THE ROLE OF MYSTERY IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Becker’s works introduce the concept of the denial of death. According to Becker, death denial necessarily exists in humans; to deny death is necessary in order to conduct the business of life. Denial of life and denial of death have a symbiotic relationship—the denial of death thus manifests itself in a denial of life (and vice versa). The denial of life implicates three concepts: repression, neurosis, and transference. Repression is the suppression, or denial, of memories and experiences. Neuroses are behavior patterns; transference influences a person’s worldview. Together, repression, neuroses, and transference are manifestations of an individual’s need to control and exert influence on outside forces. They shape the person’s experiences and ultimately control the individual. Therein lies a paradox: through neurotic behavior, through repression, and through transference, an individual creates the illusion of being in control, but it is because of repression, neurosis, and transference that the individual is controlled—often through one’s adherence to personal, familial, and social rules.

In addition to the duality of the denial of life and the denial of death, another duality exists within the individual. One creates a persona as a manifestation of a need to control the outside world. Meanwhile, a person’s inner life is tumultuous, full of
uncontrollable emotions and thoughts. But, this mysterious inner self has the potential to connect the individual to something larger, something greater—an outer mystery. And this something greater, this outer mystery, may provide hope. It dilutes the need to exert control, it imbues men with the strength to stand apart and alone. It allows individuals to live more authentically. Hence, to live authentically, there must be a cyclical experience of: (1) engaging mystery; (2) dissolving transference; (3) developing authenticity; and (4) forging an ongoing and evolving relationship with the unknown. These cycles are interrelated and feed each other.

This paper explores how one finds hope vis-à-vis one’s relationship with the unknown. That which is free and open for God lies for man in what he seeks to repress: mystery (Becker 1975, 163). To engage this mystery, to have a relationship with it, is an act of faith. An existence fueled by faith pulls man out of his self-created prison of rote behavior and cultural games and into the open territory of a more authentic life.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Humans all die. Most do not directly confront their fallibility and adapt a multitude of coping mechanisms to ignore this fact. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker dedicated much of his research to studying the concept of the humans’ denial of death. In this thesis, the author intends to explore how one finds hope vis-à-vis one’s relationship with the unknown. That which is free and open for God, lies for man in what he seeks to repress: mystery (Becker 1975, 163). To engage this mystery, to have a relationship with it, is an act of faith. And, faith draws individuals closer to living an authentic existence—an existence no longer dictated by neurotic obsessions or the rules flowing from a person’s cultural hero system. Human beings need to explore the concept of a relationship with the unknown because it provides beings with the possibility of a more open, hopeful life—a life full of possibility and authenticity.

In particular, Becker’s work *The Denial of Death* explores the complex relationship between life and death. Death denial necessarily exists in humans; humans necessarily deny death in order to conduct the business of life. Denial of death and denial of life have a symbiotic relationship—the denial of death manifests itself in a denial of life (and vice versa). When speaking of a denial of life, one introduces three concepts: repression, neurosis, and transference. Repression is the suppression, or denial, of memories and experiences. Neurotic behavior cuts one off from new experience, from the unknown. Under the influence of transference, an individual plays out the same experiences, often subconsciously, because of feelings of impotence and terror. Thus,
repression is denial, neuroses are behavior patterns, and transference influences a person’s worldview. Together, repression, neuroses, and transference are manifestations of an individual’s need to control and exert influence on outside forces. They shape the person’s experiences and ultimately control the individual. Therein lies a paradox: through repression, neurotic behavior, and the phenomenon of transference, an individual creates the illusion that he controls his life, but living under the influence of neurosis and transference means that individuals live restricted lives—often through adherence to personal, familial, and social rules. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker introduces the concept of the automatic cultural man—a man caught up in the symbolic extensions of his persona. For example, these symbolic extensions could be a college degree, a new sports car, or a wrinkle-free forehead. The automatic cultural man looks outside, away from his inner self, and finds safety in his ability to function within a cultural system. By behaving this way, the automatic cultural man’s life becomes a solitary endeavor because he works to enforce, and reinforce, his worldview through individual action. The automatic cultural man, therefore, makes himself feel important by exerting influence where he can. He remains solitary because his campaign becomes the construct of a heroic self—he seeks to build up his ego through completing tasks and winning battles.

As the duality of the denial of life and the denial of death exists, another duality exists within the individual. One creates a persona as a manifestation of a need to control the outside world. In contrast, a person’s inner life is tumultuous, full of uncontrollable emotions and thoughts. Individuals often push aside their inner self in favor of thoughts of day-to-day activities. Thus, humans repress their inner self. The inner self cannot,
however, be ignored; repression manifests itself in behavior (neuroses) and perception (transference).

One could say that the automatic cultural man finds validation in the creation of his outer self and works to ignore his inner self. The inner self is a mystery; just as it cannot be ignored, it cannot be controlled. This mysterious inner self has the potential to connect an individual to something larger, something greater—an outer mystery. And this something greater, this outer mystery, provides hope. It dilutes the need to exert control, it imbues men with the strength to stand apart and alone. It allows individuals to live more authentically. Hence, to live authentically, there must be a cyclical experience of: (1) engaging mystery; (2) dissolving transference; (3) developing authenticity; and (4) forging an ongoing and evolving relationship with the unknown (with mystery). These phases feed each other.

Becker writes, “The question that becomes the most important one that man can put to himself is: how conscious is he of what he is doing to earn his feeling of heroism?” (Becker 1973, 5). He describes the cultural hero system as “a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a primary feeling of primary value, or primary specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning” (Ibid.). Through a cultural hero system, an individual believes he or she can work to gain notice, to overcome the relative insignificance of his or her existence. There are rules to follow and ways to garner attention. But, the overall impact of a successful journey—or the accomplishment of a heroic feat—does not squelch the initial question: Because of the absurdity of life and the reality of death, does the accomplishment matter at all? To
answer this, Becker writes, “Man breaks through the bounds of merely cultural heroism; he destroys the character lie that had him perform as a hero in the everyday social scheme of things; and by doing so he opens himself up to infinity, to the possibility of cosmic heroism, to the very service of God” (Ibid., 91). An existence fueled by faith pulls man out of his self-created prison of rote behavior and cultural games and into the open territory of a more authentic life. Through faith, humans learn to stand apart from society, yet still experience connectedness through a relationship with God (with mystery).

Chapter 1 of this thesis will explore the inevitability of death for humans and how this permeates the individual’s worldview. In order to avoid conceptualizing their own death, humans—in particular, neurotic people—cut themselves off from life, thereby closing themselves off from experience. This, in turn, creates a type of living death. While neurotic people attempt to control their experiences, anxiety (or the denial of death) cannot be quelled by actions—for example cultural game playing. The denial of death remains a circumstance of human life and a fact of birth and existence. It looms in the background of one’s psyche and functions as a pervasive theme in one’s unconscious.

Often, the denial of death intrudes on healthy human functioning through the development of a closed worldview. Even in overlap of common personality traits between individuals, the individual’s worldview belongs exclusively to him. Becker opines, “[I]t is plain that the famous ‘mechanisms of defense’—projection, repression, denial, introjection . . . are the behavioral aspects of the self-system” and remain unique to each person (Liechty 2005, 63). “To change them is to effect a change in the self-
system itself, without any reference to any other constructs but the total behavioral style which is a unique creation of the individual” (Ibid.).

This unique worldview begins with early childhood experiences when the child encounters new stimuli in the way of events or even feelings. Psychoanalyst Otto Feinchel says, “Stimuli from the outside world or from the body initiate a state of tension that seeks for motor or secretory discharge, bringing about relaxation. However, between stimulus and discharge, forces are at work opposing that discharge tendency . . . . Without these counterforces there would be no psyche, only reflexes” (Feinchel 1945, 10). A child experiences something unpleasant, perhaps a parent yelling at him for eating dirt. This child simply equates dirt with food, something to sate the sensation of hunger. Becker writes, “Children feel hounded by the symbols they don’t understand the need of, verbal demands that seem picayune and rules and codes that call them away from their pleasure in a straightforward expression of their natural energies” (Becker 1973, 28). By yelling at the child, the parent intrudes on the child’s current worldview and the child experiences (for example) fear. The parent’s opinion on what dirt may do to the child lies outside the child’s worldview. His mother’s anger about eating dirt demarcates a new experience, an unpleasant and intrusive one. Therefore, in order to reach a safe psychic place again, the child represses the memory.

Repression as a key component of the denial of death leads the way to the neurotic character type. Through his concept of shut-upness, philosopher Soren

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\[1\] Or perhaps the parent has a cleanliness obsession and it is irrelevant that the dirt may harm the child in any way. Regardless, the parent imposes his worldview on the child.
Kierkegaard describes the neurotic individual as one who relies on repression to deal with life. As an accompaniment to transference, repression plays a key role in the development of a person’s worldview. The more repression plays a role, the bigger the role of transference. Thus, concerning the denial of death, transference functions as a sort of repeat button—it allows an individual to replay the events of the individual’s life and has a direct impact on the individual’s relationships. Finally, the chapter ends with a more extensive exploration of the concept of neurosis.

Chapter 2 beings by explaining the concept of symbolism. Moreover, it discusses how the development of an inner symbolic identity shapes a person’s worldview. The automatic cultural man and the immediate man both illustrate the role transference plays in coloring individuals’ experiences. Because the automatic cultural man’s worldview continuously involves rigid, simplistic patterns of thinking—all is mine, therefore I control all—the individual grows isolated and ceases to see other individuals not as human beings but as objects. Soren Kierkegaard types the person as a philistine, one who mires himself in frivolous activities. The type of individual who lives under the influence of transference binds himself through ignoring life lessons, thereby cutting off his ability to see occurrences and individuals as anything but a series of patterns. Hence, he feels he can control external phenomenon through the same means he always uses to control them. The byproduct of controlling behavior reinforces his worldview and isolates him even further. The person, in order to stay securely in the lifestyle that he guards furiously, focuses on himself and disconnects himself from others. To him, the reinforcement of his character structure becomes paramount. In order to protect his
“character armor”\(^2\) he structures a life full of games (Ibid., 57). According to Becker, “Man lives by lying to himself and about himself and about his world, and that character . . . is a vital lie” (Ibid., 51). In his discussion of character as a vital lie, he continues to say that a fear of knowing one’s self mimics fear of living (Ibid., 50).

Chapter 3 opens with a discussion of the hero system. In modern times, because of a growing absence of communal ties, religious direction (e.g. going to a priest for guidance), and rituals that promote a structured hero system, people now send themselves on egocentric quests. Thus, in the absence of a culturally sanctioned hero system, individuals form their ego-focused hero system. A hero system based on the individual fails because the individual, by engaging in self-promoting pursuits, feels superior to and separate from other people. This feeling of separateness begets a host of personality problems and ultimately affects the greater society. A world full of large egos creates communities based on keeping out the Other. Like the individuals who become increasingly isolated and self-obsessed, countries full of individuals with this mindset begin to formulate their policies, elect their officials, and make decisions through the mindset of superiority. Ultimately, these actions serve as a manifestation of fear. Individuals full of fear view the world through distorted lenses; fear occludes their thought processes because individuals fear loneliness and having their worldview destroyed. Loneliness, however, tints the human condition.

\(^2\) Becker utilizes William Reich’s term “character armor.” For Reich’s explanation of the term see: William Reich, *Character Analysis* (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1949), 44.
Chapter 3 continues with a description of the human condition and how humans feel that they can control or counteract feelings of being separate, of being fallible and destructible, yet the control, for the most part functions as an illusion. Most activities in which human beings engage end up being pointless—one could argue all activities in which human beings engage are pointless. For example, consider the individual who builds miniature sailboats in a bottle in order to deflect a pervasive sense of anxiety. Perhaps this hobby has its roots in some repressed trauma, perhaps the man’s father slapped the boy for the first time at a sailboat show, and the man (through his hobby) relives this moment over and over. Through the aid of repression and the worldview of transference, this man’s hobby seems absurd. Yet, humans frequently engage in such activities. Building sailboats in a bottle, as a standalone hobby, does not constitute anything particularly damaging to the psyche. As an activity grounded in a repressed memory, the activity signifies repetitious and avoidant behavior. Becker writes, “The great boon of repression is that it makes possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it they would be paralyzed to act” (Ibid.).

One could argue almost all human activities—for instance falling in love—develop because of some event in the past. Life thus becomes a series of repetitious behaviors. Hence, life becomes (or just is) absurd. Humans, subconsciously, develop their lives in order to feel in control, to feel powerful, but humans actually have little control over their lives. In fact, this author feels humans have virtually no control over their lives—that many of the choices individuals make are colored by the past.
Individuals, almost all people, focus on maintaining their identity and worldview through control. By doing this, they segregate themselves. They feel alone, they become obsessed with combating loneliness through various fruitless means (see miniature ship building), and their lives become the same movie played on a loop. Their lives become an existence full of repetition and gratification of an increasingly smaller worldview. This small existence—in the mind of a faltering hero—functions to suck out unpredictability or mystery. Moreover, an outer life (the personality) devoid of mystery means an inner life that stays hidden or repressed.

Humans toil to ignore the mystery of their mind, their feelings, and their unconscious. Life and the inner self are unpredictable. Neurotic people particularly try to deny this. All people, though, necessarily deny this—to be fully exposed to all would mean psychic destruction. Becker states, “To see the world as it really is is devastating and terrifying. It achieves the very result that the child has painfully built his character over the years to avoid . . . . It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it” (Ibid., 69).

While some mysterious concepts can be unraveled, the concept of death never can be. Moreover, life’s inherent mystery cannot ever be eliminated because all individuals die. Thus, to deny mystery means to deny death. In addition, despite all attempts to extract and analyze the inner self, the inner self remains a mystery and stays uncontrollable. Individuals deny the turbulent state of their inner selves (usually through repression). However, human beings’ constructs of their personalities and their day-to-day existences serve to deny the unpredictable and impermanent nature of life. The
experience of death (the circumstances of an individual’s death) remains mysterious despite what one tells one’s self. Hence, regardless of rationalization, one’s inner self, the trajectories one’s life takes, and one’s death are all mysterious. No one knows the full story. The chapter finally discusses anxiety and its relation to mystery. Anxiety can be seen as opportunity, a way to engage mystery. It posits that one can live a creative life by embracing mystery and by forging an ongoing relationship with the unknown.

Chapter 4 discusses what it means to have an awareness of death. In addition, the chapter describes what it means to have faith. Faith functions as an antidote to the denial of death. Forming a relationship with mystery means having faith, or faith reveals itself as a product of one’s relationship with mystery. After a discussion of faith, the chapter further explores the idea of creativity and its relationship to anxiety. It maps out the journey from a small worldview, one that shuns mystery, to a life akin to that of Kierkegaard’s knight of faith—an open, expansive life secured by hope and flexibility. To engage the expanse of possibility means engaging something that lies outside human constructs, including relationships with other human beings. The separateness, or loneliness, one feels while in living a rigid, closed existence cannot be assuaged through objects, actions, accomplishments, or relationships. Humans need a concept of something greater than themselves; it is not enough to be bound up within one’s self and others. Hence, the flexible life—the life full of mystery and possibility—means living a spiritual life. Separateness, the assuagement of loneliness, the deconstruction of the ego creates a spiritual life. To live this way, one develops an ongoing relationship with the unknown, with God. It is a “lived belief system” in which individuals maintain
awareness of the importance of new experiences and embracing unknown dimensions (Ibid., 272). In order to embrace mystery (God, unknown dimensions, death, the inner-self) one adopts an attitude of hopefulness. With hope, one encounters “the dimension of the unknowable . . . the mystery of creation” (Ibid.). Finally, the thesis ties together the concepts of mystery and hope and states how one can intertwine the concepts of life and death.

**Death Denial**

Death, to humans, does not necessarily mean just the demise of the physical self; it means the end of the person’s existence—the end of the game. Death represents the shuttering of all the constructs in the human’s life. Humans fight this reality by denying death. Ernest Becker’s seminal work *The Denial of Death* illustrates how the denial of death, the extinction of a human’s existence, perpetuates itself in individuals’ day-to-day lives.

Humans necessarily deny death. To acknowledge the actual impact of the ultimate demise of an individual is not something with which humans can cope. Humans are born without the mechanism to contemplate the notion of death. Unlike other animals, at some point, an awareness of death occurs. Individuals’ personalities develop as a result of the fight to avoid being paralyzed by the reality of death. Thus, from the first instance of a recognition that things cease to be as perfect as they used to be, or when the child first realizes that living things go away and never come back—for instance, the death of a family pet—begins the thought that the child will also cease to exist. From that moment on, the individual attempts to thwart the fact of death. Death,
however, remains a necessary component of human life. To be immortal—though many people seek it through various means—would mean to be something other than human. Humans, by definition, are born and they die. No matter how long modern medicine extends human life, cheating death simply remains impossible. Humans struggle, then, with concepts such as existence versus non-existence.

Individuals experience life (albeit through distorted lenses), and they have witnesses to their birth (though they obviously do not remember their birth). The “not remembering” of birth is irrelevant because humans are thrown into existence and have no idea what comes after. The “what comes before” question does not often vex individuals, though one could intellectualize that what comes before life could be exactly the same as what comes after. Yet, individuals fixate on the afterlife. Regardless, life functions as the in-between time: in between what precedes life and what succeeds life. Thus, the before-and-after periods are completely mysterious. The denial of death means ignoring—through deliberate or unconscious means—the reality of death. Neurotic individuals—individuals who repeat the same behavior patterns over and over, hoping for a new result but never receiving one—particularly deny death. Becker states, “Neurosis is another word for describing a complicated technique for avoiding misery, but reality is a misery” (Ibid., 57). People with neurotic behavior patterns attempt to control their experiences—developing (from their point of view) predictability in an unpredictable world.

Society provides the individual with opportunities to engage in mindless activities, games, to exert control on a large, scary universe. Scheduling the day,
planning for retirement, churning the same thoughts over and over in one’s mind, all
serve as ways to detract from human reality. Modern society no longer provides the
individual with rites of passage and strong communal ties that were present centuries
before continue to dissolve. More and more, humans operate on the individual level, they
feel isolated, and in turn isolate themselves. The more the individual isolates himself, the
more he becomes a prisoner of his own existence. The more the individual indulges
neurotic behavior, the more constricted his life becomes. Ultimately, one can imagine a
neurotic human closing himself off so much that he becomes a veritable shut-in. And, in
this extremely controlled environment, the human still does not find safety. Death looms
everywhere. A person locked in a room still must face death; denying death through
repression does not stop time, though neurotic individuals seem to attempt to defy the
passage of time every chance they have. The life of a neurotic character becomes full of
phrases and actions that deny movement closer to death’s door. For instance, the
repeated storytelling of a neurotic elderly man obsessed with his high school football
career—with each re-telling of the story the man throws himself back in time to a period
in which he felt young and capable. The man eschews the present moment in an attempt
to deny the reality of his situation—that he no longer is young and athletic. In addition,
in this example, the high school version of the man was engaged in heroic fights he won
(maybe a high school championship game in which he scored the winning touchdown).
The man in his older age may feel less and less potent and denies this fact by reliving his
days of personal heroism. A lack of acknowledgement of the present, by daydreaming
about the past, serves as a by-product of his denial of death. Daydreaming about the future functions as an aspect of the denial of death as well.

Humans, in general, do not focus on the immediate moment. Throwing away the present, human thought tends to slink backward or propel forward. Hence, humans keep away from the only guarantee in life—that the individual owns the present moment. Yet, individuals willingly give away this potential for authentic living by allowing the mind to wander from thought to thought. This type of thinking serves as a defense mechanism against the reality that humans only have the present moment. The past has died, and the future may not exist. To acknowledge this means to acknowledge one’s own fallibility. The denial of death represents the variety of methods humans employ in order to eschew the present moment, thereby eschewing life.

**Repression**

People create a host of strategies in order to deflect anxiety. In Becker’s eyes, the individual must discover his strategies “to avoid anxiety” (Ibid., 70). Repression serves as a way to bury unpleasant experiences. Repression is denial. Becker evokes Kierkegaard’s concept of shut-upness by writing, “There is no doubt by ‘shut-upness’ Kierkegaard means what we today refer to by repression; it is the closed personality, the one who has fenced himself around in childhood, not tested his own powers in action, not been free to discover himself and his world in a relaxed way” (Ibid., 71). Burness Moore and Bernard Fine call repression “a defensive process by which an idea is excluded from consciousness” (Moore and Fine 1990, 167). In some instances, the terms repression and defense are used interchangeably (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 391). Becker couples
the terms by saying, “Whereas today we talk about the ‘mechanisms of defense’ such as repression and denial, Kierkegaard talks about the same things with different terms: he referred to the fact that most men live in ‘half-obscurity’ about their own condition, they are in a stage of ‘shut-upness’ where they block off their own perceptions of reality” (Becker 1973, 70). Kierkegaard says, “The shut-up is precisely the mute, and if it has to express itself, this must come about against its will when the freedom lying prone in unfreedom revolts upon coming into communication with freedom outside” (Kierkegaard 1957, 110). He continues, “Freedom is precisely the expansive. It is in opposition to this I would employ the word ‘shut-up’ . . . for ‘unfreedom’” (Ibid.). Repression, then, is unfreedom, thus the person who functions under the power of repression is shut-up. Jean White states, “The primary neurotic defense mechanism remains repression—a more modest and easily recoverable putting out of the mind than the obliteration of psychotic foreclosure or the splitting of perverse disavowal” (White 2006, 126). To Jung, “[W]hereas forgotten contents were unrecoverable because of their low threshold value, repressed contents owed their relative unrecoverability to a check by the conscious mind” (Jung 1993, 63). Thus, the act of repression buries memories, or impulses the individual may, consciously or unconsciously, deem unacceptable.

For Becker, “there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions . . . but even more important is how repression works: it is not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on energies and uses them creatively” (Liechty 2005, 204). Repression can be loosened by jarring and new moments in life, moments in which cognitive dissonance occurs. These are times when individuals face an experience in
which they momentarily stand mute in the face of a new situation, but then choose to act in a different manner than customary. For example, Becker describes the psychoanalytic experience as an “emotional catharsis” that “creates a new individual, or rather one who functions differently” (Ibid., 34). Through psychoanalysis “repression is lifted and self-understanding created by examining unconscious materials, not by re-orienting the individual to a new view of external reality” (Ibid.). The process of extracting buried feelings, memories, experiences from the unconscious (from the mute) results in typing and recognizing the repressed memories—not by simply analyzing the way the individual functions in the world but by creating something new. The process jars the individual out of the lull of what Becker calls fetishization, a tool a “normal man” utilizes to function in a confusing and frightening world (Becker 1973, 178). He says, “the ‘normal man’ bites off what he can chew and digest of life, and no more . . . men aren’t built to be gods, to take in the whole world; they are built like other creatures, to take in the piece of ground in front of them” (Ibid., 18). Kierkegaard makes the distinction between lofty-shutupness and mistaken shut-upness by saying, “It is important that the child be brought up with a conception of lofty shut-upness, and be saved by the mistaken kind” (Kierkegaard 1957, 112). Mistaken shut-upness would be the kind that is analogous to repression.

For parents, “the art is to be constantly present and yet not be present to let the child be allowed to develop itself, while nevertheless one has constantly a survey clearly before one” (Ibid.). This exemplifies psychotherapeutic work on the concept of “good enough parenting” or “good enough ego coverage” in which the parent makes his or her presence known to the child, but permits the child to explore his curiosity (Epstein 2007,
The child then enters a state of psychological flow in which he feels safe to act as an individual. The child feels free to roam and explore his world—thus he feels emboldened to create. On the other hand, if the parents are too controlling, the child yearns to run free; and if the parents are absent (emotionally or otherwise), the child fears abandonment (Ibid.).

To Becker, “repression is normal self-protection and creative self-restriction” (Becker 1973, 178). He says, “In modern psychoanalytic understanding . . . dynamic unconscious can be thought to be made up of early ‘repressions.’ That is, the parents frustrate many of the child’s activities—interrupted breast feeding, scheduled waste elimination” (Liechty 2005, 74).

Along those lines, Jung writes, “Repression is a process that begins in early childhood under the moral influence of the environment and lasts through life. Through analysis the repressions are removed, and the repressed wishes made conscious” (Jung 1993, 137). Regarding this, Becker says, “If the child had a favorable upbringing, it only serves better to hide the fear of death. After all, repression is made possible by the natural identification of the child with the power of the parents. If he has been well cared for, identification comes easily and solidly, and his parents’ triumph over death becomes his” (Liechty 206, 2005). Thus, repression seems to become a matter of opposing forces—the squelching of what one perceives to be evil and the recognition of what one perceives to be good. As Jung says, “We want to be good, and therefore must repress evil; and with that the paradise of the collective psyche comes to an end” (Jung 193, 165).
Transference

Transference is devious and hidden because it taints individuals’ view of people in such covert ways that people walk around fooled. Psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi calls transference a “peculiar sort of thought-formation, mostly unconscious” (Ferenczi 1956, 30) and says “these transferences are re-impressions and reproductions of the emotions and phantasies that have to be awakened and brought into consciousness” (Ibid.). He continues, “Transference is a psychical mechanism that is characteristic of the neurosis altogether, one that is evidenced in all situations of life, and which underlies most of the pathological manifestations” (Ibid., 31). Melanie Klein says, “[I]n some form or other transference operates throughout life and influences all human relations.” She explains that as psychoanalysis “begins to open up roads into the patient’s unconscious, his past (in its conscious and unconscious aspects) is gradually being revived. Thereby his urge to transfer his early experiences . . . is reinforced and they come to focus on the psychoanalyst” (Klein 1990, 236). Herman Nurenburg writes:

As a matter of fact, the word ‘transference’ is self-explanatory. It says that the patient displaces emotions belonging to an unconscious representation of a repressed object to a mental representation of an object of the external world. The repressed objects belong to the past . . . and are thus unreal. Trying to substitute a real object (for example the analyst) for the unreal one, the patient is bound to run into misunderstandings, to become confused and to suffer frustrations. (Nunberg 1990, 221)

Thus, through work with the psychoanalyst, the patient begins to have awareness that his automatic impressions function as limitations. Through the controlled, boiler-room-like psychoanalyst’s office, the patient’s worldview unfolds; the analyst and patient work together to bring what was buried to the surface. But, transference does not limit
itself to those who can afford to spend the money and time analysis requires. It affects all
individuals, necessarily so. Necessarily because individuals distort the reality of their
situation in order to function at their jobs, in their marriages, and in everyday human
interactions. To constantly self-analyze would mean to cease to function, and humans
must get on with their business in order to live. Awareness of the existence of
transference, then, becomes the first step in modifying a person’s distorted worldview.
Kierkegaard writes:

What feelings, understanding and will a person has depends in the last
resort upon what imagination he has—how he represents himself to
himself, that is upon imagination . . . [t]he self is reflection and the
imagination is reflection, the self’s representation of itself in the form
of the self’s possibility. The imagination is the whole of reflection’s
possibility; and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of self
intensity. (Kierkegaard 1989, 61)

Transference, simply put, is fantasy. To recognize this fantasy, one must undergo
an awareness of one’s inner self. The interaction between individuals, and the interaction
between an individual and his external world, boils down to fact that individuals repeat
the same interactions over and over, with little variation. Thus, this repetition obfuscates
the fact that life does not actually repeat itself. Becker says, “But now the fatality of
transference: when you set up your perception-action world to eliminate what is basic to
it (anxiety), then you fundamentally falsify it. This is why psychoanalysts have always
understood transference as a regressive phenomenon, uncritical, wishful, a matter of
automatic control of one’s world” (Becker 1973, 143). Transference serves to eliminate
anxiety. Yet, to Kierkegaard (and in the office of a psychoanalyst) anxiety serves as the
conduit to emotional awareness—to the uncovering and sloughing off of character
defenses. Thus, for change to occur, one must learn to work through anxiety. Becker says, “[T]ransference is a form of fetishism, a form of narrow control that anchors our own problems. We take our helplessness, our guilt, our conflicts, and we fix them to a spot in the environment” (Ibid., 144). When an individual ceases to have an anchor on which to displace his anxiety, the individual is filled with what Kierkegaard calls despair.

In many ways, transference plays a part in keeping adults psychically in childhood. Thomas Szasz says that “transference may be viewed as a special case of ‘playing an old game’” (Szasz 2010, 253). He analogizes transference to a foreign language speaker who believes he speaks another language without an accent, or more precisely, he does not hear his accent when he speaks. Szasz claims, “In the traditional concept of transference, one person (the analysand) behaves toward another (the analyst) as if the latter were someone else, previously familiar to him,” in most cases a parental figure (Ibid.). Speakers of a foreign language do not hear their accents unless someone else points it out to them, or if they hear their voices being played back on recording, “they cannot hear the distortions of the language when they speak” (Ibid., 254). Regarding the example of a foreign language speaker, he says, “This view of transference . . . rests on empirical observations concerning the basic human tendency to generalize experiences” (Ibid., 253-4).

Of Becker’s ideas on transference, Daniel Liechty writes:

In Becker’s view, people use transference as a way of dealing with the real terror of feeling powerless, ungrounded, weak, and alone . . . [t]he first object in the lives of most people is probably their parents or caregivers. But as the ability to symbolize develops, the child soon learns that almost any object will suffice . . . such as a blanket or teddy bear. (Liechty 1995, 92)
In terms of awareness of transference, and because of the pervasive nature of transference, humans operate without being able to notice where their transference objects lie. Moreover, humans’ transference issues develop independently of conscious human thought (Ibid., 94). Ernest Becker feels that transference reactions actually stand behind many facets of human choice and allow for the influence of cult leaders and politicians (Ibid., 92).

Thus, “transference dynamics pervade all of human life and are inseparable from the ontological fact of our human condition” (Ibid., 93). Liechty claims that without transference humans would be “psychotically stunted every time we lifted our minds from the total absorption from all but the most mundane of occupations” (Ibid., 94).

**Neurosis**

To be neurotic means living a constricted life—a life dictated by learned behaviors, rules, and repetition. To be neurotic, also, means being human. For humans, a certain level of neurotic outlook and behavior remains necessary in order to function. The paradox of neuroses lies in the fact that while neurotic behavior restricts normal functioning, normal functioning is not possible without the presence of some neurosis. As Liechty says, “Becker’s work forces us to the conclusion that neurosis is normal—that is, that normalcy is neurotic” (Ibid., 157).

The idea that neurosis presents itself in all humans, to varying degrees, does not solve the problem of neurosis. Neurosis binds humans, and restricts their potential for psychic growth. According to Moore and Fine, “The term neurosis is now almost always synonymous with psychoneuroses. It was first used by William Cullen to designate
functional physiological disturbances without structural basis in the afflicted organ” (Moore and Fine 1990, 126). That means, like many early psychoanalytic concepts, neurosis evolved into an abstraction separate from physiological functioning. Thus, the concept of neurosis becomes a moving target.

If all humans are neurotic, then some humans seem to be more neurotic than others—but the debilitating outcome of some neurotic behavior manifests itself differently in each individual. Ernest Jones calls neuroses “one of the many different ways in which people react to psychological and social difficulties that everyone has to meet” (Jones 1948, 21). Feinchel claims that “psychoneuroses are essentially a conflict between instinctual demands and defensive forces of the ego” (Feinchel 1945, 21). Laplanche and Pontalis continue along these lines by saying that neurotic symptoms “constitute compromises between wish and defense” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 266). To Becker, neurotic people close themselves off from the world, they “have more trouble with their lives than others,” they tell themselves “clumsy lies about reality” (Becker 1973, 178). Those lies have a connection to buried unconscious material—the lies people tell are not the product of awareness, but are hidden in the person’s nature.

One can particularly learn about an individual’s neurotic character structure by witnessing how the person deals with conflicts (Jones 1948, 13). As Laplanche and Pontalis say, neurotic symptoms “are disturbances of behavior, of the emotions, or of thought which make manifest a defense against anxiety and constitute a compromise in respect of this internal conflict form which the subject . . . derives a certain advantage” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 266). Again, it seems that the neurotic person repeatedly
experiences internal conflict between what he experiences in the external world, and what is buried in his internal world. This tension creates anxiety. Moreover, much of this anxiety seems to be a direct reflection of what the individual learned as a child. As Liechty writes, “Man is burdened by his early learning . . . . a child learns to conduct himself, and to execute choices, in a manner that will be pleasing to his parents. He learns to gain his feeling of self-value by performing according to codes that are thrust upon him by his parents” (Liechty 2005, 74). Therefore, neurosis can be seen as “a kind of behavioral stupidity in the face of the new” (Ibid.).

Neurotic people repeat the same behavioral patterns learned in childhood. Their parents’ influence on them remains in place because their childhood responses carry over into adulthood. However, as much as the neurotic person may unconsciously feel it is, the world is not filled with one’s parents; every interaction is not a manifestation of one’s own childhood experiences. The neurotic person operates on outdated principles. The survival skills he learned as a child no longer work, and yet the neurotic person strives to force his will on the world. To Liechty, “neurosis signifies simply that there is a basic dichotomy in human experience, an incompatibility between early training and adult needs” (Ibid.).

Becker connects neurosis to sin and Kierkegaard by explaining how sin and neurosis “are two ways about talking about the same thing” (Becker 1973, 196). To him, “both sin and neurosis represent the individual blowing up himself to larger than his true size, his refusal to respond to his cosmic dependence” (Ibid.). By constraining life to manageable portions, by limiting one’s own experience, and by remaining tied to
childhood belief systems, the neurotic person makes himself the center of his world. He magnifies his own power and “pretends that the meaning of miraculousness of creation is limited to that, that he can get his beatification from that” (Ibid.). In a way, the neurotic person separates himself from other humans—by playing god he craves to be more powerful than others. Extending it to Kierkegaard, this separation begets anxiety. The cycle of neurosis and anxiety can be seen this way: individuals are by nature neurotic; because they are neurotic they suffer mental conflict; this conflict begets anxiety; the way to understand anxiety is to understand its presence as a call to freedom. Then, one learns to live a life of faith. Faith means an opening up of personality, a willingness to let go of one’s own power structure. Becker writes, “[I]t was not until scientific psychology that we could understand what was at stake in death and rebirth: that man’s character was a neurotic structure that went right into the heart of his humanness” (Ibid., 57). In other words, in order to live a life of creativity one must be re-born. One must shed all the trappings of childhood (of neurotic thought and action) and enter into unknown territories. Through this connection to the unknown, authentic living becomes a possibility.
CHAPTER 2
BINDING ONE’S SELF, THE CULTURAL HERO

If neurotic behavior closes off one from experience, it is because people develop their worldview at an early age and often fail to discard their old ways of deciphering and coping with situations. As a child grows up, he or she develops a character that aligns with his or her parents’ codes of behavior. Of course, the child learns to bury his impulses and he overlays the improper urges with newly formed symbols. The child learns to relate to these symbols through various means—thus the child’s interior world becomes a caldron of opposing wishes, thoughts, and demands. On the outside, though, the developing human’s character becomes solidified (or so he hopes). Thus, to the individual, one’s character becomes a fixed object. And, usually, one’s idea of what one’s character is like remains steady throughout the person’s life. This is an illusion according to Becker. To him, character is a lie—but a vital one. An individual’s character structure cannot be fixed because humans experience changes. Simply pointing out how the aging process changes humans’ exterior is enough to shatter the permanence of character structure. Yet, people cling to their perception of themselves. To them, personality is a constant. A personality that develops in childhood, however, is inadequate for adulthood. Pasting one’s parents’ faces on the people one encounters makes for ineffective living. In addition, the idea that the individual possesses the power to will the world to behave in a particular way means the individual believes he has the power to bend the world to his will. And, in many instances, individuals perceive others’ reactions and the outcomes of certain events as repetitions of the past.
Character develops through a child’s attachments of thoughts and feelings to symbols. According to Moore and Fine, “Symbolism is a form of indirect representation, and symbolization is a uniquely human psychic process in which one mental representation stands for another” (Moore and Fine 1990, 191). Humans relate to the world through symbolic identification; symbols “encompass all substitutes for words representing an idea, quality, or totality” (Ibid.). In psychoanalysis, two different types of “indirect representation” exist: “the relationship between signifier (a concept) is arbitrary and dictated by conventional agreement (as is the case with most words). The symbol . . . has a conscious manifest form but also latently represents unconscious mental content” (Ibid.). To Freud, “all symbols . . . result from unconscious primary process mental activity, the goal of which was reducing anxiety by repressing unacceptable wishes and ideas” (Moore and Fine 1990, 192). Laplanche and Pontalis call symbolism “a mode of indirect and figurative representation of an unconscious idea, conflict, or wish. In this sense, one may, in psycho-analysis hold any substitutive formation to be symbolic” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 442).

Becker says, “The child, in order to keep his objects and their love, in order to keep his self esteem and the forward-momentum of his action, accepts to predicate his whole being on the vocabulary of motives learned from his parents” (Becker 1964, 140). Through this arrangement, the child begins to arrange his external life in a unique set of symbols. However, underlying feelings conflict with the way the child mentally arranges his life. Therefore, while the child builds his character, he buries his own impressions of the world and replaces them with what he believes are more appropriate ones. This trade-
off occurs in order to manage within the framework of his household and later in society. Becker says, “The individual is born into a random environment. Faced with the need for action, he learns an ‘unauthentic’ form of behavior” (Ibid., 170). The child does not choose his parents, or the facts of his environment. He fashions his life by piecing together feelings and objects—learning vocabulary, cultural and behavioral schema—and mostly looks to his parents in order to sort everything out. Moreover, the baby evolves from exerting control over his parents—the closest the human ever gets to being god-like—to being beholden to his parents’ authority. The child must learn to give up his early dance with power. Becker writes, when a child “tries to master the body, pretend it isn’t there, ‘act like a little man,’ the body suddenly overwhelms them, submerges them in vomit or excrement—and the child breaks down in desperate tears over his melted pretense at being a purely symbolic animal” (Becker 1973, 28). Becker then describes how a child will deliberately go to the bathroom on himself or will urinate in the bed in order to eschew the fact that he is not in control of his body and his exteriority; the child “seems to be saying that the body is his primary reality and that he wants to remain in the simple physical Eden and not be thrown out in to the world of ‘right and ‘wrong”’ (Ibid., 28-9).

Eventually, the child begins to hide even these types of protests, and into adulthood, the desire to rebel in this way becomes latent—and perhaps manifests itself in other ways. The adult forgets the struggle to organize and decipher one’s external environment, and minimizes the difficulty the younger self had with suppressing actions
and urges in order to be deemed acceptable by one’s parents, teachers, friends, and other authority figures.

Becker writes of the humanization process: “1. Each actor is ‘twisted’ in a certain way. 2. That early ‘twist’ is usually fundamentally at odds with much of later experience. 3. Only the rare person is trained to be flexible, to appraise experiences with a minimum of early baggage” (Becker 1964, 167). To be authentic means to be flexible; those with rigid symbolic structures see the world as fixed. They have a rigid approach to life—in perception and in action.

Becker talks of how the “essence of man” is paradoxical—that he is “half animal and half symbolic . . . he calls this “existential paradox . . . individuality within finitude” (Becker 1973, 26). He describes existential thought on freedom as “a striking out for one’s own life, for new choices, for a break with the accident of one’s birth, and training” (Becker 1964, 169). To be free means to live flexibly, to challenge and destroy one’s symbolic structure. But, breaking down everything one has learned means facing infinitude. This causes anxiety. “The ‘anxiety of finitude’ is the child’s early helpless interiority that he can overcome by basing action on the psychological symbolic categories given to him by his early objects” (Ibid., 176). The anxiety of infinitude means destroying these “psychological symbolic categories” and casting out on one’s own—facing the world exposed and disarmed (Ibid.). Becker opines, “Anxiety arises from the possibility of abrogating an entire meaning framework” (Ibid., 178).

Anxiety arises from conflict, or opposing forces. Humans work to dispel feelings of anxiety by utilizing various means of control. Kierkegaard “defines anxiety as ‘the
dizziness of freedom,’ as a desire for what one dreads” (Ibid., 176). The tension, or psychic conflict, between one’s need to protect one’s symbolic structure and the desire to break free of that structure means a choice between confinement and freedom. However, to find the courage to face freedom is terrifying. “To be courageous is to choose a new range of objects in spite of old rules, in the face of them” (Ibid., 177). That means not shunting anxiety when it rears itself in myriad, often untraceable, ways. Of Kierkegaard, Becker says, “Kierkegaard gives us some portrait sketches of denying possibility, or the lies of character . . . . He is intent on describing what we call today ‘inauthentic men’, men who avoid developing their own uniqueness” (Becker 1973, 73). Inauthentic men are inauthentic because they hide behind society’s rules. They fashion their personalities to align with whatever their current social set deems acceptable; then, they have others on whom they can lean. To combat their repressed desire for individuality, they connect themselves to people in hope that physical proximity to others will quell the loneliness they feel. But, because they do not understand from where their loneliness comes, their feelings of loneliness increase. Thus, they chase something that does not exist: relationships that heal the fissure between when they were baby gods and when they became well-behaved, rule-abiding adults. These people are “the one-dimensional men totally immersed in the fictional games in their society, unable to transcend their social conditioning” (Ibid.). Becker calls this type the “automatic cultural man,” “man as confined by culture, a slave to it, who imagines that he has an identity if he pays his insurance premium, that he has control of his life if he guns his sport car or works his electric toothbrush” (Ibid., 74). The automatic cultural man worships the symbolic
framework within which he operates. He acts automatically because he exists in a trance-like state, numbing himself with whatever he encounters that momentarily stops his anxiety. He develops elaborate avoidance strategies and becomes addicted to whatever seems to ameliorate feelings of desolateness. At some point, he becomes so bound to his character structure that he ceases to recognize that others do not belong on earth simply for him to move about as he pleases. He guards his character structure at others’ expense and battles with them if they challenge his view of himself in any way. On the other hand, if others affirm his view of himself, he eventually grows tired of them and becomes annoyed because regardless of what they do, they ultimately fall short of his fantasy about how they should behave. Becker says, “No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood, and the attempt has to take its toll in some way on both parties. . . . We want an object that reflects a truly ideal image of ourselves. But no human object can do that; humans have wills and counterwills of their own” (Ibid., 166). For the automatic cultural man, his relationships disappoint him because he acts automatically and uncritically.

Humans look for similarities in others, and hope that others will validate their worldview. Becker writes, “We enter symbiotic 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, they enslave even further because they support the lie we fashioned” (Ibid., 56).

Yet, each individual’s worldview, his personal symbolic structure, is unique. Again, tension arises when individuals believe that their companions mirror their views—because the mirror images are illusions. Thus, the quest to be similar fails. A power
struggle occurs between each individual’s worldview; each person takes his own side and stands ready to fight to defend his own character structure. So, the ties between automatic cultural men are tenuous and imaginary. If individuals act uncritically, and are driven to assuage their feelings of anxiety and separateness, then they fool themselves into believing the fraudulent reasons behind whichever fight they join. And, they hear the voices of others supporting their cause—until they encounter contradicting worldviews. This is what Becker means by relationships binding individuals. Individuals masterfully ignore what stands in front of them in order to continue with their daily existences. Even with major life changes, or emotional shocks, humans strive to move things back to whatever they consider to be normalcy. They move back in order to quash the anxiety they feel whenever their routines become altered. They move back into a safe zone, they believe, and hope that nothing will jar them awake again. They rush back to hide between the walls they have erected. Becker says, “Man is protected by the secure and limited alternatives his society offers him, and if he does not look up from his path he can live out his life with a certain dull security” (Ibid., 74).

Yet, humans pay a price for their secure worlds. All humans are pushed off their paths from time to time. They hope they can avoid it, and toil to avoid it, but it happens. At moments when humans find themselves far from their prescribed paths, when they become overtaken by terror, the chance for development arises. The tension between going forward or striving to go back to one’s path is analogous to the tension one feels when one’s worldview is challenged. It is the tension between the conscious and the unconscious—between that which one believes is concrete and that which is mysterious.
People do not like mystery. They may toy with it, perhaps attempt to defy it, but they lunge away from it as soon as they are able. And, they repress those moments when they are lost and unable to control whatever it is that has yanked them away from comfort. They plan for the next time when they might have to encounter something new. They plan against any eventuality in which they may have to experience discomfort. Of course, life outsmarts humans every time; yet humans convince themselves that the answer to life’s attempt to derail their comfortable existences is to plan more. With each instance of anxiety, with each instance of exposure, the inevitable human answer is to attempt to devise a way to avoid ever experiencing discomfort again. Yet, to plan this way must be uncomfortable. The plotting and rulemaking, and rule abiding, becomes an all-consuming activity. Moreover, the individual must obey society’s rules for him—rules put in place to protect him from any potential harm. Humans begin to worship these rules and give up their freedom in order to hedge against any (in their minds) harmful event. Becker writes, “Why does man accept to live a trivial life? Because of the danger of a full horizon of experience” (Ibid., 74). Humans prefer triviality to freedom because freedom terrifies them.

Becker says that man is “beaten because he fails to face up to the existential truth of his situation— the truth that he is an inner symbolic self, which signifies a certain freedom, and that he is bound by a finite body, which limits that freedom” (Ibid., 75). An individual’s fallibility, the fact that he will die, limits the way he associates with the tangle of symbols lurking within his mind. His humanness, his mortality, serves as a check to the possibility of infinitude. Thus, one can analogize that psychic conflicts
(repression, transference reactions, neurotic behavior) revolve around this primary tension between the body and the inner realm. The body feels anxiety produced by the inner realm. The body succumbs to mystery again and again and it constantly angles towards, and eventually succumbs to, the extinguishment of the ineffable inner realm. The fight between interiority and exteriority serves as a metaphor for the fight between life and death. Mystery versus what we think (we hope) to be permanent. Humans turn away from what is mysterious and work to control their bodies through various means—exercising, dressing a particular way, drinking, drugging. They shut off the ramblings of their unconscious by ignoring their reactions and they look to their society to dictate behavioral rules to them. But, their interior world always wins out because it is powerful—and its power exists because it always surprises. Moreover, death always wins; and it offers the most terrifying surprise.

Most individuals understand they have an interior existence that is separate from their character structure. They understand they have buried memories; they experience fleeting thoughts that contradict their identity. They conjure up ways to separate their inner selves from their body by talking of their souls—souls that will continue to live on after their body decomposes. Putting aside a discussion about the veracity of whether one’s soul lives on, the idea that there is a structured, separate inner personality prevents individuals from having to acknowledge that their inner selves are actually fragmented, transitory, and fluid. Humans conceptualize their soul just as they conceptualize their personality—as a fixed phenomenon that travels. They trivialize and minimize the ephemeral nature of their inner world because they believe they can manage to control it.
The result, then, means greater tension—which means finding newer and stronger ways to control it. Eventually, a constant numbing of tension becomes necessary. This is where Kierkegaard’s concept of philistinism and Becker’s concept of the automatic cultural man begin to merge. Becker states, “For Kierkegaard, ‘philistinism’ was triviality, man lulled by the daily routines of his society, content with the satisfactions that it offers him: in today’s world the car, the shopping center, the two week vacation” (Becker 1973, 74). The best way to numb anxiety and tension is to will one’s self to follow rules, to practice following rules so well that the rule following almost becomes instinctual. Becker explains, “The safest thing is to toe the mark of what is socially possible” (Ibid.). It is socially possible to hide within the bosom of one’s cronies and pretend that mystery functions as a solid entity one overpowers. This is the definition of the inflexible personality type, the one who throws away freedom with both hands.

In the very early stages of life, babies exist without any awareness of their condition. As they begin to realize they are beholden to their parents, that they are not at the center of the universe, they begin to sort out their world through the process of symbolization. The emotions that they attach to their symbols usually are repressed because their personal symbols become automatic; they are not conscious that they are arranging their world cognitively. When children begin to arrange their world into symbols, usually between the ages of one and three, then the process of individuation begins (May 1977, 38). They begin to understand they are separate from others. And, with this understanding comes feelings of loneliness. Also, with this process of individuation, comes anxiety. Before it, children feel powerful. They merge with their
parents (for example, with their mother during times of breastfeeding). They experience unity, and feel connected to the objects around them. They have not begun the task of figuring out concepts such “I” and “they”; therefore they behave basically instinctively. They explore their bodies freely, and do not understand that there are delineations between their mind, their unconscious, and their physical body. After the process of individuation has begun, especially depending on how the parents deal with their child, children begin to acquire ways to deal with the new anxiety they feel when they are left alone or too restricted in their action. They develop different ways of interacting with the various intrusions in their lives and begin to piece together the personality they probably will keep through their lives. This is where the character armor begins to develop. Because once the child begins to have awareness of his separateness, he also begins to defend his worldview.

Becker says, “[T]o a self-reflexive, symbol-using animal, the purely symbolic social definition of normative behavior is as crucial to action as if instinctive patterning to any lower organism” (Becker 1962, 494). Animals instinctively fight death, and humans share this instinct. Basically, animals have the instinct to survive. However, humans develop a symbolic structure that makes them aware of their own death. Liechty writes, “[O]ur mental capacity to view ourselves in the third person (that the symbolic self becomes an object in the field of the ego, in professional jargon) is the most important survival mechanism of the human species” (Liechty 1998, 51). Humans reflect on their death and the tension between the natural instinct to survive, and the reflexive personality creates death anxiety.
Through observations on neurosis, transference, symbolization, and instinct versus self-reflection, one observes that the commonality between them is the tension that occurs between the unconscious (or instinctual) and the conscious. Thus, opposing forces within the individual cause distress. One can continue along this line of reasoning and see that tension between the individual’s inner striving for uniqueness (for instance their unique inner self or their unique symbolic structure) and the opposing force of cultural norms (rules) creates tension as well. To Liechty, “Each successive culture will offer convincing and viable avenues for achieving triumphant sublimation of this basic anxiety [death anxiety] in the form of ‘cultural heroics’” (Ibid., 57). Humans, through their culture, find ways to find “symbolic immortality” through battling to earn recognition within their social groups (Ibid.). However, these cultural heroics are a lie: no amount of social recognition quells the terror of death. People fashion their lives to follow a set of rules designed to suppress their instincts; culture represents a falsehood perpetuated by individuals who fear death the most. Succumbing to anxiety, creating ways to obey rules, and subjugating the yearning for individuality means succumbing to prosaic ways of living. Andrew Brink writes, “Basic anxiety is a product of attachment to imperfect caregivers at the start and, thereafter, to the persons in one’s social network” (Brink 2000, 1). He calls anxiety “an unfocused apprehension of danger, a more or less chronic emotional arousal of something bad happening” (Ibid., 20). Becker attributes this anxiety as a leftover in human evolution: “The result was the emergence of man as we know him . . . a hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even where there are none” (Becker 1973, 17). Since humans no longer have to face down dinosaurs
rumbling toward them, they now stress over whether to buy the Blackberry or the iPhone. The choice between phones means they will have to choose the subset of their peers with which they would like to connect or from whom they would like to gain admiration.

One must look at the difference between anxiety and fear. Fear can usually be connected to something concrete—something that logically would bring about emotional discomfort. One feels fear when a snake is about to strike, or when a plane is about to crash. When the fearful moment is over, the person no longer feels fear. There is a causal relationship between the snake and the fear, or the plane crash and the fear. It is more difficult to understand the root of anxiety. Anxiety is “diffuse and non-specific as to what the danger actually is” (Brink 2000, 20).

**Anxiety and Symbolism**

Anxiety occurs where tension exists, and tensions exists when a fight between opposing forces exists. Human beings are rife with opposing forces: they are animals, but they do not rely exclusively on instinct to survive; they conceive of immortality, but they witness the cessation of life; they understand that they are separate from others, but they search for merger with other humans. They understand the concept of symbols (for example the flag), but do not realize that their interior world teems with them. Jones says, “Symbolism is a representative or substitute of some other idea from which in context it derives a secondary significance not inherent in itself . . . symbolic modes of thought are the more primitive . . . and represent a reversion to some simpler and earlier stage of mental development” (Jones 1948, 90). He continues, “The process of symbolization is carried out unconsciously, and the individual is quite unaware of the
meaning of the symbol he has employed” (Ibid., 97). Finally, he believes, “all symbols represent ideas of the self and the immediate blood relatives, or of the phenomenon of birth, love, and death. In other words, they represent the most primitive ideas and interest imaginable” (Ibid., 102). Symbols, then, can be something society decides the meaning of and then perpetuates through various means. Symbols can also be internal, malleable, spontaneous, and inexpressible. Symbols could first be described as rigid, second as creative. The first description states that symbols are dictated to the individual from the outside, the second states that they are individualistic and develop internally. Some fluidity probably exists between the two, but one can extend the concept even further and state that the cultural symbolic system and the individual symbolic system each represent the difference between rigid thought-structure and creative thought-structure. For Kierkegaard, this would mean the difference between unfreedom (rigidity) and freedom (creativity). This would mean the difference between philistinism and faith.

In The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard writes, “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two terms. Looked at in this way a human being is not yet a self” (Kierkegaard 1989, 43). He continues:

Despair is the imbalance in a relation of synthesis, in a relation which relates to itself. But the synthesis is not the imbalance, the synthesis is just possibility; or, the possibility of the imbalance lies in the synthesis. If the synthesis were itself the imbalance there would be no despair, it would be something that lay in human nature itself, that is, it would not be despair; it would be something that happened to a person, something he suffered like a sickness he succumbs to, or like death, which is the fate of everyone. No, despair lies in the person himself. But if he were not a synthesis there would be no question of his despairing. (Ibid., 45-6)
Jones says:

[T]he primary ideas of life, the only ones that can be symbolized—those, namely, concerning the bodily self, the relation to family, birth, love and death—retain in the unconscious through life their original importance, and from them is derived a very large part of the more secondary interests of the conscious mind. As energy flows from them, and never to them, it is comprehensible that symbolism should be placed in one direction only. Only what is repressed is symbolized; only what is repressed needs to be symbolized. (Jones 1948, 166)

He continues, “The essential function of all forms of symbolism . . . is to overcome the inhibition that is hindering the free expression of a given feeling-idea, the force derived from this, in its upward urge, being the effective cause of symbolism. It always constitutes a regression to a simpler mode of apprehension” (Ibid., 144).

Overcoming rigid ways of seeing the world means departing from the structure of one’s childhood, and later culture, and facing what is new and frightening. It means recognizing the synthesis within each human is not the result of the fear mechanism (‘something that happened to the person’), but a unique product of the individual’s interior being (the unconscious). Repressed material, then, becomes fodder for the possibility of overcoming what holds the individual in a rigid mode of living (the philistine, the neurotic, the automatic cultural man). Uncovering repressed material results in feelings of anxiety; feelings of anxiety then can be utilized to effect change. Psychologist Rollo May says, “To Kierkegaard, the more possibility (creativity) an individual has, the more potential anxiety he has at the same time” (May 1977, 38).

May discusses how anxiety often co-exists with guilt. Guilt can be seen as a feeling that emerges when an individual feels he runs counter to the wishes of an
authority figure. As adults, these authority figures are self-created and reflect a regression to past modes of being. Thus, the guilt feeling indicates that the individual fears separation (or punishment) from the actual or ersatz parental authority; herein lies the feeling of anxiety. May feels Kierkegaard believes that “in the state of innocence there is no separation of the individual from his environment, and anxiety is ambiguous. In the state of self-awareness, however, there occurs the possibility of separation as an individual” (Ibid., 42). Individuals fear separation because they cling to the idea that they can once again find the state of innocence. They crave to experience ambiguity again, but that is impossible. Thus, the anxiety they experience represents the presence of a choice between living in a stupor (being shut-up) or coming awake (facing the possibility of creativity). May writes, “We can understand Kierkegaard’s ideas on the relation between guilt and anxiety only by emphasizing that he is always speaking of anxiety in its relation to creativity. One has anxiety because it is possible to create—creating one’s self, willing to be one’s self . . . . One would have no anxiety if there were no possibility whatever” (Ibid., 44).

In order to live in a stupor, to chase a fantasy, people develop elaborate schemes to attempt to re-create the era of innocence (of ambiguity), and thereby bury anxiety. May quotes Kierkegaard: “One does everything possible by way of diversions and the Janizary music of loud-voiced enterprises to keep lonely thoughts away, just as in the forests of America they keep away wild beasts by torches, by yells, by the sound of cymbals” (Ibid., 49), (Kierkegaard 1957, 107). Kierkegaard says, “Hence it is that in our age one learns to know so little about the highest spiritual temptations, but all the more
about the coquettish conflicts between men, and between man and woman, which the refined life of society and the soirée brings in its train” (Ibid.).

Society provides the individual with ample diversions to forget what it is like to be a lonely individual who dies. For these diversions, individuals surrender the possibility of freedom for protection. Moreover, the procurement of “like minded” behavior, the need to assimilate, and the quest to keep out what is undesirable, all provide individuals with distractions. Humans search for ways to distract themselves from the fact that with awareness comes separation and fallibility. They individually and collectively look for ways to bury feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Yet, these remedies cannot control the uncontrollable. One cannot control mystery. Separation and fallibility become facts the moment a baby begins to sort out its external world. The main task of the adult is to discard the quest to revert to an ambiguous state, to undo the rules he learned along the way to adulthood, and to realize that he holds the ability to be creative or individualistic.

Reverting to old patterns of behavior means denying the forward momentum of life—it means denying death. Moreover, it places the individual on a repetitive journey back to childhood. With each revolution back to childhood, the adult throws away the opportunity to experience freedom—even within the absurd constraints of human life. When the individual understands that he is the one who keeps himself buried in childhood repetitiveness, he can take steps to remedy the situation; he can recognize the absurdity inherent in this cyclical regression back to the fantasy of childhood innocence.
Innocence dies when the individual begins to fashion his ego. No individual escapes this fact, no matter how much he strives to recapture it.
CHAPTER 3  
LONELINESS

Anyone over the age of baby experiences an awareness of loneliness. Humans are lonely beings. Humans also feel they can counteract feelings of being separate without understanding from where the feelings of separation come. They feel they can prop themselves up to god-like status by engaging in cultural contests of potency. They engage in feats of strength and sometimes use proxies for their own power plays (as in sports). When they win, they feel indestructible—they have survived the battle. When they lose, they search for and find the next fight. In between fights, they sometimes feel pangs of loneliness, but they push them aside to find another other ways to divert themselves.

Humans constantly engaging in self-procured battles is absurd. The emotional attachment to the activity highlights the person’s lack of awareness; humans lack awareness that they are engaging in pointless activities in order to further their immortality struggle. Therefore, they do not realize that much of what they do is absurd. They trick themselves into believing that what they do matters; that it has a greater significance than an arbitrary fight. They argue, punish, cajole, and manipulate in order to forget that they are mostly powerless. All their machinations are impermanent, yet they convince themselves what they do matters. This is a dishonest way of living. This is a way of forgetting the reality of human life: that humans die and that at some point they become aware that they are going to die. They become aware that they are separate. No longer can they reside in the protection of their mother’s womb, perfectly connected
to another individual who imbues them with life and provides them with all they need. They even move past the breastfeeding stage, the baby stage when all their needs are magically met with one cry from the baby-god mouth. At some time, the individual begins to acknowledge his imperfection and his exposure to harm. And, at this time, the child begins to know that he lies at the mercy of others. Thus, he begins to see the world through his own distorted lenses. He begins to see the world through the eyes of a human animal: an animal full of contradictions, but an animal just the same. Yet, he tells himself that he is more than just an animal—that he is more important than other animals (and other humans). The more he does this, the more he increases the separateness between the oneness he felt as a baby and the separateness he feels thereafter. Yet, he chases oneness, but never encounters it again. Still, he pursues it through fraudulent means: through social games, drugs, alcohol, feelings of superiority, love, maybe even war.

The human condition, then, is absurd. Humans repetitively seek to avoid loneliness through the very means that enhance it. Their minds provide them with powerful psychological mechanisms, such as transference, to help them forget what they really are. Yet, these psychological mechanisms (though necessary) also hold them back. They hold them back emotionally because they usually are rooted in childhood experience. They hold them back because they are outmoded ways of dealing with new situations. It would be as if a medical doctor in contemporary times pulled out leeches in order to treat a patient who has the flu. Humans keep themselves firmly rooted in the past in order to avoid the unpredictability of life. But, by doing this, they separate
themselves. They undermine their relationships by hoping their friends and partners can intuit how to solve their existential crises. They look to society to give them guidance, but it only provides rules on how to hide within its masses. They keep their memories of freedom and individuality repressed, and only sometimes let themselves remember a time when the world was less confined, less dull. Becker writes:

[M]ost of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience. Sometimes we may recapture this world by remembering some striking perceptions, how suffused they were in emotion and wonder, how a favorite grandfather looked, or one’s first love in his early teens. (Becker 1973, 50)

A transaction occurs: humans give up splendor and unpredictability in the external world (and within their minds) for the predictability of a structured and predictable life. They focus their mind on minutiae and trick themselves into thinking that the world mimics their thought patterns. Thus, they reaffirm the fact that they are simple creatures living a simple life. Or, they convince themselves that they are gods living an extremely complex and important life. Either way, they delude themselves. They are asleep.

In *The Denial of Death*, Becker writes, “The foundation stone for Kierkegaard’s view of man is the myth of the Fall, the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In this myth is contained . . . the basic insight of psychology for all time: that man is a union of opposites, of self-consciousness and of physical body” (Ibid., 68-9). After the fall, man became aware of his nakedness and the fact that he will surely die. He became “self-conscious”” (Ibid., 69).
Kierkegaard writes of the synthesis of man, of the fact that he is aware on one the hand of his nakedness, his fallibility, and on the other hand he is aware of his “symbolic inner identity” (Ibid.). Becker states, “Man’s anxiety is a function of his sheer ambiguity and of his complete powerlessness to overcome that ambiguity, to be straightforwardly an animal or an angel” (Ibid.).

Moreover, because man took the fall and became self-conscious, not only does he have to contend with the tension (or synthesis) between corporeality and abstraction (between body and mind) he becomes aware that he will some day die (Ibid.).

From that moment, man works to preserve himself and ignore the fact that he is something more than a beast, and something less than a god. He fights to avoid death, and focuses his mind on the tedium inherent in the struggle for physical survival. He focuses on the body, and ignores the inner self. Yet, the inner self (the unconscious) controls the body and capably overrules it. It works discretely, but effectively.

May writes, of Kierkegaard and the myth of Adam, “Kierkegaard interprets it as a portrayal of the individual’s inner awakening into self consciousness. At some point in development there occurs the ‘knowledge of good and evil’ . . . Then conscious choice enters the picture of possibility” (May 1977, 39). With possibility comes the feeling of anxiety, and the individual has the responsibility not to shirk possibility, but utilize it to “direct his own development” (Ibid., 42).

In The Concept of Dread, Kierkegaard writes, “Innocence is ignorance. In his innocence man is not determined as spirit but is soulishly determined in immediate unity with his natural condition. Spirit is dreaming in man” (Kierkegaard 1957, 37). “Spirit is
dreaming” because in an innocent state man has no awareness of the contradiction inherent in his being. He has not become a synthesis of animal and god. Kierkegaard says, “In this state there is peace and repose; but at the same time there is something different, which is not dissension and strife, for there is nothing to strive with” (Ibid., 38). When the individual awakens, “the difference between myself and other is posited; sleeping, it is suspended; dreaming, it is a nothing vaguely hinted at” (Ibid.).

Kierkegaard calls dread “the qualification of the dreaming spirit” (Ibid.). He differentiates between the dread children feel, and the dread one experiences later in life. “If we observe children, we find this dread more definitely indicated as a seeking after adventure, a thirst for the prodigious, the mysterious” (Ibid.). This is what Becker means when he says that humans repress “our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation”; children confront death anxiety with wonder and curiosity. Then, the child increasingly couples dread with guilt (not adventure), and walks further and further away from the “possibility of freedom” (Ibid., 40).

When God forbids Adam from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Kierkegaard feels “the prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom. That which passed innocence by as the nothing of dread has now entered into him, and here again it is nothing, the alarming possibility of being able” (Ibid.).

Here one can observe guilt possibly entering the picture after Adam eats the fruit and falls. Post-fall, the voice of God serves as the authoritative voice the individual hears when experiencing anxiety. This type of anxiety appears in moments of possibility.
Usually, it is coupled with a choice: stay protected by an authority figure or set off alone on unknown paths. There occurs a struggle between the old and the new (between the conscious and the unconscious). God’s pronouncement that Adam shall surely die means (post fall) Adam will awaken to an awareness of his own death. Indeed, Kierkegaard writes, “The terrible [death] becomes in this instance merely dread; for Adam has not understood what was said, and here again we have only the ambiguity of dread” (Ibid., 41). Kierkegaard means that without understanding death, or the terrible, Adam still understands the seriousness of the prohibition. He writes, “Indeed even the beast is able to understand the mimic expression and movement in the speaker’s voice, without understanding the word” (Ibid., 40-1).

Thus, before the fall, Adam’s experience with dread (the moment God forbids him from eating from the forbidden fruit but in doing so also informs him that there is such a fruit, thereby awakening the chance of possibility) is the “ambiguity of dread” (Ibid., 41). Because he does not fully understand “the terrible” but his interest is peaked, “innocence is brought to its last extremity. It is dread in relation to the prohibition and the punishment. It is not guilty, and yet it is in dread, as though it were lost” (Ibid.)

Kierkegaard presents the concept of dread as something God offers to Adam, because with His prohibition, God is presenting Adam with the possibility of awareness. Because Adam has no concept of what God’s potential punishment means, what death means, Adam only experiences a flickering of what disobeying God might bring. Yet, this flickering opens up possibility. Thus, because Adam has yet to disobey God, the dread he feels is not guilty. He has not fallen, he has only felt the reaction to God’s
prohibition. Eve then pushes him along, after the serpent pushes her along. “Then follows the Fall. This is what psychology is unable to explain, for it is the qualitative leap” (Ibid., 43). Earlier, Kierkegaard writes, “I have only said that sinfulness moves by quantitative determinants, whereas dread comes in constantly by the qualitative leap of the individual” (Ibid., 42). Thus, the possibility of sin existed, but first the person has to make the leap. Eve, a “derived being of Adam,” sins (Ibid). She makes the leap. Her offspring, in turn, eventually make the leap. They have the ability to sin within them, and they eventually do. But, it is their sin. Sin is latent until the sinner makes the leap in awakening it. Thus, Adam and Eve made the first qualitative leap that casts all humans as sinners, but humans do not sin until they make the leap themselves. Babies all experience a period prior to self-consciousness, then they make the leap into awareness. They cannot choose to stay in a state of ambiguity, the choice only lies dormant, but they choose nevertheless. The choice extends beyond their control, but they make it.

Kierkegaard writes, “Innocence is indeed well able to talk, inasmuch as in language it possesses the expression for everything in the spiritual order. In view of this one need only assume that Adam talked with himself. The imperfection in the account, that another speaks to Adam about what he does not understand, is thus eliminated. Adam was able to talk” (Ibid., 41).

May writes, “Now creating, actualizing one’s possibilities, always involves destructive as well as constructive patterns. It always involves destroying the status quo, destroying old patterns within oneself, progressively destroying what one has clung to from childhood on, and creating new and original forms and ways of living”; refusal to
change “brings guilt towards one’s self” (May 1977, 44). To Kierkegaard, “guilt feeling is a concomitant of anxiety: both are aspects of experiencing and actualizing possibility. The more creative the person, he held, the more anxiety and guilt are potentially present” (Ibid., 45).

For example, a human experiences an opportunity to change (he becomes tantalized by the possibility of freedom) and the authoritative voices of his past warn him not to go. Then, anxiety ensues because the individual now has to choose either to be creative and actualize possibility, or push the anxiety aside and stay shut-up. To Kierkegaard, the feeling of guilt couples with the feeling of dread because guilt functions as the possibility to regress—the possibility that the person will choose to refuse to grow. The anxiety presents itself against the person’s conscious wishes, but the guilt is there to tantalize the person back to security. May says, “Anxiety and guilt are potentially present at every instant that individuality is born into the community . . . not only in the figurative sense of the birth of a child, but in the birth of new phases of one’s own individuality” (Ibid.). Individuals constantly have to be re-born, they must constantly take opportunities to discard their old selves and move forward. If they do not, guilt controls them—and guilt represents the voices of ghosts of the past as well as their present day surrogates.

**Separation**

Individuals live in a haze for most of their lives if they fail to push beyond their automatic perceptions—perceptions they carry with them in order to make the world a more manageable place, a less scary place. These perceptions remain in one’s unconscious until death. They control a person’s external and internal activities. They
distort the individual’s opinion of himself and of others. The more one views the world through these automatic perceptions, the more one feels isolated and disconnected. Thus, one evolves into a solitary figure looking for ways to exert his power. These solitary figures lack a feeling of connectedness and flail about searching for proof of their potency. They kill, manipulate, cajole, or, at other times, simply obey others with more power. Regardless, they disregard the mystery inherent in life and fashion the world into predictable and manageable chunks.

Before one begins a journey, one must prepare for it. This preparation may or may not be within conscious constructs—it is possible to prepare for the journey without knowing the journey is going to happen. In an unknown preparation, moments of insight may evoke a tingling sensation, a nagging sensation, or even an itch at the back of one’s mind. The itch (or sensation) usually foretells of something unusual on the horizon. These moments of temporary awakening happen often in childhood. A child may think, “Something’s different, things are changing, but mother fed me dinner tonight and everything is okay.”

Or, an adult may drink another half a decanter of brandy—for the thousandth night in a row—and tuck away into bed knowing the other half awaits him in the morning. For children, and adults, living in the haze means repeating similar actions for perpetuity. The haze means safety, warmth, and comfort. It is staying on the mother’s breast.

Becker writes, “If we were not fear-stricken animals who repressed awareness of ourselves and our world, then we would live in peace and unafraid of death, trusting to
the Creator God and celebrating His creation” (Becker 1975, 163). Thus, in order to live authentically, men and women need to embark on a journey of self-awareness. There are, however, many other kinds of journeys humans take in order to flee the reality of their existence.

Becker opines, “Transference represents not only the necessary and inevitable, but the most creative distortion of reality . . . This means joining together their individual pulsations in a gamble toward something more transcendent” (Becker 1973, 158). The “something more transcendent” can mean different things to different people: writing a novel one has always dreamed of writing, overcoming a fear of snakes by letting one slither around one’s neck, or jumping out of an airplane. Yet, none of these actions brings anyone any kind of everlasting peace—there is always another novel to write, something more thrilling to do.

Becker says that “man’s all-encompassing fear of death drives him to attempt to transcend death through culturally standardized hero systems and symbols” (Becker 1975, xvii). He blames human evil on the fact that humans deny death in order to be seen as heroes. “Man erected cultural symbols which do not age or decay to quiet his fear of his ultimate end—and of more immediate concern, to provide the promise of indefinite duration” (Ibid.). Thus, men build buildings, erect elaborate tombstones over their graves; they write great works and have offspring with the hope that they will carryover into a new era. At no point do they reflect on the fact that even the grandest, most sturdy building will fall. That the empty fields of yesterday, now filled with skyscrapers, will again be nothing. Eternity, to the human, is a terrifying concept. But, it is a concept a
human can intellectualize. Of course, intellectualization of concepts can be seen as their own defense mechanisms—a preoccupation with nothingness can be as detrimental as a preoccupation with erecting buildings. In a sick human twist, any re-working of concepts (simply negating that which one finds to be problematic) does not necessarily mean finding freedom. The opposite of a preoccupation with one’s personal mythmaking is not inertia. One posits that the opposite of a narcissistic, culturally accepted, heroic quest could be becoming a depressive lay-about. The counterforce to heroics is not a “do nothing” attitude. Thus, humans twist their minds about in order to find answers; but the answers do not come readily—the opposite of battle cannot be inaction because either way humans work to exert their own needs. Something more creative needs to come into play.

Becker states, “Theologically, sin literally means a separation from the power and protection of the gods, a setting up of one’s self as a casua sui” (Ibid., 88). He continues, “[T]he experience of sin still today, for simple believers, is merely of uncleanliness and straightforward prohibition of specific acts. It is not the experiencing of one’s whole life as a problem” (Ibid., 87).

Therefore, when one becomes consumed with self-aggrandizing activities, and one becomes interested in building a personality, then one loses the protection of the gods. Moreover, when one lies in bed all day and does nothing, then one also separates one’s self from the protection of the gods. The reactionary choices humans make always points towards some kind of heroic journey. When one thinks hero, one thinks of someone who fights. But, the panic-filled pacifist makes the same point from a different
People yearn to exert themselves on others. When there is an aim in mind, a person finds himself on a quest. And, often, one can find others to join the quest.

Becker says, “Society almost everywhere provides codes for such self-aggrandizement, for the ability to boast, to humiliate, or just simply to outshine in quiet ways” (Ibid., 13). Society presents individuals “on the one hand with codes that allow people to compare their achievements and virtues so as to outshine rivals; on the other hand, by codes that support and protect tender feelings that prevent the undermining and deflation that can result from the clash of organismic ambitions” (Ibid., 14). Humans repeatedly devise ways to beat others: grabbing the bus seat from another rider, offering a sought-after bus seat to an injured bus rider, outwitting one’s boss, or choosing the right horse in a race (even a lucky guess counts as a win). Becker calls the games humans play trying to find “self-transcendence through culture” (Ibid., 5). Humans keep a mental score card of all the times they have won and they re-tell their stories to their friends who egg them on and pat them on the back. By engaging in cultural heroics, people are transferring their fear of death onto “the higher level of cultural perpetuity” (Ibid.).

In modern times, the hero’s journey links to earthly things; for instance the accumulation of wealth and items, a top banking job, or airline miles. Becker expresses the difference between contemporary times and primitive times by saying, “Primitive society was a formal organization for the apotheosis of man. Our own everyday rituals seem shallow precisely because they lack the cosmic connection. Instead of using one’s fellow man as a mirror to make one’s face shine, the primitive used the whole cosmos” (Ibid., 16). That means, in contemporary times, one acquires the newest electronic
gadget to gain social acceptability—to garner attention. One fights for the top job at a company precisely because it will cause envy in the hearts of some, and will garner positive attention from others. Attention from others is paramount.

It seems that separation is inevitable. Once humans take the fall in consciousness, then they begin their personal journey. They separate from God; they become individuated. They no longer see where God is; they only see the battleground in front of their eyes. But, because they felt connectedness once, they have an unconscious striving to find it again. Transference distorts how they see the world, and so they move towards people and things they hope will close the gap between them and another. One wants to stand out and achieve momentary glory. Then, once the glory wears off, one must start again and find the next battle. Everything is lacking. Furthermore, there never is enough because humans, through heroics, attempt to close the separation between them and the gods (or God). But, they do so through fraudulent means. Because to attempt to close the gap through what is worldly (human products, human accomplishments, relationships with other humans) means running in a closed circuit. It means living through absurd means. To keep looking for something missing in the same place one has always looked is absurd. However, if one’s society sanctions that path, and one finds others traversing the path, then at least everyone lives an absurd life together. To Becker, having the urge to be a hero, but attempting to satisfy that urge through society, is absurd. And, to live in an absurd culture (while not being aware of the absurdity) means conforming. To be in society, one must stay within the confines of the closed circuit. Becker says, “To live is to stick out, to go beyond safe limits; hence it is to court a danger, to be the locus of
possibility, of disaster for the whole group” (Ibid., 35). To point out the absurdity to others, to move away from the closed circuit, causes panic in others because they are afraid the courageous individual’s actions will cause them to die. They will confine, constrict, and distort anything different because to court possibility means leaving that which is safe. Therein lies the issue, safety means projecting one’s fears onto others; it means categorizing the world and placing one’s self in a safe category. However, the very act of seeking safety within that supposedly safe category generates danger—because people fight to maintain their own safety. Becker says, “[M]en are truly sorry creatures because they have made death conscious. They can see evil in anything that wounds them, causes ill health, or even deprives them of pleasure” (Ibid., 148).

**Guilt**

Most humans feel guilty. The presence of guilt, in many ways, keeps individuals from becoming full-blown sociopaths. It is an essential feeling when it compels people to (for instance) not murder, tell the truth, or only look at (not take) the money in the open cash register. Guilt that binds, that keeps one from action, has an entirely different function. In this way, guilt becomes a crutch—a type of shorthand for behavior. This kind of guilt constricts too much—and when it becomes an omnipresent character mechanism, it becomes the signature of the neurotic. Becker writes, “The child in his boundless desires for gratification can’t help feeling love for those who respond to him; at the same time, when they inevitably frustrate him for his own good, he can’t help feeling hate and destructive impulses toward them, which puts him in an impossible bind” (Ibid., 33). Thus, feeling guilty means feeling locked in an emotional bind. It is
important to distinguish between different types of guilt: the guilt felt as a mechanism of what one could call a conscience (Do not rape the lady.), the guilt a child feels after one fantasizes about spitting the brussel sprouts his mother just fed him (My mother made me do something I dislike, I have feelings of aggression towards her. Wait, she is a loving mother and is only trying to do something good for me, I feel terrible that I just had that feeling, now let me hug her.), and Kierkegaard’s type of guilt. Kierkegaard’s opinion about guilt aligns with his ideas on anxiety.

Anxiety is opportunity. The presence of anxiety is a physiological reaction to the presence of conflict or opposing forces. To Kierkegaard, it is indicative of synthesis found in humans. To a psychologist, for instance, it is a regressive phenomenon. It means adhering to childhood rules. The overlap, then, means guilt serves as a signpost for change. To Kierkegaard, guilt means possibility is present.

Becker feels, “[G]uilt is a reflection of the problem of acting out in the universe; only partly is it connected to the accident of birth and early experience. Guilt, as the existentialists put it, is the guilt of being itself” (Ibid., 58). In this statement, Becker means humans are guilty because they exist—they are guilty simply because they are human. He says that guilt “reflects the self conscious animal’s bafflement at having emerged from nature, at sticking out too much without knowing what for, at not being able to securely place himself in an eternal meaning system” (Ibid., 158). Thus, to him, humans are guilty because they come into self-consciousness (or self-awareness). They are guilty because they manage to hold dominion over other animals, and at times over the environment. They are guilty because they are the only beings capable of abstract
thinking. Yet, humans throw away their cosmic connection in order to forget the very fact that they are self-conscious. The bind lies in the fact that humans employ earthly means to forget their self-consciousness (as Becker says, by “using one’s fellow man as a mirror to make one’s face shine”) (Ibid., 16). Thus, individuals ignore the half that is capable of connecting to the greater cosmos. In addition, they build-up the part that separates themselves from that very cosmos. They throw away the very thing that makes them different to begin with—the fact that they are self-aware—that they are aware that they will die. They forget the fact that what makes them different is that they contain brains capable of understanding what death is—that they are not purely instinctual beings. In a way, this does not differ much from the child who eats his brussel sprouts but has aggressive feelings towards his mother and then feels guilty about his feelings. The child obeys arbitrary rules in order to receive protection from an unpredictable, unreliable source (hopefully not too unreliable). Because the parent rewards the child with care, the child continues to obey (though probably not all the time). The child then forgets he has any power whatsoever, and represses his urges in order to satisfy the parents. Older humans repress their more abstract urges in order to receive care from society. They do this in order to survive. Yet, as adults, the transactions become less straightforward. Anxiety becomes more diffuse. Guilt becomes more diffuse. Repressing urges becomes habitual. Then, the adult’s task becomes identifying when anxiety appears and why it appears. Becker writes, “One of the reasons guilt is so difficult to analyze is that it is itself ‘dumb.’ It is a feeling of being blocked, limited, transcended, without knowing why . . . This real guilt partly explains man’s willing
subordinacy to his culture; after all, the world of men is even more miraculous in its richness than the awesomeness of nature” (Ibid., 33).

Thus, humans are guilty about simply being humans. They leave behind childhood curiosity, learn to feel guilty, learn to suppress their urge to be different, and then become adults. Adults then become less and less aware of what they do in order to suppress their urges, and they become more and more focused on what others think. They become experts at following rules, and utilize a host of mechanisms (probably just different iterations of the same mechanisms they developed as children) to ignore mystery. They begin to fashion mystery through their own worldview; their inner symbolic structure begins to look like a pointillist painting (It has an appearance of being whole, but it really is fragmented). Along the way, adults become experts at pushing aside feelings of guilt and anxiety, but they grow older and closer to death. Since they have spent very little time reflecting on their condition, and they act in automatic ways, they ignore their decaying state until life either jolts them awake or until their bodies decay and death becomes harder to ignore. Often, after a jolt one simply works harder not to experience it again. As for a decaying body, modern medicine has given man many ways to ignore death.

All in all, guilt functions as a reminder that one is utilizing different techniques for the same purpose—ignoring possibility. A momentary flash of guilt (maybe presenting itself as doubt) means that the mind signals to the individual that there resides in them an opportunity to be different, to walk out of the closed circuit and stand on the other side of the street by one’s self. The presence of guilt means that creativity lurks
somewhere and that something mysterious is present. Mystery is creative. Mystery means something unexpected lurks. Anxiety and mystery work together.

To live authentically, to break down one’s character structure and emerge as an individual who walks toward freedom instead of staying in the bosom of culture, means engaging mystery. It means, first, understanding that mystery is present in every instance. It means being aware of that presence, and it means engaging that presence. It means breaking away from routine, and dealing with one’s transference issues. It means casting aside one’s neurotic habits and being creative with one’s life. Most importantly, it means forging an ongoing and evolving relationship with the unknown. That means no running back.
CHAPTER 4

AWARENESS

Becker’s primary thesis is that the driving force behind human behavior extends from the fact that humans have an awareness that they are doing to die. Unlike other animals, humans become aware of death (that they and others will die). They become aware at an early stage in their development. Because of this awareness, they employ various defense mechanisms in order to forget this fact. However, these defense mechanisms—which are necessary to a point—cause problems not only for the individual but on a societal scale. Human beings, in order to deny death, often find culturally sanctioned ways to ignore the part of them that is aware of their death. They employ a culturally sanctioned heroic system that, in modern times, is tied to human objectives. In more primitive times, group heroics were tied to more cosmic ideals—they were tied to things that were larger than the individual or the individual’s group. Now, people’s heroic objectives involve a quest to receive attention from other humans. They ignore the cosmic, the unknowable, the mysterious Other. Ignoring something, however, does not mean that it will go away. Life is filled with mystery—and death seems to be the most mysterious thing. Death, and images of death, loom large. Death really is everywhere. Modern society works to sanitize death; it works to hide all aspects of death and decay. One simply has to look in the aisles of a grocery store and see packages of meat with pictures of happy, cartoon cows (not bleeding cow carcass) peering up from the packaging. At no point does the concept of a larger animal (humans) consuming dead animals that humans have overpowered come into play when purchasing meat. This is
not an argument for vegetarianism, it is simply an example of how modern society continues to repress the reality of death’s omnipresence.

Becker claims that humans feel guilty about their god-like statuses on earth. The fact that they mostly have dominion over other animals and over the environment means that they have power. Thus, humans seem to be half god, half animal. And, earlier in life, they had no awareness that they were not gods. As babies, before the symbolization process begins, humans are gods. They live in an ambiguous state in which all their needs are met because they cry out for attention. At the same time, they are closer to animals because they have not begun to symbolize their world; they simply see motion and objects but they have not sorted out what these objects are. As they begin to develop the capacity for language and they begin to associate objects and words with feelings, the connections they make fade (meaning the object/feeling association begins to fade); but these early emotional associations do not disappear. And, as the child grows into an adult, the adult becomes an expert at repressing whatever new feelings arise. That means that as one grows older, one moves further and further away from those early, heady days of new experience. Repression, then, serves a functional role in allowing humans to participate in the world. It allows people to manufacture their personalities and interact with others. It allows them to live. Yet, how much repression influences the person marks the distinction between a so-called normal level of repression and one that constricts too much.

Regardless, at some point, humans walk around simply categorizing things in their mind. They rely on the schema they have created in order to make the world a more
predictable place. They, hilariously, behave like children (on autopilot) but lack the inquisitiveness and strong feelings children have. Thus, their character-structure becomes a sort of flow chart: experience new stimuli, categorize it with something familiar, quickly act, and repeat the process interminably. Becker calls this type of person, which is most people, the automatic culture man. He behaves automatically because he acts without thinking; he walks around unaware. However, if he took a moment to recognize the mental space between when he experiences something new and the split second later when he categorizes the situation (for example, a person yells at me means I automatically yell back) he would experience a moment of autonomy. He would taste freedom. In the space between the stimulus and between the automatic reaction lies the possibility for change—the possibility to become smarter.

Becker categorizes the depressive neurotic as someone who is stupid; he characterizes a person burdened by guilt stupid as well (Becker 1973, 78). The depressive neurotic and the guilt-ridden man are both stupid because they refuse to expand their minds. They literally lay down the same mental tracks repetitively. They do not stimulate their minds; they do not appreciate the expanse of their minds. They do not appreciate possibility. Under the guise of comfort and safety, they give up their intelligence. Humans like this are probably the smartest they will ever be as children—when they are open to new experience and they court new situations. If they learn to continue to be flexible, to expand their minds, then they may partially escape the bind of the human condition. If they decide the trade-off for safety and comfort (first in the parents’ hands, which is excusable for children, then in society’s hands, which is less
excusable since adults have choices) is worth an intellectual dumbing down, then they are
signing a contract without reading it. Humans’ contract with society means that they
abrogate their own intelligence, their own creativity, for protection and recognition. That
means they repress the uniqueness of their own inner symbolic identity (their individual
worldview) for the rigid rules of society. Humans forget, by behaving this way, they
simply are trading mystery for mystery because relationships and governments are also
impermanent. Yet, through transference reactions, humans can con themselves into
believing in the permanence of their relationships. Again, this is a form of rigid thinking.
People fix the world into permanent structures in order to avoid mystery.

Men, then, play god by attempting to structure that which is mysterious. This
includes death. Men attempt to symbolize death without understanding what they are
doing. Yet, death means mystery. Humans, unlike animals, have an awareness of
mystery. This awareness of mystery manifests itself in anxiety.

The Mystery of Anxiety

Anxiety is mysterious. It appears without notice. It is a physiological reaction
based on mental processes. Anxiety appears out of nowhere, and often one does not
know why one feels anxious. In fear, a cause and effect reaction exists. Anxiety is
diffuse and largely uncontrollable. Somehow, it connects with one’s worldview.
Whenever tension is present, anxiety develops. However, it is hard to pinpoint from
where exactly the tension comes. Kierkegaard feels that anxiety is the product of human
synthesis, when man falls from an ambiguous state into a synthesized state tension is
born. Psychologists like Rollo May believe that there is a connection in emotional and
cognitive development that corresponds to Kierkegaard’s utilization of the Adam myth: some time in early childhood humans make the leap from a world of cause and effect reactions to a world that becomes symbolized and structured. Linguists say this is about the time when human beings begin to develop their language abilities. Thus, the world develops from a haze (pure emotions) to a recognition of symbols. And, behind each symbol a corresponding emotion hides.

In the *Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard discusses the concept of the connection between emotions and concepts (the process of symbolization):

> The fact that science, fully as much as poetry and art, assumes a mood both on the part of the producer and on the part of the recipient, that an error in modulation is just as disturbing as an error in exposition of thought, has been entirely forgotten in our age, when people have altogether forgotten the nature of inwardness and appropriation in their job over all the glory they believed they possessed. (Kierkegaard 1970, 13)

> It is the touchstone of creativity to acknowledge the presence of mystery. Sin means something personal. The inner symbolic structure is personal. It is unique.

Becker presents the idea that modern individuals see sin as a deviation from a standard of norms, as breaking codes of law, or as committing unclean acts (Becker 1975, 88). This is a deviation from what sin meant in primitive times. Sin in primitive times, he says, meant separation (Ibid.). Sin meant a breaking away from God; it meant viewing one’s self as a god, viewing one’s self as the master of one’s life (Ibid.). In a way, sin as separation means pitting one’s self in competition with God. To behave this way is to will life to fit a particular vision one has concocted. Thus, to define sin as something that is not clean, that is not proper, means repressing the meaning behind sin. It means trying
to structure sin to fit into an intellectual category; but by doing this one denies sin’s origin (Ibid.). Sin means that one has separated from God as Adam and Eve did. It means trying to close that separation not by looking to God (or to mystery), but by engaging in power plays. Becker says, “We have become completely secular. Accordingly, we no longer have any problem with sin, since there is nothing to be separated from. Everything is here, in one’s possessions, in his body” (Ibid.). The inner symbolic structure is mysterious, yet humans attempt to separate from it. Humans attempt to concretize ineffable concepts; they attempt to control mystery. Through this attempt to control, humans separate themselves. Sin, thus, could be seen as a denial of God.

Becker also discusses the link between sin and neurosis. He says that, through Kierkegaard’s discussion of sin, one can say that neurosis indicates blockage; to be neurotic means to be focused on a particular way of being. It means denying possibility. God is possibility; human acting as gods is limitation. Becker writes, “Neurosis . . . reflects the incapacity of the individual to heroically transcend himself; when he tries in one way or another, it is plain (Ibid., 158). To be neurotic means to look for salvation within one’s hero system. This is the opposite of faith, this is will. Man attempts to will life through dominance. Faith means having an open attitude; neurosis means living through strategizing. Faith means opening one’s self up to possibility. Faith means playing with mystery. It means having an awareness of one’s skewed vision and it means residing within the space between categories. It means understanding that one’s inner self and one’s outer self contradict one another. And, this contradiction creates anxiety.
Anxiety resides in the space in between the unconscious and personality. It is diffuse and uncontrollable. Marino writes that in the *Concept of Dread*, “anxiety is likened to dizziness” (Marino 1998, 308). Anxiety means the presence of opportunity. It is not something that should be quieted or repressed; one should take notice when anxiety appears.

**Faith**

Faith is an antidote to the denial of death. One must have faith and engage mystery; and then once one engages mystery one must continue to have faith and continue to engage mystery. Faith and mystery fuel one another. Having faith means having a flexible attitude. Moreover, one notes that freedom lies within the individual, and that freedom comes from within one’s self, not from others. Freedom means acknowledging a connection to all kinds of mystery, but it also extends from having an awareness of the human condition. The reason faith is the antidote to the denial of death, is that the denial of death manifests itself as a denial of life. The two concepts work with one another. When one begins to open up life, the unpredictability of it, one begins to understand the mystery in life. With an engagement of mystery in life, one begins to lives less rigidly, and old patterns begin to fall away. Just as a denial of death results in a denial of life, learning to live creatively means learning to embrace mystery—it means taking unexpected turns in life. This, in a way, is a way of facing death, because something is dying—one’s old personality. And, it is a process that must be continuous; it is a dynamic process. Becker’s term “cosmic heroism” means having a connection to something larger than one’s self or others. It means destroying one’s culturally
constructed self, it is a lifelong project. One has to learn what one’s automatic behaviors are and then work to be rid of them. Then, one becomes more aware and pays attention to moments when there is an opportunity to change. This means re-working one’s reactions to things, facing each new experience with an attitude of creativity—it means not having rules of behavior, or making quick and automatic judgments. This means being cognizant of moments when anxiety presents itself and then doing something other than the automatic solution (which means choosing the solution that confronts the anxiety rather than pushes it aside).

The answer to beginning to live an authentic life lies in awareness; it starts with being observant of one’s immediate reactions. It also means acknowledging the reality of the human condition: it means acknowledging that you will die. In addition, it means casting aside any attempts to build an immortality project. For example, if one aims to write a book in order to achieve fame, the problem does not lie in writing a book. It also does not lie in gaining fame. If one writes a book because doing so is an act of faith, not an act of human calculation (for fame), and the act of faith results in fame, then one acted from a place of creativity and authenticity. If one schemes to write a famous book, then from the onset the project fails because the fame one achieves is of an empty sort. The person who acts from a personal place, from a place to gain attention, will inevitably feel the need to keep looking for new ways to gain acceptance. An act of faith means doing something for the sake of the project. It means channeling one’s creativity and utilizing it to engage in something meaningful. It means, in a way, there is no inherent meaning to the project—there is no real purpose. To assign a purpose to it would mean categorizing
it. To categorize something is a product of restricted human thought. This means it
closes off the experience from possibility. But, Becker writes:

> [E]ven the highest, most individuated creative type can only manage
> autonomy to some extent. The fact is that men cannot and do not stand
> on their own powers; therefore they cannot make death ‘their own.’
> (Becker 1975, 162)

Humans cannot completely cast off all their character defenses; some are essential
for survival. Moreover, people inevitably will regress because of the natural need to feel
safe at times. In a sense, humans must develop an approach to life; they must develop an
overarching theme of receptivity and flexibility. One needs to loosen one’s grip on life.
One needs to stop controlling behaviors (recognizing which events trigger the need to
feel controlling). Moreover, one needs to notice when anxiety arises, and then realize
that anxiety and fear are not synonymous. Anxiety means opportunity is present; fear
means danger is present. Humans often equate and confuse the two.

Becker connects religion and what he calls unrepression. He says, “Religion as
unrepression would reveal both truths about man: his wormlikeness and his godlikeness.
Men deny both in order to live tranquilly in the world” (Ibid., 163). He says one must
“overcome the fear of self-knowledge . . . self-knowledge is the hardest human task
because it risks revealing to the person how his self esteem was built . . . on the power of
others in order to deny his creatureliness” (Ibid.).

Becker maintains that for God “everything is possible” (Ibid.). Everything is not
possible for humans; but it is possible to hand over one’s personal fight to something
greater than one’s self. He says:
Remember the awesome fascination of St. Francis with the revelations of the everyday world—a bird, a flower. It also meant unafraidness of one’s death because of the incomparable majesty of God . . . . If we were not fear-stricken animals who repressed awareness of ourselves and our world, then we would live in peace an unafraid of death. (Ibid)

God

In a way, a person could look at God as a parent. This analogy does commit an error, because one is attaching a human concept to something that is beyond human cognition. But, an analogy is helpful. God as an ever-present parent means that one could learn to walk alone by handing over one’s power, not to a human transference object, but to mystery. The mark of a “good enough parent” is one who is there but not there (Winnicott 1982, 10). This is a parent who permits his child to wander and explore in the child’s creative space. The child feels the presence of the parent, but is not restricted by it (or by feelings such as separation-anxiety, guilt, or insufficiency). In a way, it would be best for the child to forget that he is accompanied by someone, and at the same time forget that he is alone, so that he could be free to explore his curiosity. This develops a spirit of adventurousness in life; and it is an environment that adults could adopt. As an adult, one must learn to be alone. Yet, if one begins to believe in the omnipresence of something outside of one’s self, something that is there but not there, one can begin to feel secure enough to create and re-shape the world. Becker mentions St. Francis and his awe when looking at flowers. In order to feel awe one must forget one’s self, one must have a childlike attitude—this evokes Kierkegaard’s description of innocence. Adults need to develop their ability to be alone, but not feel loneliness. They need to remain with feelings of anxiety when there are opportunities to embark on their
own and experience something new. Along the same lines, adults must be aware that life provides new opportunities continuously. Old routine is only old routine in one’s mind. To children, everything is possible for their parents (their parents are powerful beings). As Becker said, everything is possible for God. This type of possibility is beyond the human mental construct of God; it is also beyond participation in many kinds of organized religion—especially types which advocate conformity and blind devotion. If humans are born feeling they are gods, then realize they are dependent beings (actually dependent to parents and later emotionally dependent to transference figures), perhaps the subsequent stage is to realize that one is neither.

One is not dependent on individuals; but one is not a god (or a hero). As Kierkegaard says, one is a synthesis. One must not act like God; but one must not be driven by what is easy (by instinct alone). If humans can embrace both sides of their personality—the childlike awestruck side and the independent side—then they will be able to experience moments of authenticity. Authenticity means a forgetting of one’s self, forgetting the constructs of character and being something other than one’s self. It means re-birth. Again, when one looks at loneliness as a by-product of feeling disconnected (of being separate from) and one connects the notion of sin to loneliness; then one finds that a new type of merger with mystery is the answer. Unfortunately, a re-merger is not possible—one cannot find it with another human, one cannot find it through an inanimate object, and one certainly cannot find it accumulating an abstract human construct like money. There is no re-entering the womb for humans. The umbilical cord, once cut, is cut. Once Adam fell, there was no re-entry into the Garden of Eden.
Connectedness cannot be found, for more than a fleeting moment, in the eyes of one’s spouse. No amount of hugging can permanently close the void of separateness because hugs end, and eye contact ends, and conversations end. People connect the fear of death to a fear of being alone. Death is the ultimate end (as far as humans know). A preoccupation with it may indicate some sort of missing element in one’s life. An obsession with death could simply be a defense mechanism for life.

Some psychiatrists (and Becker at certain points) theorize that the closest one gets to forgetting one’s lonely condition is in moments of creating (Epstein 2007, Winnicott 1982). One must enter a zone of safety in which feelings of loneliness, and awareness of one’s body and mind (for example awareness of the pain in one’s hands, errands one must run later) recedes. One’s environment becomes a haze, and one forgets. One’s mind cannot keep wandering to the temperature of the room; one must step outside of one’s mind—a chattering mind is anathema to the creative process. To create means to develop something new, something original. Kierkegaard feels one can elongate those moments when one forgets one’s self (for instance the feeling one gets when producing an original work of art) and experience them in life. His goal is to live a life full of creativity. The authentic artist, one could call him an artistic genius, creates something new. While the work, itself, may be original, what makes it original is that it is representative of the artist’s worldview. Simply copying, or slightly modifying, other works of art does not constitute creativity—it is copying (sometimes copying can be skillful, but it is copying nevertheless). Thus, an artistic genius utilizes his inner symbolic identity to re-shape the world. The analogy between artistic genius and one
who is creative in life does become flimsier at some point. One notes that some artists simply have the gift to create. To be creative in life takes a bit of work.

The overwhelming majority of people cannot easily identify their character defenses. Transference issues seem to be particularly tricky because transference is a well-hidden phenomenon. Character defenses become such an ingrained part of the person’s character structure that analyzing them seems to be a painstaking and never-ending process. It is as if one is running in the woods, perhaps momentarily finding a clearing, then is back in the thick of the woods again. If one understands what Becker is saying, the point may be to look at the forest in a different way (and to keep looking at it in different ways—a continuous process is important). A neurotic person would stay fixed in a closed-circuit, perhaps in just a small part of the forest. A creative person ventures out, and works through the anxiety. An authentic (and creative) person would be like St. Francis, noting the wonder along the way; but he would not spend too much time staring at flowers, he needs to keep experiencing new things. He needs to keep walking through the woods. One simply cannot leave it all up to God. While this is possibly a good mental fix in certain situations (perhaps when it is absolutely necessary to cede control), leaving everything up to God presents certain problems. At some point, humans must work. They must sit down to write the novel. God cannot physically write a novel for a novelist.

Life is mysterious; things do seem to appear or resolve themselves magically. Yet, humans need to take an active role. If one accepts Kierkegaard’s notion that anxiety means that opportunity is present, then one also notes that Kierkegaard feels action is
necessary too. Inaction would be behaving the way one always did (an automatic behavior). When one behaves automatically, one is shut-up (as a function of repression). Becker’s answer is unrepression as religion. To become “unrepressed” means actively working to be aware of one’s hidden symbols, to uproot them, and then change. Change does not come from a place of passivity. Action is required. Thus, one must develop an attitude of faith—to feel faith is not enough.

**Types of Faith**

Kierkegaard’s opinion on faith does present a type of active faith. In *Fear and Trembling*, he utilizes the story of Abraham and Isaac: God instructs Abraham to take his son, Isaac, to the top of Mount Moriah and sacrifice him. Abraham walks up the mountain, and prepares to kill Isaac, but at the last moment an angel sent by God stops him. After Isaac is saved, Abraham and Isaac walk down the mountain together and life goes on for them. The movement of Abraham and Isaac going up the mountain and down the mountain is important. Kierkegaard specifically uses the upward and downward movement as indicative of what he calls “double movement” (Carlisle 2006, 122). To him, Abraham’s moving up the mountain signifies an act of resignation (a necessary precursor to faith, but the action is not enough to be a what Kierkegaard calls a knight of faith). This upward movement is a single movement. Abraham walks up the mountain knowing this could be the last time he sees his son; it also could be the last time he is morally clean because by killing his son he will be committing murder. This act of resignation, Kierkegaard says, is an act of resignation because Abraham’s faith in God is why he goes up the mountain instead of staying home. It is inactive faith because
Abraham makes the decision to abide in God’s wishes, but he is doing so merely through obedience, not through confrontation. It is better than an automatic decision because faith is involved; Abraham is willing to give up his son for faith. However, Abraham is not acting as a knight of faith because Abraham metaphorically moves away from the world by going up the mountain. Carlisle writes, “Johannes de silentio [Kierkegaard’s pseudonym in Fear and Trembling] describes faith as double movement: first the world is renounced and then it is received back again. This ‘double movement’ is represented by Abraham’s journey out to Mount Moriah, but then home again to his family life” (Ibid.). A knight of faith returns to his community and participates in his community. He does not live in isolation; he engages others and shares the information he gained from embarking on a journey of faith. He does not hoard what he has learned—perhaps a lesson about the absurdity of life—he shares his unique lesson with others. He shares his unique gift; the gift God has given him.

To Kierkegaard, Abraham’s unquestioning faith is not representative of the highest level of faith (Ibid., 111). Carlisle writes, Fear and Trembling “presents ideas that remain central to his entire authorship: the inwardness of faith, the contradictory nature of God, the difficulty of being authentically religious, the significance of repetition, the importance of movement, the claim of religion to be a sphere beyond both rationality and ethics” (Ibid., 110). Faith is personal, it cannot be found through others, or through the community (Ibid.). It is beyond rational thought, it is not the product of reason but of personal experience. Becker also warns against the idea of an easy faith. He states:
[T]he contradictions of man’s earthly situations cannot be resolved by easy belief or by reflexively relaying the meaning of it to God . . . . The ideal critique of faith must always be whether it embodies within itself the fundamental contradictions of the human paradox and yet is able to support them without fanaticism, sadism, and narcissism, but with openness and trust. (Becker 1971, 198)

Humans measure themselves against other humans. Often there is someone worse off, or someone whom one would strive to be like, but to compare one’s self to others is not useful; comparison to others and imitating others is suggestive of false heroics. Carlisle says, “Out in the world, we present a certain public self and we judge others according to how they appear but in relation to God we become transparent—and it is only in this relationship that we are seen as we really are, and can truly express ourselves” (Carlisle 2006, 118). Judging one’s self against God leans closer to Becker’s suggestion to pursue cosmic heroism, not human heroism. Becker writes, of the early church, “Each individual was a sacred center, they said, a free and pure spirit who cannot be measured by a material yard stick; by saying that each individual had a divine soul they meant to say that he was not reduced to earthly measures” (Becker 1971, 182). Each individual must cede earthly measures and earthly controls (earthly heroic journeys or battles). One must also cede connectedness to earthly accomplishments.

George Pattison says the ordinary type of anxiety is connected to a human’s predisposition to have anxiety about the next day (Pattison 2010, 151). He says that anxiety about the next day means worrying about earthly things (such as whether one will have money to pay a bill the next day)—which would be akin to worrying about things within finitude (earthly things). Of course, to function, people do need to plan and go through the steps of living. But, there lies a difference in attitude. Having a
preoccupation with earthly ventures means being led by a type of anxiety that is contrary to Kierkegaard’s type. One could call this type of anxiety ‘normal human anxiety.’ This kind of anxiety constricts humans and is closer to fear than to Kierkegaard’s type of anxiety. If one were to extract only the guilt component of Kierkegaard’s type of anxiety, one could understand it to be an anxiety that restricts. One could also say that it is neurotic anxiety, especially if it is anxiety that is not particularly traceable to a particular event (a general fear that one cannot pay one’s bills one day—this kind of anxiety would be tied to fortune telling). In this case, utilizing Kierkegaard’s type of anxiety would mean changing an overall attitude towards life; it would mean re-working one’s entire belief system. The process could begin with changing particular behaviors; but the aim is more macro than micro. The aim of the process is to develop a general attitude of hope and flexibility.

Kierkegaard’s knight of resignation, though, does not participate in the world. This would be the kind of action-free faith. On the other hand, Kierkegaard’s knight of faith “returns to the world and lives within it happily, sustained by the belief that his life is blessed because it is a gift from God” (Carlisle 2006, 121). Pattison says, Kierkegaard’s “discourses on the gift focus strongly on the human being who accepts or who is striving (or perhaps struggling) to accept their life as a gift” (Pattison 2010, xxi).

Walter Lowrie writes, Faith “is here depicted as a major human passion, affecting daily life at every point, its content being the essential reality of the individual’s existence” (Lowrie 1952, xxi). Kierkegaard says, “Faith is the highest passion in man. There are perhaps many in every generation who do not even reach it, but no one gets
further” (Kierkegaard 1962, 191). Lowrie says, “Kierkegaard [in *Fear and Trembling*]
appears here as the ‘knight of infinite resignation,’ living in the expectation of attaining a
higher order of chivalry, becoming a ‘knight of faith’—of the faith that with God all
things are possible” (Lowrie 1962, 255). Thus, Abraham’s act of faith (bringing his son
Isaac to the top of the mountain and preparing to kill him) is not the final position on a
faith scale, it is the “last position anterior to faith, without which no real faith is possible”
(Ibid., 266).

Kierkegaard writes:

But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too soon nor too late. He
mounted the ass, he rode slowly along the way. All that time he
believed—he believed that God would not require Isaac of him,
whereas he was willing nevertheless to sacrifice him if it was required.
He believed by virtue of the absurd, for there could be no question of
human calculation, and it was indeed the absurd that God who required
it of him should the next instant recall the requirement. (Kierkegaard
1952, 47)

Here, Kierkegaard uses the term absurd to show unpredictability. Absurdity means that
there is no real meaning behind the initial request, according to human calculation
(meaning there was no real purpose behind the act—no cause and effect in practical
measures—it is not as if God told Abraham he would reward him or punish him if he did
or did not kill Isaac), and that as absurd as the first order was, it was also absurd that the
order would be suddenly rescinded.

One could say that Abraham’s first act was based on Abraham’s hope that God
would stop the killing at the last minute; but one could imagine that Abraham would not
be completely devoid of apprehension or anxiety. Regardless, Abraham moved forward
through his anxiety; upon walking down the mountain, he returns to his life a changed
person because he saw the other side of his act of faith. He returns to the earth a changed
person because of his faith, but he also saw that God’s gift was through the request of the
killing and the stopping of the killing. Abraham had to experience the event in it entirety.

Kierkegaard says:

Generally people are of the opinion that what faith produces is not a
work of art, that it is a coarse and common work, only for the most
clumsy natures; but in fact this is far from the truth. The dialectic of
faith is the finest and most remarkable of all; it possesses an elevation,
of which indeed I can form a conception, but nothing more. (Ibid., 49)

Faith must be rooted in action. Carlisle says, “For Kierkegaard, to be free means
to be capable of making a decision and to act upon it” (Carlisle 2006, 121). Abraham
decides to take Isaac up the mountain, and he does. He decides to prepare to kill Isaac,
and then God suddenly stops him. Then, Abraham and Isaac return to their lives; but
Abraham now has experienced faith in action. Kierkegaard says, “For he who strove
with the world became great by overcoming the world, but he who strove with God
became greater than them all” (Kierkegaard 1952, 19).

Becker says:

And this is the genius of the religious genius: that he becomes a
masochist to the world from a position of strength and by choice. He
disperses the center of his personality by shedding his character armor,
but this is only an apparent dispersal, not a real one: it is only a
dispersal of one’s center in the world. His secret is that he re-centers
himself beyond the world, by making the meaning of life dependent on
the ultimate source of meaning, not on the worldly one. (Becker1969,
97)

Abraham, by taking his son up the mountain, casts off various elements of his
personality when he does so: law-abiding citizen, sane person, good husband, and good
father. The “meaning behind the myth” lies in the fact that Abraham does not follow his
old rules of personality, he strikes down all remnants of what he believes he is (his character armor) when he decides to act on faith and prepares to kill his son (Kierkegaard 1957, 42). His personal faith in God, and his belief in his personal relationship with God, changed him. As Kierkegaard says, Abraham experienced “double action”; he turns his back on what he knows (do not kill anyone, especially not your son), acts on faith, and is rewarded by having his faith validated. Instead of becoming a religions recluse, he returns to exist with others in his community—but not as he did before. Now, when he returns, he is a knight of faith. A knight of faith is flexible in attitude and is receptive to whatever God offers; like Abraham he develops an ongoing and personal relationship with something larger than himself. He does not attempt to control the world through planning and scheming; he is ready to receive what life offers as gifts from God. He does not anticipate what God will send, but he remains open. This is the creative attitude at its best. Becker claims “Finally, as Kierkegaard . . . taught us, a man who is truly potentially free must reach for a self-transcendent divine object; and if he is a free man he will develop an intensely personal relationship to such an object—it will not be the God of his fathers, uncritically and mechanically worshipped” (Becker 1968, 270). Becoming a knight of faith is a personal process; because it involves creativity and flexibility, there is no set pattern for it. It is also is not something one can force, one cannot plan acts of faith, it involves letting go and engaging mystery. Kierkegaard writes, “A man can become a tragic hero by his own powers—but not a knight of faith” (Kierkegaard 1962, 100).
Conclusion

The denial of death would not exist without a denial of life. Because death can exemplify re-birth, then one can utilize that knowledge to recreate one’s life. Death means destruction; it means absence. It means mystery. Things appear and disappear in life. The denial of these appearances and disappearances results in repression. Repression, however, plays a role in allowing humans to live decisively. One could call repression functional, if it does not lead to unhealthy ways of living.

Death paradoxically provides people with the hope that they can be re-born at any and every moment. Francis J. Ambrosio calls this “the freedom always to begin anew after each humiliation or failure” (Ambrosio 2009, Lec. 34). He calls death “the most basic form of humiliation” (Ibid.) Embarking on a journey of self-knowledge requires faith. The journey itself is humiliating because when humans act without safe guards they inevitably court and experience humiliation. Because repression conveniently provides humans with a way to ignore their reality and live comfortably, to attempt to root out unhealthy repression and embarking on a journey with an unclear outcome (a journey fueled by faith) is absurd.

Life provides humans with infinite possibilities to awaken—to emerge from under the shelter of their character defenses. Each time they engage possibility, something dies (for example, part of their old belief system). Death also occurs when an individual re-fashions his worldview. When humans encounter moments of possibility, a choice presents itself: deny the knowledge (repress it) or experience a more authentic way of existing. Not matter what the individual chooses, the choice is the individual’s. The
presence of the choice (whether taken or not) provides hope. Humans have the choice whether to venture out and risk humiliation. Once individuals realize that humiliation does not necessarily mean annihilation, that mystery actually presents possibility (freedom), then humans realize that they are always free. They realize they are limited (finite) beings, but that they exist within infinity. They are always free to choose because life is never fixed—the acknowledgement of the presence of infinity means the acknowledgement that an infinite number of choices are possible. Humans can choose to engage mystery; they can choose to stay repressed. If they choose to engage mystery, then they live expansive, not constricted, lives. An expansive life, full of opportunity and choice, is a hopeful life. A hopeful life extends from awareness. To be aware, to live aware, is to be different. People who choose to live differently live unique lives—they stand out. Because they are different, and recognize their ability to choose, they are powerful. If they are aware that they are free, that they are free to make choices, then they must be aware that their choices affect others.

As God gives man gifts, a knight of faith gives his own gift (Becker 1973, 258). A knight of faith has undertaken a journey that most individuals refuse to undertake. He experiences a call to act on his faith, he acts on his faith by going on a journey of faith (thereby becoming a knight of infinite resignation), and he then returns to his community a changed man (a knight of faith). His journey is his own; but while on the journey he acquires new information. When he returns to his community, his gift would be sharing his information. He would be sharing whatever knowledge he amassed on his journey. This could be sharing a work of creativity, providing a way to diminish human suffering,
or simply exemplifying a way of living that encourages others to undergo their own journeys. The knight of faith becomes a representative of faith. Becker says, “The knight of faith, then, represents what we might call an ideal of mental health, the continuing openness of life out of the death throes of dread” (Ibid.). He stands out because he is courageous, but he is authentically courageous. He is creatively courageous.

Death in isolation is a vortex. It means nothing; it would be all-consuming and would mean utter annihilation. Death can only become meaningful when coupled with life. Death can only exist with life. Humans die, but before they die they must live. Living in isolation means living in a vortex. It means being overwhelmed; it means being dead. In order to live meaningful existences, humans need to engage other humans. Yet, one cannot meaningfully engage other humans without becoming more self-aware, without embarking on a journey of self-awareness. Functioning under the fog of repression mean seeing others as replicas of the past. One must see others as wholly new beings in order to live a creative life. Thus, humans have a responsibility to acknowledge the same right in others; the same freedom that they have, other humans have. To live free lives means never infringing on the freedom of others.


