

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

By Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski

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A transformative, fascinating theory—based on robust and groundbreaking experimental research—reveals how our unconscious fear of death powers almost everything we do, shining a light on the hidden motives that drive human behavior

More than one hundred years ago, the American philosopher William James dubbed the knowledge that we must die “the worm at the core” of the human condition. In 1974, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death,* arguing that the terror of death has a pervasive effect on human affairs. Now authors Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski clarify with wide-ranging evidence the many ways the worm at the core guides our thoughts and actions, from the great art we create to the devastating wars we wage.

The Worm at the Core is the product of twenty-five years of in-depth research. Drawing from innovative experiments conducted around the globe, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski show conclusively that the fear of death and the desire to transcend it inspire us to buy expensive cars, crave fame, put our health at risk, and disguise our animal nature. The fear of death can also prompt judges to dole out harsher punishments, make children react negatively to people different from themselves, and inflame intolerance and violence.

But the worm at the core need not consume us. Emerging from their research is a unique and compelling approach to these deeply existential issues: terror management theory. TMT proposes that human culture infuses our lives with order, stability, significance, and purpose, and these anchors enable us to function moment to moment without becoming overwhelmed by the knowledge of our ultimate fate. The authors immerse us in a new way of understanding human evolution, child development, history, religion, art, science, mental health, war, and politics in the twenty-first century. In so doing, they also reveal how we can better come to terms with death and learn to lead lives of courage, creativity, and compassion.

Written in an accessible, jargon-free style, *The Worm at the Core* offers a compelling new paradigm for understanding the choices we make in life—and a pathway toward divesting ourselves of the cultural and personal illusions that

keep us from accepting the end that awaits us all.

Praise for *The Worm at the Core*

“The idea that nearly all human individual and cultural activity is a response to death sounds far-fetched. But the evidence the authors present is compelling and does a great deal to address many otherwise intractable mysteries of human behaviour. This is an important, superbly readable and potentially life-changing book.”**—*The Guardian* (U.K.)**

“A neat fusion of ideas borrowed from sociology, anthropology, existential philosophy and psychoanalysis.”**—*The Herald* (U.K.)**

“Deep, important, and beautifully written, *The Worm at the Core* describes a brilliant and utterly original program of scientific research on a force so powerful that it drives our lives.”**—Daniel Gilbert, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *Stumbling on Happiness***

“As psychology becomes increasingly trivial, devolving into the promotion of positive-thinking platitudes, *The Worm at the Core* bucks the trend. The authors present—and provide robust evidence for—a psychological thesis with disturbing personal as well as political implications.”**—John Horgan, author of *The End of War* and director of the Center for Science Writings, Stevens Institute of Technology**

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The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life By Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #191579 in Books
- Published on: 2015-05-12
- Released on: 2015-05-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.40" h x 1.10" w x 6.40" l, 1.25 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
"The idea that nearly all human individual and cultural activity is a response to death sounds far-fetched. But the evidence the authors present is compelling and does a great deal to address many otherwise intractable mysteries of human behaviour. This is an important, superbly readable and potentially life-changing book. . . . The lesson contained within *The Worm at the Core* suggests one should confront mortality in order to live an authentic life, as the Epicureans and the Stoics suggested many centuries ago."**—*The Guardian* (U.K.)**

"A neat fusion of ideas borrowed from sociology, anthropology, existential philosophy and psychoanalysis . . . [The] sweep-it-under-the-carpet approach to death is facile and muddle-headed. More than that, it has consequences more far-reaching than we could possibly imagine because, as [the authors] see it, death informs practically every aspect of human existence. From the way we organise our societies to the moral codes we live by, even down to how we have sex and what rituals and emotions we ascribe to it, death is the bedrock."**—*The Herald* (U.K.)**

"Deep, important, and beautifully written, *The Worm at the Core* describes a brilliant and utterly original program of scientific research on a force so powerful that it drives our lives, but so frightening that we cannot think clearly about it. This book asks us to, compels us to, and then shows us how—by shining the light of reason on the heart of human darkness."**—Daniel Gilbert, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *Stumbling on Happiness***

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"This is a wonderfully (terrifyingly) broad and deep study of most everything we know or have thought about death. It carries Ernest Becker's work a long way further down the road."**—Sam Keen, author of *Faces of the Enemy***

About the Author
Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and **Tom Pyszczynski** are professors of psychology at Skidmore College, the University of Arizona, and the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, respectively. They have been collaborating on research and writing projects for more than thirty years. Their award-winning and National Science Foundation–funded work has infused existential thought into modern psychological science, using state-of-the-art methods to explore terrain long thought to be beyond the scope of scientific scrutiny. This integration of different approaches has led to new ways of thinking about culture, self-esteem, and the factors that steer people toward their most noble and ignoble actions.

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Chapter 1

Managing the Terror of Death

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

—Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: A Memoir

On Christmas Eve 1971, seventeen-year-old Juliane Koepcke and her mother, Maria, a German ornithologist, were flying from Lima, Peru, in a plane with ninety other passengers over the Amazon jungle. They were on their way to celebrate Christmas with Juliane's father, the brilliant zoologist Hans-Wilhelm Koepcke, in the city of Pucallpa. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning hit the airliner's fuel tank. The entire plane broke apart in smoke, fuselage, and cinders, two miles above the gigantic, sparsely inhabited rain forest.

Swept from the plane, Juliane found herself flying into the open sky. All was silent. Strapped into her seat, she felt herself tumbling through the air and saw the jungle canopy spinning toward her as she hurtled earthward toward what seemed like her certain death. Her fall was broken by the thick foliage. She fainted.

When she came to, she unbuckled herself from the still attached seat and felt around. One shoe was missing, as were her glasses. She felt her collarbone; it was broken. She discovered a deep gash in her leg and a wound in her arm. One of her nearsighted eyes had been swollen shut; the other was just a slit. She was dizzy from a bad concussion. But because she was in shock, she felt no pain. She called, and called, and called for her mother. No response. She found that she could walk. And so she walked.

For eleven days, Juliane stumbled through the Amazon jungle—home to caimans, tarantulas, poisonous frogs, electric eels, and freshwater stingrays. She endured torrential downpours, sucking mud, brutal heat, and the constant onslaughts of swarming, stinging insects. Eventually, she found a small creek. Remembering what her father had taught her—that most people tend to live near waterways—she followed the stream to a larger river. She waded into the piranha- and stingray-infested water and began slowly swimming and floating downstream.

Her state of shock saved her. She wasn't really hungry, and felt as if she'd been psychologically "muffled in cotton." But the clouds of biting, stinging insects tortured her. She tried to rest under the trees, but sleep was nearly impossible. Maggots took up residence in her wounds. Her insect bites became badly infected. She got so sunburned from floating on the river under the Amazonian sun that she bled. But she pressed numbly on.

Finally, she came upon a motorboat. She had the presence of mind to pour gasoline from a small tank on the maggots, killing many of them. After a few days, the owners of the boat found her near their small hut and took her to the nearest town, seven hours away.

She was the only survivor of the crash.

We've all heard amazing tales of people who defy death against all odds: the survivors of the Donner Party and the Titanic, those who lived through the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Such stories reflect the fact that all living beings are born with biological systems oriented toward self-preservation. Over billions of years, a vast array of complex life-forms have evolved, each distinctively adapted to survive long enough to reproduce and pass their genes on to future generations. Fish have gills; rosebushes have thorns; squirrels bury acorns and retrieve them months later; termites eat wood. There seems to be no limit to the marvelous variety of ways creatures of all species adhere to the fundamental biological imperative: staying alive.

If you discover a bat flittering around in your closet and you enter the dark space with a tennis racket to kill

it, you'll be in for a battle royal, because that creature will fight to survive. Even earthworms strenuously avoid death, as anyone who's tried to bait a hook can attest. You split them in two; they persist. You try to get them on the hook; they struggle mightily. Once impaled, they defecate on your hand.

Unlike bats and worms, however, we humans know that no matter what we do, sooner or later we will lose the battle against death. This is a profoundly unnerving thought. We may think we are afraid to die because our bodies will rot, stink, and turn to dust, because we will leave our loved ones behind, because we've left important things unaccomplished, or because we have the sneaking suspicion that no loving God awaits us, ready to enfold us in his arms. But underlying all these concerns is that fundamental biological imperative. As Juliane Koepcke and other survivors have discovered, we will do just about anything to stay alive. Yet we live with the knowledge that this desire will inevitably be thwarted.

How did we get into this predicament? Although we humans inherited the basic imperative to survive, we are different from all other forms of life in several crucial ways. We are not terribly impressive from a purely physical perspective. We are not especially large, nor are our senses particularly keen. We move more slowly than cheetahs, wolves, and horses. Our claws are no more than fragile, dull fingernails; our teeth aren't constructed for tearing into anything much tougher than an overdone steak.

But the small band of African hominids from which we all descended were highly social, and, thanks to the evolution of their progeny's cerebral cortices, our species eventually became extremely intelligent. These developments fostered cooperation and the division of labor, and they ultimately led our forebears to invent tools, agriculture, cooking, houses, and a host of other useful things. We, their progeny, multiplied and thrived; our civilizations took root around the world.

The evolution of the human brain led to two particularly important human intellectual capacities: a high degree of self-awareness, and the capacity to think in terms of past, present, and future. Only we humans are, as far as anyone knows, aware of ourselves as existing in a particular time and place. This is an important distinction. Unlike geese, monkeys, and wombats, we can carefully consider our current situation, together with both the past and the future, before choosing a course of action.

This awareness of our own existence gives us a high degree of behavioral flexibility that helps us stay alive. Simpler life-forms respond immediately and invariably to their surroundings. Moths, for example, invariably fly toward light. Although the moth's behavior is generally useful for navigation and avoiding predators, it can be deadly when the source of illumination is a candle or campfire. Unlike moths, we humans can shift attention away from the ongoing flow of our sensory experience. We aren't inevitably sucked toward the flame; we can choose to act in a number of different ways, depending not only on our instincts, but on our capacity to learn and think as well. We can ponder alternative responses to situations and their potential consequences and imagine new possibilities.

Self-awareness has generally served us well. It has increased our ability to survive, reproduce, and pass our genes on to future generations. It also feels good. We can reflect on the fact that each of us is, in Otto Rank's lovely words, a "temporal representative of the cosmic primal force." We are all directly descended from, and consequently related to, the first living organism, as well as to every earth-dwelling creature that has ever been alive or will live in the future. What a joy it is for us to be alive, and at the same moment know it!

However, because we humans are aware that we exist, we also know that someday we will no longer exist. Death can come at any time, which we can neither predict nor control. This is decidedly unwelcome news. Even if we are lucky enough to dodge attacks by poisonous insects or biting beasts, knives, bullets, plane crashes, car accidents, cancer, or earthquakes, we understand that we can't go on forever.

This awareness of death is the downside of human intellect. If you think about this for a moment, death awareness presents each of us with an appalling predicament; it even feels like a cosmic joke. On one hand, we share the intense desire for continued existence common to all living things; on the other, we are smart enough to recognize the ultimate futility of this fundamental quest. We pay a heavy price for being self-conscious.

Terror is the natural and generally adaptive response to the imminent threat of death. All mammals, including humans, experience terror. When an impala sees a lion about to pounce on her, the amygdala in her brain passes signals to her limbic system, triggering a fight, flight, or freezing response. A similar process happens with us. Whenever we feel mortally threatened—by a car spinning out of control, a knife-wielding mugger, a tightening in the chest, a suspicious lump, extreme turbulence on an airplane, a suicide bomber exploding in a crowd—the feeling of terror consumes us; we are driven to fight, flee, or freeze. Panic ensues.

And here's the really tragic part of our condition: only we humans, due to our enlarged and sophisticated neocortex, can experience this terror in the absence of looming danger. Our death "waits like an old roué," as the great Belgian songwriter Jacques Brel noted, lurking in the psychological shadows. This realization threatens to put us in a persistent state of existential fear.

The poet W. H. Auden eloquently captured this uniquely human conundrum:

Happy the hare at morning, for she cannot read

The Hunter's waking thoughts. Lucky the leaf

Unable to predict the fall. Lucky indeed

The rampant suffering suffocating jelly

Burgeoning in pools, lapping the grits of the desert .?.?.

But what shall man do, who can whistle tunes by heart,

Knows to the bar when death shall cut him short like the cry of the shearwater?

What can he do but defend himself from his knowledge?

This ever-present potential for incapacitating terror is the "worm at the core" of the human condition. To manage this terror of death, we must defend ourselves.

How We Manage Terror

Fortunately, we humans are an ingenious species. Once our intelligence had evolved to the point that this ultimate existential crisis dawned on us, we used that same intelligence to devise the means to keep that potentially devastating existential terror at bay. Our shared cultural worldviews—the beliefs we create to explain the nature of reality to ourselves—give us a sense of meaning, an account for the origin of the universe, a blueprint for valued conduct on earth, and the promise of immortality.

Since the dawn of humankind, cultural worldviews have offered immense comfort to death-fearing humans. Throughout the ages and around the globe, the vast majority of people, past and present, have been led by

their religions to believe that their existence literally continues in some form beyond the point of physical death. Some of us believe that our souls fly up to heaven, where we will meet our departed loved ones and bask in the loving glow of our creator. Others “know” that at the moment of death, our souls migrate into a new, reincarnated form. Still others are convinced that our souls simply pass to another, unknown plane of existence. In all these cases, we believe that we are, one way or another, literally immortal.

Our cultures also offer hope of symbolic immortality, the sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves that will continue long after we die. This is why we strive to be part of meaningful groups and have a lasting impact on the world—whether through our creative works of art or science, through the buildings and people named after us, through the possessions and genes we pass on to our children, or through the memories others hold of us. Just as we remember those we loved and admired who died before us, we feel the same will be done for us. We “live on” symbolically through our work, through the people we have known, through the memorials marking our graves, and through our progeny.

These cultural modes of transcending death allow us to feel that we are significant contributors to a permanent world. They protect us from the notion that we are merely purposeless animals that no longer exist upon death. Our beliefs in literal and symbolic immortality help us manage the potential for terror that comes from knowing that our physical death is inevitable.

This brings us to the central tenets of terror management theory. We humans all manage the problem of knowing we are mortal by calling on two basic psychological resources. First, we need to sustain faith in our cultural worldview, which imbues our sense of reality with order, meaning, and permanence. Although we typically take our cultural worldview for granted, it is actually a fragile human construction that people spend great energy creating, maintaining, and defending. Since we’re constantly on the brink of realizing that our existence is precarious, we cling to our culture’s governmental, educational, and religious institutions and rituals to buttress our view of human life as uniquely significant and eternal.

But we don’t just need to view life in general this way; we need to view our own life this way. The paths to literal and symbolic immortality laid out by our worldviews require us to feel that we are valuable members of our cultures. Hence, the second vital resource for managing terror is a feeling of personal significance, commonly known as self-esteem. Just as cultural worldviews vary, so do the ways we attain and maintain self-esteem. For the Dinka of Sudan, the man who owns the largest herd of long-horned cattle is the most highly regarded. In the Trobriand Islands, a man’s worth is measured by the size of the pyramid of yams he builds in front of his sister’s house and leaves to rot. For many Canadians, the man who best uses his stick to slap rubber pucks into nets guarded by masked opponents is considered a national hero.

The desire for self-esteem drives us all, and drives us hard. Self-esteem shields us against the rumblings of dread that lie beneath the surface of our everyday experience. Self-esteem enables each of us to believe we are enduring, significant beings rather than material creatures destined to be obliterated. The twin motives of affirming the correctness of our worldviews and demonstrating our personal worth combine to protect us from the uniquely human fear of inevitable death. And these same impulses have driven much of what humans have achieved over the course of our history.

The idea that knowledge of our mortality plays a pivotal role in human affairs is ancient. It can be found in the Bible, the Torah, the Qur’an, and ancient Buddhist texts. Twenty-five hundred years ago the Greek historian Thucydides, in The History of the Peloponnesian War, saw the problem of death as the primary cause of protracted violent conflict. Socrates defined the task of philosophy as “learning how to die.” For Hegel, history was a record of “what man does with death.” Over the last two centuries, these ideas have been taken up by philosophers (such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche), theologians (for

instance, Paul Tillich and Martin Buber), psychoanalytic and existential psychologists (from Sigmund Freud to Otto Rank to Robert Jay Lifton), not to mention enduring works of literature by everyone from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Philip Roth.

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