



Death and Dying: An Exploration in Fear

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This paper explores some of the aspects of fear associated with death and dying. To do the entire subject justice might require writing a book. Death need not be such a morbid subject that you avoid it entirely until, finally, it is unavoidable. It is a fact of life that is best accepted early on and included in the final parts of your plan. So much of the fear and anxiety surrounding death and dying is unnecessary and addressing these issues can alleviate it.

Contemplating my own death is something I really do not care to do. Considering the possibilities of just what that might mean is something I have been exposed to since I was too young to even understand my own language. That was from religion. Living in fear of death or of anything is not good. When it comes to death, such a fear is not necessary but it has been a part of human nature since there were humans.

Of course, a healthy fear of death lends itself to survival, but what of that ultimate fear? The fear of death, even when it comes in a timely fashion, is something that plagues many people. Such a fear may reside in most people here in America. Such fear may well be the single largest motivating factor in most human activity (01).

It is probably safe to say that most people in this country do not really face their mortality, at least not until the time grows near. It is something we just put aside and try not to think about. We avoid dealing with it. We avoid it as much as possible. We consider death as something bad while life is good and consequently put ourselves into the first stage of "loss and grief," denial (02). Many of us will live our lives accordingly and can miss out on a heightened quality of life that could come from acceptance of reality (02). Perhaps such acceptance would alleviate fear.

One terrifying possibility would be that when we die, we simply cease to exist. Try to imagine that you die and everything that you are disappears and just goes to black and that's it. No more you at all. One second you are there and the next there simply is no you at all. I am not so sure that when I try to imagine that, I am actually imagining that. It may not be possible. The idea of it is a bit frightening. Suddenly, my

life has no meaning and purpose and, perhaps, that is what I fear the most (01). To simply cease to exist is unacceptable.

If there is one fear about death that must be universal, it is the fear of simply ceasing to exist. Enter religion. For the most part, here in America, we have the monotheistic religions (one God) of Christianity, Islam (Muslims), and Judaism (Jews). There is also Buddhism and Hinduism (04). Buddhism is not really a religion, but a philosophy and Hinduism may have about a million “Gods.” One thing that all of these have in common is a solution to that one, universal fear. One way or the other, they all provide a way for eternal life. The monotheistic religions even allow you to retain your identity from this point on though you may experience some initial improvements upon making the transition to paradise or heaven. With Buddhism and Hinduism, we have karma and reincarnation. Problem solved, right? Bronislaw Malinowski asserts that religion “is as instinctual a response as the fear of death which underlies it.” He states, “Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death is of greatest importance (05).”

There is, unfortunately for some, a conditional outcome to your transition based on your performance while living here. An unimaginable, relentless, torturous hell on the one hand or the possibility of suddenly realizing that you are a spider with a thirst for bug juice on the other is not very appealing. At least the desirable performance is supposed to be all good things by most anyone’s standards. It would seem that for many we will have traded one fear for another.

From the viewpoint of considering fear of death as an underlying motivator, society has developed ways to perpetuate one’s life based on their contributions. According to Ernest Becker, “at the core of all human endeavors is the terror of death. Because all individuals instinctively fear their own annihilation, death confers a narcissistic need to preserve the individual’s self-esteem in the face of the pointlessness of life (06).” “What humankind fears most is not extinction, but extinction without meaning.

Society provides a *cultural hero system* that creates and perpetuates the myth of the significance of human life (06) (07).”

For all practical uses and purposes, the more well-known “heroes” will have statues commemorated, show up in books, plays, or music, buildings or geographic places named after them, descendants –or not– named after them, and the list goes on and on. The contributions of individuals to society are perpetuated in countless ways and some may never be forgotten. The actual person may be long dead, but they could potentially live forever or at least as long as the human race. Anyone can be a hero in some respect and defy what might otherwise be a pointless existence (01). At the very least, you could be “a working class hero (08)!” Ernest Becker died in 1974, but he yet lives within the context of my paper –and others– and otherwise ever more so than he could have imagined –in 1974– thanks to the internet. Whether the whole thing simply propagates an *illusion* to satisfy the human ego is questionable. Whether such mechanisms of civilization have manifested out of the aforementioned reason is, perhaps, not so questionable.

Many people live full and happy lives that have gone according to a general plan that has taken the ultimate passing into consideration. Happy or not, such people can be very practical about it and take care of all the arrangements for their passing ahead of time. Whether anxiety and fear about the unavoidable event comes into play with age could be another story. Fear of the actual event may exist, but other, related fears tend to be more prevalent.

It is not so much the final event as the circumstances leading up to it that most people are afraid of. The debilitating effects of age, disease, chronic conditions, and the like can easily make death itself the very least thing to fear even to the point of wishing for it to happen (03). Ultimately, we would like to have control over our circumstances, we do not want to be a burden on others, and we do not want prolonged suffering with a painful death.

The possibilities for suffering are almost infinite. Medical technology has advanced to the point where life can be prolonged through years of misery and suffering. In many circumstances, the individual may be incapacitated such that they are at the mercy of the physician and caretakers who will only prolong their suffering in the interest of preserving life. Fear of death may cause one to hang on in spite of incredible suffering. Fear can feed on itself and blow everything out of proportion while serving only to increase anxiety and pain (09). The possibility of such circumstances are worthy of anyone's fear.

There's no need to elaborate on the possibilities here. Personally, I would want to have the option of indicating when I prefer to go then have the morphine take me into my final sleep. That would be assisted suicide and I have no problem with that though it might be reasonable to build some safeguards into that process. I might maintain my own kit for doing that. In the meantime, and while at the point of growing close to death, quality of life will be very important. Once there is to be no more quality of life or anything left for me to do, it may be time to say farewell.

If you have not yet reconciled your mortality there are some stages you may go through when getting the news that your condition is terminal. There are five universal stages of grief that you can experience in light of your own impending death or of someone close to you. Thanks to her work with the terminally ill, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross offers these steps from her book (10).

The 5 Stages of Loss and Grief

1. Denial and Isolation

This can be a reaction to the shock of getting the news. It is a defense mechanism so we refute the words and deny the facts. We may also isolate ourselves from anyone who might try to stop this.

2. Anger

The denial will eventually wear thin and painful reality becomes unavoidable. Our reaction to the pain is anger. It can be a mindless anger directed at anything or anyone. If it is someone else that is dying, we might even direct our anger towards

them as the source of our pain. We could begin to feel guilty for being angry which can make us even more angry.

3. Bargaining

“If only I had...” or “what if I had just...” done something different. Perhaps we try to make a deal with God. A possible, weak attempt on our part in an effort to regain control or at least gain some time.

4. Depression

We can become dominated by regret and sadness. Thoughts about the issues surrounding the circumstances like the costs or with the other people involved can worry us. Such things can pass as our depression becomes more of a preparation to deal with the situation.

5. Acceptance

We may be accepting of the circumstances but it does not mean we are happy about it. As we give way to acceptance, it is important to differentiate feelings of sadness from depression. Relief from overwhelming emotion will come as transition is at hand. For those who go through this and will remain, the challenge of letting go and moving on with life is ahead.

Change. Everything is in a constant state of change. It is good to come to terms with the impermanence of life and value the time we have.

The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time. - Mark Twain

I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens. - Woody Allen

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