awareness of this subconscious anxiety enables us to realize the impact our lives have on others. While immortality projects, and cultural fictions, may not always lead to negative behavior, if left unexamined, the potential for harm is significant.

I believe that people who live in poverty, especially those without homes, are symbolic of the failing of our cultural fictions. Their existence reveals the frailty of our cultural fictions. If one embraces the “work hard to get ahead” narrative, a person living in homelessness may threaten that illusion.

When confronted by poverty or homelessness we are left with two options: we deem to offenders lazy and suggest they are not participating properly in the cultural norms, or the cultural system in which we find anxiety relief is not as durable as we thought. Unfortunately, given the popular rhetoric around poverty and homelessness, it would seem that more often than not we seek to scapegoat those who live in poverty or in homelessness. I have often heard character-assassinating words like, lazy, weak, worthless, or trash, in association with this community.

One of the goals of this dissertation project is to connect the academic architecture I have created to understand responses to poverty with real life experience. In my work with the Winter Shelter I try to connect and have regular interaction with the homeless people in my own community. I have found a ready conversation partner in my friend Mike. He has experienced homelessness first hand and even yet lives not far from

it. He spoke of feeling marginalized and cast out from society. “All the world is going on around me and I’m not worth paying attention to.”²²⁴ While he was homeless his sense of community collapsed and the support systems he relied on failed.

I strongly doubt anyone upon seeing a homeless or poor person thinks to themselves, “Now there is a symbol of my mortality which I must suppress.” But the ramifications of this non-conscious reaction are very real. We wage symbolic wars against symbols of our failings rather than make rational decisions about actual problems. Equally damaging, we let the “homeless” or the “poor” become a nameless and faceless entity rather than human beings or valued neighbors.

Disgust Theory

It may be a gross overgeneralization, but I think most people believe that those who live in poverty are disgusting. Some smell bad, others do not wear clean clothes, many carry large dirty backpacks or bags, have missing teeth, and greasy hair. When we see someone or something as offensive, our basic biological predisposition is to expel it from our body. Richard Beck writes concerning a sociological experiment done by Paul Rozin his classroom where he asked students to collect spit in their mouths. After a few moments he asked them to swallow and they did with no problems. Then he handed out cups and asked the students to spit in the cup. Next, he asked them to drink what they had spit in the cup.²²⁵ Their reaction was one of disgust. The saliva that had moments before been in their mouth, now expelled, was disgusting. In fact, in my experience, even sharing this story with others has caused some to feel nauseous.

²²⁴ Mike The Russian, interview by author, North Bend, Washington, March 24, 2015.

²²⁵ Richard Allan Beck, *Unclean: Meditations On Purity, Hospitality, and Morality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 1.

The biological response to disgust is powerful and perhaps homeless, impoverished, and marginalized people have become the victims of an overly robust disgust response. They have become transformed into symbolic entities that violate our cultural norms and are therefore disgusting and must be expelled from our body—that is the body of our communities. Once expelled, like spit in a cup, it is incredibly difficult to regain a place in the body. That which is expelled from the body becomes disgusting: blood, vomit, urine, feces, puss, or mucus. The homeless can elicit the same disgust response. They have symbolically been expelled from the body (the community of people who have homes) and they become disgusting. In this instance they represent the failings of a cultural fiction we work so hard to maintain. But also they represent the very elemental biology we work to repress. Our culture works very hard to suppress bodily smells and Becker may argue, these smells remind us of the biological nature of our humanity which is indicative of our death. As a society we place value on clean teeth, groomed hair, and cosmetic products that in effect become outward signs of inward commitments to common cultural endeavors. All these behaviors can be interpreted as a repression of the essential bodily connection—especially a body that ages and will die. Homeless people typically violate these cultural values and so with their very presence, as well as their appearance and smell, they symbolically threaten our immortality projects. Beck writes, “Metaphorically, we experience these ‘uncivilized’ acts as a form of desecration, as a form of contamination via a movement away from the angels and toward the animalistic.”²²⁶ Once they have taken on the symbolic identity as that which is disgusting, it is incredibly difficult to reintegrate back into the society that adheres to the

²²⁶ Ibid., 56.

prevailing cultural fiction. Once something has been expelled by the body it is determined to be disgusting. The metaphor is a powerful one. The homeless and impoverished are the expelled ones and the body is the ones for whom the cultural fiction has not yet failed.

It is one thing to read about these theories in my nice clean office. But how is this experience lived out? For that we must be willing to cross the boundary and engage with those whom our society and culture has found disgusting. Only then can we hear their voices and work together to make our communities whole. I asked Mike if this theory of disgust connected to his experience. Did it resonate with his story or was something academics think up with no basis in reality? “No,” he claimed, “this is right on. This is how it feels.”²²⁷ He talked about having friends one day and the next day feeling like a stranger in his own community. He went from living in a house to living in a small forested area near a freeway exit. Using Beck’s words, Mike felt expelled from the body. Mike resonated with Becker’s language and knew first hand what it meant to feel like the object of disgust in a community.

Food Banks and Homeless Shelters

So what about food banks, homeless shelters, or social programs trying to alleviate poverty? They help, right? Yes, they help, but they also bring to bear another perspective of Becker’s work. When a person is confronted with death anxiety their response may be to lash out and banish the symbolic entity contributing to their anxiety. They may try to ignore or annihilate their perceived adversary. But as we have explored, the opposite behavioral norm may be primed and their death anxiety may bring about an

²²⁷ Mike the Russian, interview by author, North Bend, Washington, March 24, 2015.

altruistic response. It is plausible that the reaction to death leads to behavior that attempts to make the symbolic problem disappear. If then the problem is people need food, and they symbolically threaten my immortality project, then give them food. If there are people without homes that subconsciously raise death anxiety then we should give them shelter.

Altruism

There have been recent studies combining Focus Theory and the field of Terror Management.²²⁸ The goal is to examine which cultural norms or behaviors can be predicted given a rise in death anxiety. This initial research reveals a proximal connection to the exhibited behavior. If the closest proximal norm is altruistic it is likely that an individual's behavior will be altruistic in response to death anxiety. Combining Focus Theory with Terror Management Theory reveals that death anxiety responses may be altruistic or destructive depending on the context of the situation. For our purposes this allows an interesting opportunity to examine altruistic responses to poverty and homelessness. Is there a dark side of altruism rooted in death anxiety?

The problem with altruistic behavior as the result of death anxiety is that it is still a death anxiety response. The response is still about the individual's need to repress death anxiety and has nothing to do with the person who is marginalized or distressed.²²⁹

²²⁸ Eva Jonas et al. "Focus Theory of Normative Conduct and Terror-Management Theory: The Interactive Impact of Mortality Salience and Norm Salience on Social Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 6 (2008): 1241, accessed December 14, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0013593>.

²²⁹ I perceive this symbolic action to be an attempt to assuage a subconscious death anxiety. The immediate action may be altruistic but the tertiary motivation is perhaps more nefarious. Viktor Frankl writes about the negative ramifications of trying to resolve the tension in one's life. "I consider a dangerous misconception of mental hygiene to assume that what man needs in the first place is equilibrium or, as it is called in biology 'homeostasis,' i.e., a tensionless state. What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task." Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 105. It may be the subconscious striving to act out in

Rather than interacting on a human level this interaction plays out symbolically and the homeless or the poor remain in their non-human state as symbolic entities to be manipulated to assuage death anxiety. What is radically absent from this interaction is relationship. In the story of the woman at the well, Jesus provides us with another means forward. Rather than meeting the woman as a symbolic political statement, or a gender role stereotype, Jesus met her as a human being. In my conversations with the homeless and those living in poverty one of the things they long for the most is relationships.

Mount Si Lutheran Church hosts a winter shelter for the coldest months of the year. I am frequently there to greet the patrons as they arrive. As the volunteers are busy preparing dinner, the patrons bustle through the door out of the cold. You can watch them change. They arrive defensive, combative, maybe even quiet and reserved. They are in “street” mode. When they sit at the table and have conversations with other homeless people and volunteers, the humanity returns to their faces. It is in these relationships impact can be made. But to have these relationships we must we cross the boundary of disgust and mitigate the internal response to reject them as symbols of mortality. These relationships are life changing and impact the health of the entire community.

Reflecting on our unexamined death anxiety allows us to interact authentically with other human beings rather than manipulate them as objects of a system that assuage my death anxiety. In my conversations with Mike, I often ask if the Winter Shelter works, that is, is it doing anything to change lives in the long term. He says that providing a place of shelter is one thing. It meets a basic human need and that in itself takes people out of survival mode. *But what is even more impactful are the relationships and*

response to death anxiety is an attempt to resolve the tension between the certainty of death and the cosmic sense of injustice concerning mortality.

connections made during their stay in the shelter. Going forward, Mike believes a day center where those relationships can be nurtured would be even more beneficial.

To examine altruism that is limited to a symbolic response I visited a congregation in an affluent area of our region. One of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Washington State is the Sammamish Plateau. If we allow that money can be a symbolic extension of our immortality project this would be a community that has plenty of financial resources to buffer its death anxiety. The Reverend John LaMunyon is the lead pastor of Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church (ELCA) in the center of the plateau. I was able to speak to him about how his congregation responds to issues of poverty in their community. His congregation is full of generous and faithful people, but for the most part they would rather write checks than actually get involved in person. He describes their sentiment as, “Money is an extension of us, we can pay to make it go away.”²³⁰

For the most part there are not visible homeless individuals or families in Sammamish: they are provided transportation to Issaquah or Seattle and neatly removed from the community. He says the only homeless person he has seen recently was a high school student who lived in his BMW. His parents had kicked him out of the house when he turned 18, but continued to make car payments for him. Pastor LaMunyon talked about the extreme amount of money in his community that is paired with an unusually high number of teen suicides. All this points to the damage an unexamined death anxiety can bring to bear on a community. It diminishes our capacity to be in relationships with others and help those in need. This is damaging on both a personal and societal level.

²³⁰ The Reverend John LaMunyon, interview by author, Sammamish, Washington, April 9, 2015.

Scripture is a powerful guide in leading us away from these damaging decisions and reactions.²³¹ Scripture empowers us as individuals and community to live together in the fullness of life for which we are created. Perhaps one of the most profound gifts of the law is the adherents can overcome some of the basic biological predispositions that seem to be built into the human animal and live together in community in life giving ways. Levitical laws can seem overwhelming and oppressing just by their sheer number. Yet, another way to view the law, as recorded in the Old Testament, is to see it as a pattern of life together. The law curbs transgressions and provides appropriate proportional solutions to infractions in community life. Curiously, a great deal of the law provided in the Old Testament is aimed at how to deal with issues of poverty. Leviticus 23:22 speaks of the necessity to leave grain in the field for the wretched, the poor, and the stranger. We see this law observed in the book of Ruth. Ruth is able to glean Boaz's field because he follows the law and allows room for the widow, the orphan, and the alien to glean in his field.²³² Another powerful example comes from Deuteronomy 15:7: "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor." These examples of law help us to overcome the disgust response associated with poverty and homelessness and motivate us to move beyond symbolic manipulations of those that threaten our cultural fictions. While we no longer live in a society bound by the Levitical or Old Testament laws, these systems provide insight in

²³¹ Narrative is also a critical component of moving away from damaging decisions. Knowing a person's story helps garner empathy and compassionate responses.

²³² Ruth 2:3-7.

how we might examine the plight of and our response to the powerless and the marginalized.²³³

A great deal of Jesus' own life and ministry was spent on the boundary of clean and unclean. He seemed to walk freely between what was deemed holy and clean and what was defiling and impure. He spent plenty of time teaching in the temple, but also crossed boundaries and borders to meet those who would have been deemed unclean. Jesus touched the lepers and the sick. "Disgust erects boundaries while love dismantles boundaries"²³⁴ It is this great love that Jesus invites us to participate in, a great love that dismantles boundaries and disarms our disgust response.

It is worth revisiting the story of Jesus washing to disciples' feet in this context. This is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of this invitation to dismantle boundaries. From John 13:2-8:

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Jesus washed the disciples' feet: feet that were dirty, sweaty, and unclean. It was entirely out of place and perhaps one of the most radical accounts of Jesus crossing the clean/unclean boundary. He takes the place of a slave and washes what was considered one of the most disgusting parts of the body. He risks becoming unclean in his interaction

²³³ Donal Gowan, "Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: The Case of the Widow, the Orphan, and the Sojourner," *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 341-53.

²³⁴ Richard Allan Beck, *Unclean: Meditations On Purity, Hospitality, and Morality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 88.

with what has been deemed disgusting. It is in this context that Jesus gives his disciples, and presumably those who would later follow, a new commandment. He says in John 13:34-35, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” It is this great love that tears down the boundary of disgust and ushers in the possibility and potential for authentic relationships. It is the love that Jesus invites his followers to share, the love that crosses boundaries for the sake of the individual, the love that refuses to see the ‘other’ as a symbolic entity that either threatens or confirms my cultural fictions.

The possibility of mobility beyond those symbolic identities is slim—yet Jesus moves us beyond our disgust responses by offering this command of love. *Love is the anecdote to an overly robust disgust response.* Jesus shows the disciples love, washes their feet, and breaks bread with them. It is in this context that Jesus gives the disciples this new commandment. As if to say, love one another as I have loved you with this foot-washing-boundary-crossing love. He invites them to let this love carry them across the traditional boundaries and cultural borders and into relationships with their fellow human beings. Jesus sends the disciples out into the world, not concerned they will become unclean by that with which they come into contact. Rather, sending them out with the love he has modeled for them, he expects their presence to offer healing and restoration to individuals and communities.

Moving beyond our responses rooted in disgust, which is ultimately death anxiety, is not an easy task. Yet, following Jesus example and learning from the best scholarship of today: we can. This is a call to human engagement and relationships, not a

symbolic manipulation of one another. Relationships are critical to overcoming poverty and death anxiety reactions can make those relationships impossible. Scripture, when paired with the scholarship done around Disgust Theory and Terror Management Theory, leads us into a powerful way to life in the fullness of relationships and community for which God intended.

Humility

The practice of Christian faith does a great deal of damage to the human hubris. In our commitment to follow Jesus, pride and an overly robust sense of self-importance have no place. The practice of humility is a hallmark of Christian discipleship.²³⁵ Humility is a common ground between Christian theology and the psychological articulation of the human condition with which we have been working. The work of Becker and Terror Management Theory not only reveals the darkness of the human condition but also reveals to us some helpful practices. One of the helpful practices that has been identified in the work of Terror Management Theory is that of humility. This is an amazing connection between the practice of discipleship and the current psychological research.²³⁶ The common ground we can establish in this connection between these two fields is incredible. We cultivate humility as a faith practice but are now given psychological insight into how this helps mitigate the negative affects of the human

²³⁵ The value of humility is deeply resonant in the Christian faith practice. Jesus often speaks of humility and he also models humility as a way of life in the actions we read about in scripture. One example of such humility we have already discussed in his washing the disciples' feet. Further we read in the letter to the Colossians, "As God's chosen one's, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (1 Colossians 3:12).

²³⁶ Pelin Kesebir, "A Quiet Ego Quiets Death Anxiety: Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 4 (2014): 610-623, accessed December 12, 2015.

condition. This realization empowers us to more diligently cultivate the practice of humility in our faith communities as a health death anxiety buffer.

Pelin Kesebir has researched this important connection between humility and death anxiety responses. We do not need to engage damaging immortality projects, or entertain idols, to achieve healthy transcendence of death anxiety. The appropriate awareness of mortality through our faith practices can help us check our impulses to turn to idols or damage our neighbors. She posits that humility can be just as effective in buffering death anxiety as the negative projects we have previously explored. She writes:

Humble people likely see themselves from a higher, broader, truer perspective, and struggle less with accepting what they see. This possibly renders threats to the self less distressing and the reality of death easier to accept. Self-esteem, and other buffers that rely on boosting the value of “me and mine,” potentially work by making the self feel more powerful and less vulnerable in the face of death. Humility, on the other hand, might work not by making the self bigger but rather by making death smaller.²³⁷

Creating an overly aggrandized sense of self, cultivating an enormous ego, or sense of pride does work to assuage death anxiety but the results can be catastrophic. What is revealed in Kesebir's work is the efficacy of humility to buffer death anxiety. Humility is an astounding solution that works to assuage death anxiety and it is already at work in our faith communities. Rather than working to make ourselves bigger the practice of humility serves to make death smaller. Which thrusts us right into the place of realization that we depend on God alone as our source of life. We are able appreciate the beauty and gift of life once we get our egos out of the way. Humility is not a human solution to solve the problem of the human condition. It is a way of life that allows the faithful to remember

²³⁷ Ibid.

their proper place in the cosmos. A humble person is aware of their limitations, which cultivates space for a beautiful divine connection.

CHAPTER SIX

OUR FAITH LEADS TO LOVE

We fail to live because we are afraid to die. Becker and Terror Management Theory give us profound tools with which to examine this problem in our contemporary society. Using the social and cultural anthropological tools we are able to look deeper into the human condition than ever before. We catch a glimpse of the impulses that motivate individuals and communities to inflict great pain and damage on one another. With Becker's work, along with our reading of scripture and studying of culture, we can recognize a pattern of the human condition at its worst. We have seen in Becker's work an explanation of the underlying motivation in the human animal to protect individual self-esteem, cultural worldview, and immortality projects. When these projects are threatened we respond with negative behavior rooted in death anxiety. This response robs the actor of life but also diminishes the life of those upon whom the response is inflicted. This is analogous to the Christian language of sin or idolatry that are manifestations of the problem of the human condition from which Christ frees us. Understanding the problem is only the first step towards making changes to make life better.

Wisdom in our Faith Tradition

The wisdom in our faith tradition helps us connect to our mortality in a healthy way and frees us to authentically live. In our regular practice of the Sacraments we are confronted with our mortality, but we are not left in a state of morbidity. Using the practice of communion and baptism to create a healthy encounter with the reality of death we can cultivate a mindfulness that allows us access to our previously subconscious death anxiety reactions.

Cultivating this mindfulness can help check our impulses and give us reason to pause to examine why we do what we do. The sacraments move us into an encounter of death; we talk about things like bodies, blood, water, and drowning, which are tangible reminders of our mortality. Yet the sacraments are not practices that keep us in death, but they move us to life. The drowning in baptism is followed by a raising to new life. The participation in consuming the body and blood of Jesus Christ is not a morbid feast but a feast of life—because he lives we also live! In this practice we are reminded we will die, but our hope remains in life.

In our examination of the Apostle's Creed we see an example of the symbolic writing of the church that informs our faith. Used as a symbolic expression of faith it allows the faithful to speak to the entirety of faith with efficiency. The Apostle's Creed allows the faithful to remain connected to the orthodox practice of the Christian witness. Distorted by the power of a response rooted in death anxiety, it can become a weapon of exclusion. Rather than an affirmative statement of faith and a place of conversation it becomes a barrier to relationships and collaboration. The symbols of the church can be ossified and distorted and then used to flee from death. Distorted in such a way they fail to capture the enormity of their symbolic potential to usher us into ways of faith and life.

Helpful Symbols

Ancient symbols of the church like the fish are helpful in that they communicate an identity and a faith practice. The appropriation of the fish as a Christian symbol shows the adaptability of the symbolic enterprise. In the early church the fish quickly became an essential symbol of the faithful without raising the suspicion of a prosecutorial government. This example shows the flexibility and the positive power of a symbol to

communicate the faith. Further, with our example of enriching the symbol of the fish with the salmon mythology from the Pacific Northwest, we can see how the fecundity of the symbol is realized even in contemporary culture.

Ideally, embracing our sacred symbols allows us to recognize our mortality and move towards life.

It is vital, no matter the content of our theological endeavor, that it remains informed by scripture. As we have seen, death is a topic that Scripture address from the fall to the account of the Resurrection. Becker helps us see the problem of death anxiety in the human condition from a psychological perspective and use that to inform our reading of Scripture. As Scripture addresses death, we can more thoroughly see how powerfully scripture speaks to the heart of the human condition. We read the story of the fall in Genesis and saw the problem of the awareness of death symbolically illustrated in the bite of the forbidden fruit. In Exodus we read a story about the people of God making an idol out of their golden jewelry. Given Becker's insights we can better examine this idol making propensity revealed in Scripture—but perhaps more importantly—revealed in our own live. Standing in the valley of Dry Bones, the prophet Ezekiel powerfully speaks to the condition of mortality. In a place of literal and symbolic death Ezekiel dares to proclaim the hope of life. Not shying away from the reality of death, he proclaims the promise of hope even beyond death.

Loving our Neighbors

Fleeing from death manifests in damage to the individual and community; such behavior makes it impossible to live a full and rich life. For example, the first emperor of China's flight from death consumed his life. While we may not be emperors, many of us

fall into a similar temptation. It may be a certain car, a house, living in a certain zip code, a job, a degree, or family, but in each of us lies a propensity to find life in a particular fiction that gives us the illusion of defying mortality. The damage extends beyond the individual as immortality projects are symbolically enacted, or perhaps inflicted, on our neighbors. Neighbors become those with whom I must compete to achieve mortality transcendence or those who might threaten my own immortality achievement.

How individuals and communities respond to the problem of poverty demonstrates the communal interaction of unexamined death anxiety. Individuals without housing, who rely on the food bank, receive governmental assistance; symbolically represent the failing of our cultural fiction. When the veil of that fiction is pulled back, we are reminded that it is only that fiction that protects us from admitting we are mortal. This symbolic threat demands a symbolic action in response. By admitting the homeless are a product of the system, rather than failed participants, we are forced to acknowledge the frailty of our fiction. This brings about an existential crisis that is too great for most to bear. So rather than enact a meaningful response, we scapegoat and marginalize the poor. However, guided by our faith practices, the words of Scripture, and Christ himself, we are led to overcome our essential human shortcomings. We are led to move beyond our reactions of disgust and shame into relationships built on the love Christ offers for all people. Guided by our faith we check our responses rooted in death anxiety and follow Jesus to work for the health and safety of our vulnerable neighbors.

Our faith practices help put us in proper scale and proportion in the story of God and the cosmos. Religion is not a way to make ourselves feel bigger, more important, or

better than our neighbors. Rather our faith reminds us that God is big, we are not, and invites us to adopt an orientation of humility throughout our lives.

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