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## The Social and Economic Effects of Mortality Saliency in Modern Americans

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# The Social and Economic Effects of Mortality Salience in Modern Americans

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Thank you.

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## Abstract

A study of the effects of the awareness of personal mortality, *The Social and Economic Effects of Mortality Salience on Modern Americans* is an exploration of the subtle effects of the humanity's unique awareness of our own imminent deaths. Drawing from a multidisciplinary selection of philosophers, political thinkers, psychologists, and sociologists the work delves into specific examples such as survivalist cultural, the ghettoization of the elderly, religiosity and capitalism using the idea of a (conscious and subconscious) death motivator to attempt to answer the question of why it appears as though a meaningful life is so much further away today, despite advances in technology and increasing life spans. Broken up into sections, the author discusses the Modern American's relationship with death and juxtaposes that relationship with the known and documented effects of mortality salience via the work of Ernest Becker, Sheldon Solomon and their contemporaries. A society's relationship with death defines consciousness and perception of time and reality, meaning that a change in the Modern American's relationship with death would impact broad social change and could be the key in creating a culture that is sustainable, both environmentally and economically and one where a meaningful existence is the norm.

Brian Saxton

## The Social and Economic Effects of Mortality Salience on Modern Americans

*In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there was once a star on which clever animals invented knowledge...After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die...how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist, and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened.*

*-Friedrich Nietzsche, from On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*

This paper is about Death. Death is the inevitable bookend to life. Its universality is intrinsically linked to our understanding of time and the way we react to a constant barrage of stimuli not just physically and emotionally, but individually and as a group as well. The following will begin a discussion on the link between inevitable death and human interaction with the world. More specifically we will ask *in what ways does the awareness of inevitable death (mortality salience) affect the modern American?*

So let's talk about death. Human beings, like other living creatures, have a natural will to live. However, human beings are unique in that they are consciously aware of their own mortality. This awareness is an obvious source of anxiety for humankind. Each and every one of us has at some time considered the question of what will become of our consciousness *post mortem*, and the natural response is to push those thoughts away and as Bob Dylan says, "keep on keepin' on." In secular science this avoidance of death-thought anxiety is often referred to as a driving force behind religion.

Indeed it has been said that religion is a way of discussing death without directly confronting it. "At the prospect of impending death, people are apt to be chilly, cold, lonely, scared because it's an unknown...The world is full of threats...There are all sorts of things that scare you, but beyond every monster, is death," says Alan Watts. Widely regarded as one of the Western world's most gifted teachers (translators) of Eastern Mysticism, Watts describes death as a natural dissolution into nothingness. If described as the absence of all that we see before us, death is no different from that which is behind our eyes<sup>1</sup>. Death is inevitable, and should not be feared, Watts says, though in reality our imminent end is very much is feared.

With these teachings in mind it should come as no surprise that Watts held a large following in San Francisco's 1960's counterculture movement. The 60's were a time of changing attitudes towards social structures and self awareness. In many ways it was the beginning of American individualism, urged on after a long World War through advertising, suburbanization, a larger and more solid middle class, and a little invention called the television. In the United States this coincides with the beginning of a change in the way society dealt with death and defined what would come to be commonly thought of as a meaningful existence.

What this meant for Watts was a huge increase in the number of people arriving at his home, a dilapidated ferry boat named *Vallejo*, moored in the Sausalito area of greater San Francisco.

People who wanted to be his disciples or to have their problem straightened out by him turned up unannounced at the *Vallejo* or insisted on telephoning him at all hours of the day and night. There was a woman who came and knelt at his feet on one occasion while he was dining out at a San Francisco restaurant. As a man who seemed to have answers, to know something others didn't, he drew the lost, the worried, the depressed

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from The Essence of Alan Watts, Vol. 4: "Death" by Alan Watts. <http://troublewithhammers.blogspot.com/2012/06/alan-watts-on-death.html>. Accessed 10/28/13.

and the seeking like a magnet<sup>2</sup>.

However, this paper is not about Alan Watts, it is about death and how the question of death, the fear of death, can create such an attraction around someone who may have answers. Watt's phenomenal attraction can undoubtedly be attributed in part to his charisma, though the drive or need to find the "answers" that sages like Watts seem to possess is a symptom of something larger: If religion is a way of discussing death without directly confronting it, then *where does the discussion turn in a society when religion begins to disappear?* Furthermore, in a society so heavily based on individual achievement, where does the individual turn for answers to the most universal questions of humanity? More specifically, for our own discussion, what are the uniquely American ways of dealing with imminent mortality and how have they been affected by the dawning of the digital age?

That is not to say that Americans, as a culture group, have a heightened awareness of their own mortality *per se*, nor is it a suggestion that Americans live in a neurotic and morbid state and are unable to shake a constantly badgering conscious awareness of impending personal doom. If post-religious society sees death as a form of nothingness following the collapse of consciousness then we can begin to see ways in which our increasingly technocratic society has sought to eliminate nothingness.

Recently, while eating in a restaurant, I noticed an entire family of four all staring at their respective cell phones. There was no discussion as they waited for their food, but there was also no idling thought either. What is the need for this distraction? What is it about idle time that makes us so anxious? If we can view moments of idle thought as a brief period of self awareness, in which all distractions are cast aside and the finite nature of our physical existence makes itself known, even if indirectly, it is possible to view this simple habit as a repression of mortality awareness.

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<sup>2</sup> Furlong, Monica. *Zen Effects: The life of Alan Watts*. 1986. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. Pg 156 & 172-176.



If the word repression conjures up a Freudian image in your mind, you're on the right track, but don't run to the hills just yet. Though the work of Freud is nonetheless important to our cause, it is the post-freudian thinker, Ernest Becker, who will lay the foundation. Becker reexamines Freud's psychoanalytic work on repression with an existentialist/darwinian approach. He argues that Freud's research on human motives was fundamentally correct though his over-emphasis on sexuality, the dogma through which Freud is filtered today, missed the point. The Oedipal complex and anality that Freud so "doggedly" held to were merely a symptom of something more deeply ingrained in humanity<sup>3</sup>. That is the instinctual fear of death, or more precisely, that the fear of death is an "expression of the instinct of self preservation<sup>4</sup>." The flip side to the coin, as it were. Human beings, like other animals have an instinctive will to live; however, we are unique in our conscious awareness of our own mortality. More importantly Becker stressed the duality of humanity: that we are "out of nature and hopelessly in it...half animal and half symbolic<sup>5</sup>." Estranged as we are from our animal side we have a constant reminder in our natural mortality.

Becker argued that the awareness of human beings to their own mortality has profound effects on the way in which we live our lives. The prevalence of this awareness, known today as "mortality salience," can cause anxiety that manifests itself in both visible and more subversive ways. For example, a middle aged man concerned with age may take active measures to feel younger which may manifest themselves as an increase in exercise, a new car or wardrobe, or a trip skydiving. Of course we all know this as the classic "mid-life crisis," but it can also be seen as an effect of a heightened mortality salience. The study of mortality salience came about as part of the larger Terror Management Theory

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<sup>3</sup> Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. Free Press Paperbacks. Simon and Schuster. New York. 1972. Pg 30-34.

<sup>4</sup> Becker 16

<sup>5</sup> Becker 26

and the modern study of the work started by Dr. Becker. Terror management theory (TMT) posits that people fight off feelings of anxiety caused by their own mortality salience by adhering to their cultural worldviews<sup>6</sup>. There are broad implications in creating a sort of foundational yet subconscious death motive. For one thing, the percentage of our actions that are a form of Terror Management, or a Distal Death Defense (DDD)<sup>7</sup>, is open to interpretation. A broad definition may include just about every non-functionary action. Going to work in the morning may not seem like a DDD but it could be construed in that direction. While the actual boundaries of TMT are not finalized it is safe to say that acknowledging our limited time does have an impact on decision making, though not in a way that requires contemplation if the DDD is successfully implemented.

Prominent cultural trends or norms can have substantial impact on both what kind of DDDs are deployed as well as what the average mortality salience for a given population is. A place like Caracas, Venezuela where there is a staggeringly high crime rate, or Florida with its vintage population, are likely to have a higher mortality salience. Furthermore the DDDs employed will be vastly different in a largely Catholic population than in a largely Buddhist population or in ancient Egypt. "'Death' is a socially constructed idea," argues Trinity College professor Michael Kearls. "The fears, hopes, and orientations people have towards it are not instinctive, but rather are learned from such public symbols as the languages, arts, and religious and funerary rituals of their culture<sup>8</sup>." However, I would argue that these public symbols are necessarily a result of the fear of death: more importantly, the instinctual preservation

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<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. ( 1986). The causes and consequences of the need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In R. F.Baumeister ( Ed.) , *Public self and private self* (pp. 189–212). New York: Springer-Verlag

<sup>7</sup>Green, J., Merle, P. Terror Management and Civic Engagement: An experimental investigation on the effects of Mortality Salience on Civic Engagement Intentions. *Journal of Media Psychology*. 2013; Vol 25(3): 142-151

<sup>8</sup> Kearls, Michael. Kearl's Guide to the Sociology of Death: Images across culture and time. <http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/death-1.html#cu>.

of life.

Significant events can also have an impact on DDD and mortality salience. It is safe to say that the advent of atomic weapons and humanity's ability to destroy itself has had a profound effect on mortality salience, as can a death in the family. Several psychologists noted a high level of mortality salience in studies done in the weeks after 9/11<sup>9</sup>. Reports by the Pentagon showed an 8% increase in enlistment to the armed forces immediately following the attack<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, research by the Pew Institute shows that 19 million Americans rekindled old relationships via email during the year following the attacks<sup>11</sup>. These are just two examples of possible DDDs following a cataclysmic event.

Like these examples, psychologists have separated reactions into two categories of self construals. They suggest that a subject faced with an increase in mortality salience will react in either a individualistic or collectivistic manner. The direction they choose is dependent on both immediate stimuli -- who they are with, the source of the increase in death related anxiety, and the way this information is delivered -- but also cultural filters. For example, the way in which the news media portrays a natural disaster can impact the self construal bias in the viewer. Images of a group of people packing sandbags before a flood could bias the viewer towards a collectivist self construal, which in turn may lead the viewer to a charitable donation for flood victims as a form of DDD. Conversely, a personal interest story on one person's struggle with the flood may lead the viewer to a more individualist DDD like purchasing flood insurance or moving to higher ground. Experiments done by psychologists attempt to

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<sup>9</sup> Jonas, E., Sullivan, D., Greenberg, J. Generosity, Greed, Norms and Death: Differential effects of mortality salience on Charitable behavior. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 35 (2013) 47-57  
(see Green above)

<sup>10</sup> Daniel, Lisa. American Forces Press Service. Sept 8, 2011.  
<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=65272>. Accessed 10/20/13

<sup>11</sup> Fox, Susannah. Rainie, Lee. Madden, Mary. One Year Later: September 11 and the Internet. Pew Internet. Sept 5, 2002.  
<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2002/One-year-later-September-11-and-the-Internet/01-Summary-of-Findings.aspx> Accessed 10/20/13

recreate this phenomenon by showing subjects doctored stories made to look like magazine articles. Articles attempt to create a high or low mortality salience with either a individualistic or collectivistic self construal. Researchers then measure the subject's feelings on interpersonal trust in relationships, propensity to donate to charity, political party identification -- to name just a few. Subjects who received the high mortality salience article with the individualist self construal tended to donate to charity less and reject worldviews that were not their own<sup>12</sup>.

Again it should be emphasized that the fear of death is not constantly salient in the "average person." What I am suggesting -- using these analytical works as a crutch -- is that humanity represses this fear by attempting to sculpt a meaningful existence out of an absurd and uncaring world\*<sup>13</sup>, and that there are specific and unique ways of dealing with this in the United States. In this way the work of existential philosophers also holds considerable bearing on the task at hand. The Nietzschean proclamation that "God is dead" raises several questions and tasks individuals with mapping out their own meaningful existence as they see fit. "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and for a good reason. We have never sought ourselves<sup>14</sup>." Nietzsche saw truth, knowledge, and morality as tools of nature to be studied historically and anthropologically. He viewed the moral guidelines of the civilized world forms of repression over the human animal<sup>15</sup>. This is how we will get a clearer picture of how American concepts of morality, identity, duty, sacrifice, success, wealth, consumption, political participation and even love, all overlap and supercede each other in the individual to form the myriad of

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<sup>12</sup> Green Pg 1-6

<sup>13</sup> \*Of course there are those who would suggest that there is an inherent illegitimacy in psychoanalysis by highlighting the nature of repression, i.e. that one might say "but I'm not thinking about death right now?" to which the psycho-analytical thinker would reply "that is because you are repressing that thought..." In other words it is a "trump card" and cannot be "cleanly decided," as Becker says. "But repression is not a magical word for winning arguments: it is a real phenomenon, and we have been able to study many of it's workings (20)."

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swenson. *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*. Hackett Publishing. 1998. pg 1142

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche pg 1140

possible constructions for warding off the instinctual fear of death. Singly arbitrary actions like shopping, taste and preference, or grooming habits come together to form the human tapestry, or what Becker refers to as more like a suit of armor. The choices we make, whether conscious or unconscious, form a self-made identity that we project outward like a forcefield: These facets of culture and society are themselves natural defenses against the anxieties of the human animal.

What are the uniquely American ways of dealing with imminent mortality and how have they been affected by the dawning of the digital age? For this I will explore and analyze mortality salience in American Culture from three vantage points. First, the increasing estrangement from actual death. Mortal diseases, in large part, have been wiped out. Very few Americans die premature deaths, and when they do each year under 65 is counted statistically as a “year of potential life lost.” The elderly, the average American’s last common connection with death, have become “society’s lepers,” increasingly segregated into convalescence, where they die slow-motion deaths out of view of the populace<sup>16</sup>. The estrangement from death has had broad implications for the fear of death effectively heightening the need for repressive action on an individual and collective level. There is no doubt that how we construct our idea of a purposeful life involves others around us. Like cliques in a high school lunchroom, group and genre-based culture have increasingly formed the framework for potential “identities.” Becker refers to one’s “lifestyle” as a vital lie. It is constructed out of the need for a sense of control over one’s life that is denied by nature. Humanity creates the symbolism through which we seek understanding and truth in an effort to combat the knowledge of imminent defeat -- death and decay -- at the hands of nature. Where do people turn for answers in a post religious society? Death

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<sup>16</sup> Kearls, Michael. *Kearl’s Guide to the Sociology of Death: Images across culture and time.*  
<http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/death-1.html#cu>.

without belief has a tendency to become a grim spectre, as we will see.

Second, is the morbid nature of popular American culture, or the presence of faked death or far away media death. I should like to use the term “distant death” to describe instances of television or movie death (by the age of 18 the average American child will have witnessed 16,000 simulated deaths and 200,000 acts of violence on television<sup>17</sup>) violence, crisis and disaster in the media, and the rise of feelings of impending doom perpetuated by politicians and political gridlock, economic uncertainty, the failing environment and the ever present ability of humanity to destroy itself militaristically. To me there is an interesting juxtaposition here: on one side is our segregation from actual death while on the other is an increasing bombardment of death and violence through media and entertainment sources. Modern psychologists have even suggested that the way in which these topics, such as a disaster in the news or an apocalypse scenario based film, are presented can have different effects on how we deal with mortality. More specifically they can determine if we react in a collectivist or individual manner<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the growing popularity in apocalyptic themes (movies like “Zombieland” and “The Book of Eli”, TV programs like “The Walking Dead”, and books such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*) presents an interesting branch of study. Whole groups of people called “survivalists” or “preppers” have come into the mainstream. They’re a group of people, most notably highlighted in the television program “Apocalypse Preppers”, who are preparing for an extinction level event or man-made crisis in which the world dies around them yet they live on. What purpose could fantasies of the lone survivor or a breakdown in society serve for an individual? What role does the media and entertainment industry play in these fantasies?

Finally, third is the existential weight placed on the individual in American Society. In small and

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<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee on Judiciary. Children, Violence and the Media: A report for parents and policy makers. September 14, 1999. <http://www.indiana.edu/~cspc/ressenate.htm>. Accessed on 11/10/13.

<sup>18</sup> See Green pg 5-6

more primitive societies the death of single individuals could mean doom for the group. Each person had a necessary role to play in society. Today most people's societal role is as an expendable cog in the wheel, although the American Dream -- rags to riches success stories -- still permeate our culture. The continuing theme of manifest destiny has created the most individual based society in the world, while simultaneously justifying the subjectivity of the masses. Today our role in what can be seen as the greater good has become increasingly ambiguous and so too has our ability to craft a meaningful existence. How has American culture adjusted itself to help an individual answer that question? In what ways have Americans adjusted their behavior (repression) to deal with the changing nature of human nature? These are the three main approaches through which I hope to unpack the questions before us.

If all this discussion of repression seems condescending then I sincerely apologize. It is by no means my intention to use this paper as a pulpit from which to highlight the flaws of humanity. If anything, it is the result of a heightened sense of humility, itself a result of my own abrasive attitudes towards the status quo, which in the parlance of economics bares as many costs as benefits. I have often stated my aversion to what I call "working in an office", meaning the typical cubicle based, number crunching job of dubious societal worth with absolutely no fulfillment outside of the paycheck. To me a life lived for personal fiduciary progress alone is wasted. To be a part of social change and structure is in large part my motivation for studying in the fields of political science and sociology. This paper, written in the final year of my undergraduate degree, is part of my own attempt to overcome the same obstacles we all have or will have to face at some time before we "buy the farm," so to speak.





I'M IN PAIN BUT I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

NO!

I WANT TO LIVE AND ENJOY LIFE!

SURE YOU DO!

DEATH... THE END OF MYSELF... NO MORE ME... IT'S... IT'S INCOMPREHENSIBLE!

WORK ON IT...

I GUESS WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO IS THAT I CAN'T BEAR TO LET GO OF MY SELF. HUH? THAT'S IT, ISN'T IT, MR. NATURAL?

YES OF COURSE, FLAMEY FOOT...

WELL, OKAY, MAYBE IT'S NOT THE END OF MYSELF... MAYBE IT'S JUST LIKE Y'KNOW, GOING TO SLEEP AND THEN YOU WAKE UP IN Y'KNOW, LIKE A NEW BODY... A DIFFERENT... A NEW OR SOMETHING...

HMM... FOOD FOR THOUGHT?

WHO ARE YOU??

OH BOY, THERE YOU GO...

PLOP

THE NEXT QUESTION IS...

THE NEXT QUESTION IS...

R. CRUMB '97

## SECTION 1:

### **The American's Estrangement From Mortality:**

*The Elderly & the Cult of Youth,  
Secular Society vs Ecclesiastic in Dealing with Death  
Money as an 'Anxiety Buffer'*

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Never before in the course of human events has a civilization been so far removed from death. Humanity has virtually eliminated all but the most insidious diseases; to which one might conclude that we have begun to outlive our earthly vessels. Healthcare, regardless of its precarious political situation, is available to the large middle and upper middle classes. If it is any indicator, the Whole Foods Market™ chain of grocery stores reached all time high price on the stock market this year<sup>19</sup>. The International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association showed a 10.8 percent increase in the number of fitness club memberships between 2009 and 2010 reaching as many as 50.2 members at over 29 thousand locations in the United States<sup>20</sup>. It seems healthy living is on the rise along with an interest in its more long term effects.

Aging is now seen as something that should be avoided at all costs, and the anti aging industry's record profits reflect this. Those who cannot foot the bill are segregated. As Ernest Becker says, aging is a form of decay, or is at least viewed that way by society. To remove the elderly is in essence to

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<sup>19</sup> Google Finance.

<https://www.google.com/finance?q=NASDAQ:WFM&sa=X&ei=ghyaUpj-LI6qkAfWpYH4Dw&ved=0CC0Q2AEwAA>. Accessed 11/30/13.

<sup>20</sup> IHRSA Report. *US Health Club industry membership up 10.8%...* April 5, 2011.

<http://www.ihrsa.org/media-center/2011/4/5/us-health-club-membership-exceeds-50-million-up-108-industry.html>. Accessed 11/30/13

remove a constant reminder of the finality of life. It only makes sense that a culture so removed from actual death would attempt to eliminate the last few experiences of death that exist. Nursing or convalescent homes and hospice care serve this purpose.

The number of nursing homes in the United States peaked in 2002 and has since leveled off<sup>21</sup>. Though this total number has gone down slightly in the decade since, the number of larger nursing homes, with greater than 100 and fewer than 199 beds, has risen<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, the number of chain owned nursing homes rose to 54%<sup>23</sup> of the total in 2002 and the number of for-profit facilities has risen steadily every year since accounting for 69% in 2011<sup>24</sup>.

That is not to suggest a sort of malicious intent on part of for-profit elderly care facilities or the use of these facilities in general. The increased use of nursing homes is not part of a conscious segregation but rather could be viewed as one facet of a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon. That is to say that the same group of Americans who can afford to extend their average life expectancy and ward off untimely death by disease and thus further estrange themselves from actual death are the same group of Americans who are placing their parents and grandparents in nursing homes. The elderly are not segregated from the rest of the population maliciously but rather through the same process of repression that Ernest Becker describes, the same thought process that has lead to a billion dollar anti-aging industry. The elderly are one of middle class America's last remaining reminders of their most universal tie to nature, mortality. In a report by Ralph Nader titled Old Age: The Last Segregation the author writes, "in our single-minded pursuit of youth, we have systematically ignored those who are old.

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<sup>21</sup> Center For Medicare and Medicaid services. Nursing Home Data Compendium 2012 Edition. [www.cms.gov/Medicare/.../nursinghomedatacompendium\\_508.pdf](http://www.cms.gov/Medicare/.../nursinghomedatacompendium_508.pdf). Accessed 12/3/13. Pg 14. (referred to as CMS)

<sup>22</sup> CMS Pg 15

<sup>23</sup> Center For Disease Control and Prevention. 2004 National Nursing Home Survey: Facilities, table 1. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/nursingh.htm>. Accessed 12/3/13

<sup>24</sup> CMS Pg 33

The Native Americans stood in the path of what we conceived to be our national destiny and we shoved them by the way; we have done the same with the old<sup>25</sup>.” What is immediately relevant is that this pursuit of youth, or conversely this avoidance of decay, has led to the segregation of the old, middle class America’s most common contact with actual death. The consequences of the ghettoization of the elderly include further estrangement from nature and mortality. The elderly were not always segregated however. For centuries the multi-generational family was the norm, and it remains so in many cultures. Recent data has shown that 4 out of 5 nursing home patients are non-hispanic whites<sup>26</sup>, suggesting a cultural and economic reluctance to place older family members in homes. Furthermore, a survey done by the real estate group Coldwell Banker shows 70% of its realtors in 2010 believed that economic recession was causing a surge in the number of prospective home buyers seeking multi-generational accommodations. However, financial reasons were shown to be the number one factor in the decision to move into a multi-generational household with only 6% of those surveyed citing “strong family ties” as their justification<sup>27</sup>.

The elderly, because of their proximity to what is traditionally seen as the end of life, inhibit a higher mortality salience in those around them. In fact, death as strictly an end of life phenomenon is a relatively recent development. Advances in medicine and technology have raised life expectancy and lowered child mortality. Michael Kearls explains that these types of change affect the ethos of death in society by changing who dies, or in his words who “society’s lepers” are:

The connection between death and childhood largely remained in this country through the eighteenth century. In Puritan New England, where only 6 in 10 children reached

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<sup>25</sup> Townsend, Claire. *Old Age: The Last Segregation*. Grossman Publishers. New York. 1971. Pg 133.

<sup>26</sup> CMS. Pg 3

<sup>27</sup> Gillentine, Amy. *The Colorado Springs Business Journal. More Families seek Multi-generational homes.* February 23, 2010. <http://search.proquest.com.ursus-proxy-1.ursus.maine.edu/docview/224573206>. Accessed 12/4/13

adulthood, parents usually sent their offspring away to the home of relatives or friends supposedly as a method of discipline. In reality this practice probably arose to prevent the death of a child from causing parents too much emotional pain, for which reason we now send our infirm elderly to nursing homes<sup>28</sup>.

What a difference there would be in a society's relationship with death if surviving childhood, rather than postponing death, was the major trauma. In a very real sense, how we perceive time and space is understood through the context of life and death and average life span. If Survival and not death was the exception, society may have seen long life as extra time rather than as a countdown. Today, anecdotally, a child's first experience with death often involves something like the butterfly in a jar who withers away over the course of the night. However, in the past (and presently in the global south) children died in wars, factories, mines and textile mills where they were destroyed by machinery and suffered from the same, or worse, workplace hazards as their adult counterparts. Many children were orphaned and those who weren't were at the mercy of their parents to provide for them. It is difficult to imagine life in this time. The familiarity of death did not reduce mourning though it likely enhanced living, or at least provided for a unique relationship with death. Religion, more strictly and universally adhered to than in our own time, did not eliminate grief suffered from loss but, rather provided a framework through which death could be understood. "The loss of children were God's provenance<sup>29</sup>," Thomas Jordan writes in his book on child mortality. The loss of a child today is most often met with suspicion and treated as a potentially avoidable tragedy.

What I have described is a difference in one's relationship with actual death, namely, that modern society has recasted death as an end of life phenomenon as opposed to a threat to children or

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<sup>28</sup> see Kears

<sup>29</sup> Jordan, Thomas. *The Quality of Life and Mortality Among Children: Historical Perspectives*. Springer Doubrect Heidleberg. New York. 2012. Pg. 12.

even a constant threat. I am in no way attempting to suggest that early Americans and their European ancestors who survived to adulthood no longer feared death. I am simply saying that a difference in a culture's relationship with death would produce different DDDs. *What are the unique ways in which Modern Americans deal with unconscious anxiety caused by their imminent demise?* These distal death defenses are not only unique geographically but they differ over time as well. Christianity's prominence in the past is the most inescapable difference when considering DDDs in different eras of American civilization. If we hold religion to be a sort of roundabout way to discuss death, then the majority of Americans for over two centuries were getting together with their entire community to, in a way, talk about dying. The community involvement stemming from these weekly meetings could be looked at as a collective self-construal form of DDD, a way to deal with unconscious death anxiety. Having true faith, actually believing in a heaven and hell, to which one earns admittance to through either success or failure to adhere to a set of prescribed moral standards is a glaring example of another.

In a secular society where there is no communal codification of morality, the purpose of which is to quell the natural death anxiety, the discussion becomes introverted while simultaneously becoming more ambiguous. One has to come to their own conclusions concerning what they do with their limited time and the context in which one's life is given purpose. Without religion, definitive answers to these questions are impossible to find. The difference between the modern American's dealings with mortality and that of the ecclesiastical American is one of definition, specifically the definition of what is good or evil: subsequently, justification and purpose. One must justify their actions morally in the context of their culture thus applying a level of purpose to existence. However different society may be today though, the questions one asks when faced with their own mortality remain the same. The difference lies in how we answer those questions.

We look to society and use cultural context as a guide towards developing a purposeful existence. In the past, when a person passed away, they *knew* they were going to one of three places: heaven, hell or, purgatory. Today we have replaced life with purgatory. So far estranged are we from death that we are legally obligated to continue living. Religious belief of course made suicide a crime, however, today given the advent of life support and artificial organs, dying has entered new murky and litigative waters. The case of Terri Schiavo is one particular example of this. Terri was a 39 year old woman who had been on life support in a vegetative state for thirteen years following an accident. In 2003 a Florida court ordered that her feeding tubes be removed, based on what her husband, her legal guardian, claimed her wishes were. Both houses of the Florida State Legislature and then Governor Jeb Bush reacted by passing a law invalidating the court order -- and did so in under 3 hours<sup>30</sup>. "Terri's Law," managed to prolong her life an additional 2 years. Throughout the subsequent series of events that marked the end of Terri's life the media and special interest groups manipulated the issues and ignored the medical proof that she was in no way conscious or responsive nor would she ever be<sup>31</sup>. Terri's case, of course, brings about a serious ethical and moral dilemma; however it can be seen as another example of humanity's increasing distance from its natural self of which the most dominant feature is death. Not unlike an old widow desperately clinging to a run-down house, we, both individually and collectively, have a tendency to cling to life.

Governor Bush was quoted as saying "I am not playing God<sup>32</sup>," though his proximity and patronage to religious groups during the Schiavo case suggest he at least believed himself to be acting as a surrogate, at least in a moral sense. Encasing western culture's removal from nature, and specifically

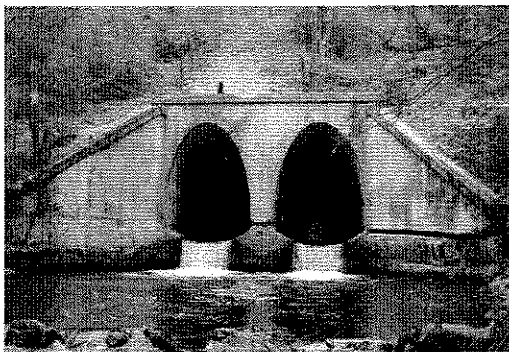
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<sup>30</sup> "The Right to Die: Terri Schiavo." *Films On Demand*. Films Media Group, 2003. Web. 4 Jan. 2014. <<http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=25641&xtid=33019>>.

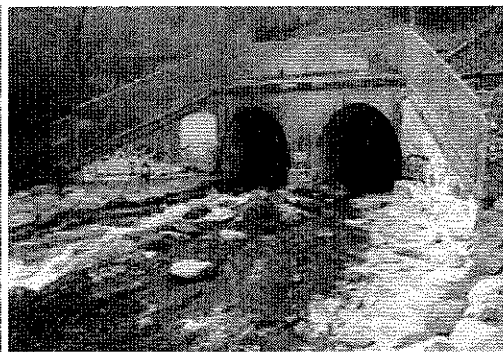
<sup>31</sup> Jennett B. *The vegetative state: medical facts, ethical and legal dilemmas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> see 31

the estrangement from death, is always an armor of benevolence. In the my own hometown a popular swimming spot was recently closed in an effort to prevent potential tragedy. The Lyman Viaducts began life as a train tressel spanning a large river valley. Later, when freight trains became too heavy for the tressel to support, the valley was filled in and a cement thruway was constructed to divert the flow of water. The cement viaduct was about thirty-five feet high and the pool the diverted water created was deep enough for jumping. All one had to do was step off of the cement ledge and they would land in the center of the pool. Those who got hurt were almost always intoxicated or taking extreme risks (backflips etc.) or both. In the last 5 years a fence was erected and the pool was filled with boulders and cement. The structure was in desperate need of repair, and allegedly threatened the local Salmon and Connecticut Rivers to an exposed wastewater pipe which runs between two neighboring towns. Furthermore, the town's first selectman argued that the streambed should be restored to its "natural" level<sup>33</sup>, an argument that seems arbitrary in the shadow of a graffiti covered, thirty foot tall cement structure.



2006



2014

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<sup>33</sup> In The News. Crumbling Lyman Viaduct gets Lifeline from State. 3/2/2011.  
[http://www.housedems.ct.gov/orange/2011/pr048\\_2011-03-02.html](http://www.housedems.ct.gov/orange/2011/pr048_2011-03-02.html). Accessed 1/5/14.



The fact that jumping was a right of passage into adulthood in this town, one that was free financially (and ideologically in the minds of the young people who hung out there) is not insignificant. The fact that this place, and a rope swing down river which was also removed, are taken away while movie theaters and strip malls are erected and ski areas and skate parks offer opportunities for seemingly more daring (though more controlled) activities, at a price (don't forget to include equipment) is a glaring example of what is hidden just beneath the surface of all this benevolence.

As was discussed earlier, the segregation of the elderly is often described as a move towards better and closer access to health care, as it often can be. It's effect has generally been a large increase in geriatric depression, particularly in nursing homes<sup>34</sup>, a redefinition of family, and a loss of skilled labor taught through familial interactions. The last part having a significant impact on capitalistic dependence. Michel Foucault referred to the power of regulatory agencies over the human body, family, birth and death as biopower<sup>35</sup>. To Foucault control over the more personal aspects of life was necessary to expand capitalism in modern society and to create a society wholly dependent upon its products and services. It is no coincidence that I chose to use the word "estranged" to describe western culture's relationship with death: It being the word chosen by Karl Marx to describe humanity's relationship to the means of production. "The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*["<sup>36</sup> Marx writes. Becker writes "Man is half animal and half symbolic<sup>37</sup>." Commodification is intrinsically linked to money, which itself is simply symbolic paper. There is a

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<sup>34</sup> Cooke, Stephen C, Tucker, Melissa L. Journal of Pharmacy Practice. Geriatric Depression. <http://jpp.sagepub.com.ursus-proxy-1.ursus.maine.edu/content/14/6/498.full.pdf+html>. Accessed 1/5/14. Pg 499

<sup>35</sup> Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality, Vol 2: An Introduction. Vintage Books. 1990. Pg 140-142

<sup>36</sup> Marx, Karl. Estranged Labor. Economic and philosophical manuscripts. 1844. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>. Accessed 1/5/14

<sup>37</sup> See Becker. Pg 26

direct correlation between commodification and the need to remove humanity from its natural state. Particularly with death, it became necessary to muffle the nagging feeling of importance and finality; feelings that intensified within a newly secularized society. Where religion once quelled the death anxiety and promoted subservience by offering Heaven and Hell, capitalism simply devalues the death anxiety: under the guise of benevolent sacrifice for the greater good.

I don't think it would be a stretch to say that for most Americans a typical day does not consist of affirmations but of denials. We deny ourselves the freedom of the day in order to afford the necessities and if we're lucky to earn some commodified "relaxation." We deny ourselves self-satisfaction for contributions to society. We gawk at and curse those whose "contributions" are less than ours. We've arbitrarily attached value to these contributions and, in a Gramscian sense, assume that those with more money are more intelligent or work harder, and that those who are poor are layabouts and ignorant. In many cases we deny ourselves life in order to live in the most basic sense. In a very real sense we deny our natural selves in order to better conform to a societal model. Both Freud and Becker describe the instinctual role repression has played in the creation of society and the processes of civilization.

Secularization went hand and hand with American individualism: both were a product of capitalism. Westward expansion in the United States introduced millions to private property. It had also introduced them to the 40-acre lot and personal privacy. White Americans saw the Bill of Rights as a declaration of individual's rights long before the Supreme Court affirmed it that way in *Brown v. Education*. Capturing the American dream had everyone of middle and lower class trying to better their own lot in life. "There is not an American who is not eaten up with a desire to better himself..." Alexis De Tocqueville writes in *Democracy in America*. "All constantly wish to acquire material

possessions, reputation and power<sup>38</sup>.” The Industrial Revolution quickly turned Americans into consumers. It was the declaration of inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that made America ripe for existentialist philosophy before it even existed. Particularly the pursuit of happiness coupled with virulent support of capitalism created an open market for goods and services full of choices and covered in advertising that sought to separate their product from the pack and in turn separating their consumers as well.

However, freedom of consumption is a rough interpretation of what constitutes the pursuit of happiness. One cannot simply buy happiness. As Jean Baudrillard puts it:

Happiness as total or inner enjoyment - that happiness independent of the signs which could manifest it to others and those around us, the happiness which has no need of *evidence* - is excluded from the outset from the consumer ideal in which happiness is, first and foremost, the demand for equality (or distraction of course) and must, accordingly, always, signify with regard to *visible* criteria. In this sense, Happiness is even further removed from any collective ‘*feast*’ or exaltation since, fuelled by an egalitarian exigency, it is based on *individualistic* principles fortified by the declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which explicitly recognize the right to Happiness of everyone (of each individual) [Italics in original]<sup>39</sup>.

That does not stop people from trying to find happiness in consumption. Some social scientists have even suggested that there are real ‘terror management’ effects in conspicuous consumption. Zaleskiewicz *et al* postulates that consumption provides a very real anxiety buffer for participants. The study goes on to suggest that higher mortality salience can effectively raise, not only a person’s propensity towards consumption of leisure goods, but can raise their own long-term financial

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<sup>38</sup> De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Trans by Gerald Bevin. Penguin Classics. London. Pg 728

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and structures*. Sage publications. London. 2004 (reprint). Pg 49

expectations and increase the desire for luxury goods like Lexus automobiles and Rolex watches<sup>40</sup>. It seems amazing that this connection between Terror Management Theory and “Retail therapy,” as it is known colloquially, was not made earlier than 2013. Money itself has the power to change public perception socially and psychologically. One can be transferred from smallness, ignorance, and impotence to power and control with a little accumulation of wealth. The social power which money provides is even transferable through inheritance, and can continue after a person has died. Ernest Becker, in his book *Escape from Evil*, suggests that money can play the role of a literal escape from death through the purchase of bodyguards, bulletproof glass, fortress-like homes or weapons<sup>41</sup>.

If American estrangement from death goes hand in hand with our own removal from our natural selves, then it should come as no surprise that our present method of terror management should come from such an unnatural venue as spending. Financial and economic answers seem to be at the basis of some very existential questions these days. No longer do we require the household assistance of our elderly relatives as meals, cleaning and child-care have all become commodities. Unfortunately so too has labor. Productivity is now irrevocably tied to one’s ability to generate money. Today, when a person, upon reaching old age, is no longer a desirable employee to commodified labor they are segregated and removed from society, something which undoubtedly sounds cruel, but nonetheless is a simple task as old age has been commodified in and of itself. Similarly, death during non-privatized recreational activity has been appraised through lawsuits creating a financial imperative to close places like the Lyman Viaducts to the public regardless of their non-fiduciary benefits. Perhaps it is not the fear of death which has estranged our natural selves but the powerful effects of money as a terror

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<sup>40</sup> Zaleskiewicz, Tomasz. Gasiorska, Agata. Kesebir, Pelin. Cuszcynska, Aleksandra. Pyszczynski, Tom. Money and the Fear of Death: The Symbolic Power of Money as an Existential Anxiety Buffer. *Journal of Economic Psychology*. 3/13/2013. Issue 36 (2013). Pg 55-67

<sup>41</sup> Becker, Ernest. *Escape from Evil*. 1975. The Free Press. New York. Pg 81

management technique that have quantified the natural world around us and remove those potential sources of non-commodified fulfillment that would otherwise undermine the almighty dollar. Technological advances have made total commodification even more possible as we will see in the next chapter. Most importantly if the techniques of Terror Management revolve around an individual return to cultural worldviews<sup>42</sup>, it has never been more important to know and understand the ways that these worldviews are generated.

## SECTION 2:

### **Estranged from Mortality and Surrounded by Death:**

*Technology, Information Literacy & Existentialism.*

*Mortality Salience Sells: Knowing a Pitch When You See One*

*Finding Motivation for Long-term Goals in the End of Times.*

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Removed as we are from our own mortality we are nonetheless surrounded by death, a seemingly contradictory but nonetheless truthful observation. We are removed from our actual death yet surrounded by *play death* and *far-away death*. Play death refers to an acted death, regardless of

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<sup>42</sup> Becker. *Escape from Evil*. see pg 8

the form of entertainment. Far-away death refers to actual death as presented by the media. In both cases the living are still estranged from actual death and, intentionally, either relieved of, or exposed to, the death anxiety depending on the desired effect. This bombardment with violent images begins at an early age. In 2007 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) did a report titled *Violent Television Programming and it's Impact on Children*. In the first paragraph of the introduction it states:

Television is an integral part of the lives of American families. An average American household has the television set turned on 8 hours and 11 minutes daily, and children watch on average between two and four hours of television every day. Depending on their age, one to two thirds of children have televisions in their bedrooms. By the time most children begin the first grade, they will have spent the equivalent of three school years in front of the television set<sup>43</sup>.

Merriam Webster defines integral as “necessary to make the whole complete,” a potential hyperbole, though there is no denying the importance of television in American culture. There is a wealth of research done on the effects of television on children and adults. No commentary on this subject is necessary. Alternately there is a relationship between the estrangement of actual death and the natural self and television. This relationship can be viewed both in what we watch and the way in which programming is edited and presented. In the introduction we discussed two levels of self construal that were subliminally favored through some careful writing in a fake magazine article. The same can be said about the way in which news stories are presented and edited for screen and film programs, a understated process greatly affecting how we perceive the programs we watch. The popular website YouTube has several examples of real movie trailers edited to appear as genre

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<sup>43</sup>Federal Communications Commision. Violent Television and its Impact on Children. Apri 26, 2007. FCC 07-50. Pg 1

opposites<sup>44</sup>, including a happy-go-lucky version of Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining" and "'Scary' Mary Poppins".

Violence, or more specifically violent death has existed in forms of entertainment for a millenia. Today, however, we have the means to represent "realistic" violence in a fashion never seen before. Video games regularly depict death and violence, not just as a part of the game but as a main objective. Faked death in all its forms is commonly painless and the dead return to star in other films or respawn from the last checkpoint. Deaths and murders occur, are (sometimes) mourned, avenged, or made in sacrifice in front of American audiences thousands of times over the course of the average lifetime. Long before the September 11th attacks, we witnessed the destruction of national landmarks and monuments like the White House and Empire State Building in movies like "Independence Day". This is *play-death*: Death forgotten in an instant. As columnist and cartoonist Tim Kreider puts it "We don't see old or infirm people much in movies or on TV. We love explosive gory death onscreen, but we're not so enamored of the creeping, gray, incontinent kind<sup>45</sup>." I can speak from experience when I say many hundreds if not thousands of these faked deaths can occur before an individual has any real experience with actual death. Violence sells.

In an effort to attract and maintain large viewing bases, news organizations have taken lessons learned on film and applied them to their stories. News stories are sensationalized to make them more interesting. In the tradition of TV violence many news sources have even begun to sensationalize the weather. The polar vortex which is sweeping across the eastern United States as I write these words is a glaring example of one approach to creating ratings-grabbing news. Redefining a typical once-a-decade cold spell using a buzzword like "polar vortex" can give weather, a constant occurrence

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<sup>44</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfout\\_rgPSA&list=PLDED3C2D517DBA8D2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfout_rgPSA&list=PLDED3C2D517DBA8D2)

<sup>45</sup> Kreider, Tim. You Are Going To Die. New York Times. January 20, 2013.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/20/you-are-going-to-die/> accessed 4/30/14

on planet earth, an identity. Hurricanes have been identified this way for over a hundred years<sup>46</sup> (the current method began during Second World War by military meteorologists). Hurricane names easily lent themselves to news broadcasts as viewers tuned in to see coverage of Andrew or Irene. As for polar vortices, which are a regularly occurring phenomenon in earth's history, the name adds a sense of urgency and seriousness to cold weather. Before the polar vortex of 2014, a cold spell was the absence of weather in the winter. WGBH news, in an article titled "The Polar Vortex is Nothing New", studied the use of the term in the media.

It wasn't always like this. Back in January 1985, before the 24-hour news cycle and Twitter, a southward shift of the polar vortex similar to the one we are currently experiencing killed at least 126 people in the US, destroyed 90 percent of Florida's citrus crop, and set record-lows across the East Coast. The cold snap was major news, but it doesn't appear that the term "polar vortex" was a part of the coverage. The New York Times described the event as the "freeze of the century" and a "bubble of arctic air" It never once used the term polar vortex<sup>47</sup>.

What is important is not that *a polar vortex* is a regular phenomenon but that *The Polar Vortex* is dropping temperatures across the eastern seaboard. Individualizing weather and news stories is one way the media sensationalizes by presenting information as unique and irregular regardless of whether or not it is in fact unique. Speculation is another method. Immediately following the April 19th 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, the media speculated that Islamic extremists were responsible, and the FBI picked up Ibrahim Ahmed as their initial suspect. The Wall Street Journal even described the event as a "Beirut style car bombing." Pure information can no longer be presented by these vendors as hear-say, sourced material and literal facts are not differentiated.

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<sup>46</sup> Hurricane names. Geology.com. <http://geology.com/hurricanes/hurricane-names.shtml>. Accessed 1/21/14

<sup>47</sup> Herwick, Edgar B III. The Polar Vortex is Nothing New. WGBH news. January 7, 2014. <http://wgbhnews.org/post/polar-vortex-nothing-new>. Accessed 1/21/14.



Information literacy is a term that first appeared in the 1970's and is defined as "the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand<sup>48</sup>."

Unfortunately, many people believe all the information presented in a news format, including opinion and speculation, to be true, meaning the propensity of the media and the entertainment industry to display stories in a violent and/or urgent manner effectively leads to a heightened mortality salience when watching television. These feelings can then be soothed and affirmed by cultural roles provided by demographic on the channel of choice. The problem with television is that the demographics necessary to carry a station are too large. Advertising and entertainment on television must be aimed at large groups like 16-27 year olds or 55 and older. In targeting large groups in this manner broadcasters lose all specificity. Programs and advertisements are aimed towards the average in this group with almost complete disregard for individuation. By doing so in a culture that places such overwhelming importance on the individual, companies risk creating the anti-product. A culture of individuals is one that opposes the average or norm. We can see this in popular cultural trends. The traditional sitcom that relies on and promotes gender and familial norms struggles to find an audience while shows like "Breaking Bad", where the hero is a meth cook, or "Jersey Shore", with the YOLO ("you only live once") culture that surrounds it, or "American Idol", a highly individuated (though largely homogenous in terms of talent) competition thrive. More than ever the personal lives of sports stars are popular entertainment, but only when these stars break loose of the confines of traditional norms. However, a problem arises with the promotion of individuation, one that coincides with the introduction of an growing number of new niche TV stations and the internet. TV may have shot itself in the foot. Social

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<sup>48</sup> National Forum on Information Literacy. Home page. <http://infoilit.org/about-the-nfil/what-is-the-nfil/>. Accessed 1/22/14

learning theory suggests that “viewers may vicariously learn life lessons by viewing models that receive positive rewards for their actions<sup>49</sup>.” In other words viewers learn from what they see on TV. By promoting the individual, specifically the individual who is rewarded for stepping outside their traditional role in society or “pushing the envelope,” television producers may seriously damage the effectiveness of large demographics.

Today, mass media includes much more than just film and television. Mass media is no longer simply a delivery device. The ways in which television presented information and shaped cultural norms is now an interactive affair on the internet. Programing is no longer confined to puzzle-like timeslots. There is no worry about missing the target demographic and viewers can access the information they want when they want it. The internet provides 24 hour information and entertainment tailored to your tastes and opinions -- it will even make those for you. Some website authors believe death panels are real<sup>50</sup> and some don't<sup>51</sup>. It is possible for individuals to support any viewpoint with “facts” from the internet. Immediately following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut police wrongly fingered the real shooter Adam Lanza's brother, Ryan Lanza, as the shooter. Seconds later, Ryan's facebook account and picture were public information displayed on CNN, Buzzfeed, and numerous other outlets<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, after the Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013, the popular website Reddit created what is called a subreddit, or a single-topic forum, called /r/findbostonbombers that literally became an online witch hunt that wrongly accused two individuals:

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<sup>49</sup>Olson, Beth. Williams, Douglas. The Family on Television: The evaluation of gender roles in the situational comedy. Sex Roles. March 1997. Vol. 36. Issue 5\6 Pg 409-410.

<sup>50</sup> Fox News. 11/26/13. Accessed 1/6/14

<http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/the-five/article/2013/11/26/was-sarah-palin-right-about-death-panels>

<sup>51</sup> Rutenberg, Jim. Calmes. Jackie. New York Times. *False Death Panel Rumor has Some Familiar Roots.*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/health/policy/14panel.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/health/policy/14panel.html?_r=0). Accessed 1/6/14

<sup>52</sup> Hill, Kashmir. Blaming the Wrong Lanza: How the Media Got it Wrong in Newtown. Forbes. 12/17/12.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/12/17/blaming-the-wrong-anza-how-media-got-it-wrong-in-newtown/>. Accessed 1/22/12

one, a missing person who was later found dead in Rhode Island and another who later said he felt fear for his life as a result<sup>53</sup>. Societal overreactions like these are by no means a new phenomenon, however in the age of the internet a person's online identity can be ripped to shreds in an instant. Lastly, enjoy this picture:



This is a fake photo that made the rounds after Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Anyone who has ever been in the New York subway system could tell you there is no possible way that water would be that clear. Nonetheless this photo went viral and many individuals were fooled. With so much fake “information” being distributed around the internet, that same information literacy that was important back in the 70’s is quite possibly the first step in education today.

The Internet, like TV before it -- but to a much greater extent -- first raises our mortality salience, then provides cultural roles for participants when they need them most. This is not to say that all website authors are involved in a grand conspiracy to make individuals unconsciously think of their own mortality, but rather that those types of stories grab attention. Illegitimate websites spreading false or sensationalized information, and increasingly, traditionally sound sources of information succumbing to profit motives, undermine the credibility of the whole internet as an information delivery system. False

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<sup>53</sup> Coscarelli, Joe. All the Mistakenly Identified ‘Suspects’ in the Boston Bombing Investigation. New York Magazine. 4/19/13. Accessed 1/22/14 .  
<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/04/wrongly-accused-boston-bombing-suspects-sunil-tripathi.html>.

information breeds cynicism and provides a justification for inaction, ignorance and cultural misguidance, specifically when this information inhibits high mortality salience. It is possible that such an abundance of opinion and sensationalism could nihilism and fatalism in an individual who feels no control over the world around them. Indeed it could be argued President Barack Obama's "Hope" campaign took advantage of this very nihilism.

With the increased popularity of the internet comes a new type of mortality salience. This new type was pervasive and constant and calls in to question the types of long-term goals and plans that make for a healthy and productive society. This is the idea of the end of the world. Whether through disease, asteroids, zombies, god or man-made socio-economic catastrophe, there is substantiation for any type of impending doom. Where previously the end of the world was the realm of conspiracy theorists and video games, today it is pop culture. It is what I call *apocaphylia*. Shows like "The Walking Dead" have had enormous success as have books like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Furthermore, we have been bombarded with news stories about the "fiscal cliff" and class warfare. New diseases like the bird flu and West Nile Virus threaten humanity. We've been presented with climate change in a non-factual way that is ambiguous and open to argument, the effect of which has made *all* weather, something we never had control of to begin with, seem more out of control than usual. Nature is now out of balance with humanity, which is of course impossible. Even if the end is really coming, nothing will be done about it on a collective level simply because, on an individual level, we are still debating whether or not the end is coming.

Perhaps there is also a desire to remove oneself from the complicated and unyielding stresses of modern society. So many of our popular culture heroes simply reacted successfully to a fight-or-flight scenario. Sports, little more than displays of humanity's natural abilities, have enjoyed unwavering

popularity since the beginning of recorded history. Perhaps the recent popularity of the post-apocalyptic theme is nothing more than a continuation of the fetishism of the return to nature, or, it is a combination of modern technocracy's effect on democracy, recently manifested within President Barack Obama's "politics of hope". "Hope" becomes a necessary tool of the politician when misinformation has rendered the political process as hopelessly complex. Americans "hope" their government will act as delegates by identifying and addressing real issues, though few believe they do. Living in a society that feels "out of control" helps maintain a level of nihilism that makes the post-apocalyptic wasteland setting a more legitimate storytelling device than, let's say, *The Jetsons*.

Our future as distopia creates a downward spiral, further intensifying mortality salience causing exploration deeper into the depths of American individualism. One example of the type of rabid individual is seen in the rise in popularity of survivalist culture. In the survivalist, something has caused a total belief in some impending doomsday scenario (the specifics are not important) that requires preparation *via* the purchase of material goods. In some individuals this belief is so strong that any other long term goals are deemed completely futile; the political system has completely failed them. Survivalist claims and theories are substantiated by a like minded community through the internet, hence the rise in non-religious apocaphylia. These individuals seem to outwardly display a sort of terror management in which their mortality salience concerns surviving the imminent death of the world. More than likely these individuals are attempting to sidestep their own anxieties by replacing their own death with the death of society, an infinitely more survivable experience. In essence their own mortality salience is soothed by their preparedness, not unlike the way bulletproof glass in a limousine might soothe a potential target for assassination. In this way these individuals may take pleasure in finding ways to purposefully increase their own mortality salience as a justification for their expense.

Additionally, if we cross-examine the actions of the survivalist, namely the purchase of material goods to be used to thwart off imminent death, with Zaleskiewicz *et al* we can see that even the most virulent survivalists are displaying typical American terror management techniques. They are not only individuating themselves in an existential sense but also using money and wealth as an anxiety buffer. Furthermore, in the context of the doomsday fantasy, the acquisition of survival goods can be seen as a backdoor attempt at building substantial wealth and power without contributing to a system to which one is individuating themselves from in the first place. In other words, the commonly held vision of a post apocalyptic world developed through popular culture is one in which a money economy no longer exists and objects are appraised based on their *use value*. In theory those individuals who have large stores of money today will be impotent tomorrow and those individuals who have stockpiled useful goods will replace them in a hierarchy of wealth.

The attempted transfer of wealth from money to use value is one example of commodification influencing cultural and existence. To the survivalist, there is a quantifiable boundary to continued existence. For many, less rampantly individualistic Americans, the social networking website Facebook, has quantified both personal experience and friendship. Companies have begun to apply dollar amounts to each 'like' they have on facebook. One group, Syncapse, "measured several aspects of Facebook fan-to-brand relationships across 20 major consumer brands. It estimated that fans were worth an average value of \$136.38<sup>54</sup>." Algorithms are now used to determine a person's online influence and purchasing power, with gifts and financial benefits (lower prices) going to those who exemplify these "ideals". How many friends you have or how many people saw a video you made is now easily counted and adds to the existential pressure Americans already face. These massive social

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<sup>54</sup> Mulvihill, Amanda. Measuring the Value of a 'Like'. EContent. Jul/Aug2011. Vol. 34 Issue 6. Pg 8-12.

networks operate in a very similar fashion to those personal networks that have existed since the beginning of civilization, only now they are easily quantified and continue to operate even when the user is asleep. The creation of a profile lends further weight to this spiral of individuation and cynicism. Though we maintain that no two people are the same we select our identity from several options on a pull down menu. Genres and subgenres are created to help explain this differentiation -- music is a great example of this. The band Explosions in the Sky, for example, is described as post rock/noise rock/ambient. This new language of genres, once interpreted, actually says something. While the overall acceptance of the multitude of these new microdemographics seems egalitarian in its foundation I believe that it poses some difficulties for the modern American existentially. Much in the same way that false information distributed over the internet creates a cynical lens through which society filters all information, the acceptance of an infinitude of individual paths of identity cheapens true individualism and, most importantly subversion. People's beliefs are not accepted for their content and contemplated by an inquisitive society, but rather, tolerated and ultimately ignored as part of one individual's right to their own opinion. In the United States it is considered rude to discuss one's political opinions in many public settings, perhaps not because we all have strong political beliefs, but instead because our beliefs and opinions make up who we are and to argue such things would be to argue against another person's identity. Unfortunately, I believe this is contributing to the type of inner division that has historically been shown to lead to a society's failure and enslavement. Once kings ruled with a monopoly on violence and a fear of death. Today our own existential anxieties cause forms of terror management that allow us to be divided and conquered.

## SECTION 3

### Existentialism in the Digital Age:

*The Case for Political Life,  
Outside appraisal as the Yardstick of  
a Meaningful Existence*

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What I described in the first section was a transition from life in a violent juxtaposition to death. The transition occurred when modern society was able to take control of life by relegating death to exception. With this transition came a new way of looking at existence. Foucault describes this transition as humanity changing from a “living animal with additional capacity for political existence” to “an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question<sup>55</sup>.” Death as the bookend of an “average lifespan” is what gives time definition. Death is the creation of the existential: Any changes to both the average lifespan or relationship with death within a given society would alter the existential question. I believe these changes could be predicted. Whether or not existence was more readily meaningful historically is irrelevant because the question of *what gives life meaning today* did not yet exist. Mortality Salience today has much different effects than at times in the past. What makes us less animal today exists only symbolically in our increased reliance on technology and estrangement from what is traditionally seen as nature: survival (fight or flight) and death. Both these things are not out of individual control. Of course we can resist the impotence that comes as a result of too much technology, but further than that we require a fundamental change in the way we think about nature, precisely, that nature, is not something that human beings can be estranged from. Nature permeates all

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<sup>55</sup> See Foucault. Pg 143.



things, and like thermal equilibrium, everything is subject to its processes and eventually subcumbs. When human beings remember their inability to remove themselves from nature and the environment, they can begin to restructure what a meaningful life is, by redefining their relationship with death to eliminate the feeling of countdown.

It is important to recognize that politics, humans as the “political animal,” because of the level of consciousness we have come to enjoy, is just as inseparably linked to nature and existence. To me, politics always appeared to be a tool through which one’s goals could be achieved. Politics is that process represented best on CSPAN and nothing else. When people say, “you don’t talk about politics in certain settings,” there is a specific idea and set of topics one has in mind. Usually government: national or at least regional in scale. However, as Aristotle first stated, and Foucault reiterated for us, we are animals with an additional capacity for political thought, in other words, that which is beyond our animal nature is political -and even that line is blurry. Even the hermit, who lives off the land, is only so defined in reference to their position in the political sphere. The Ancient Greeks knew this. The English words “idiot” and “idiosyncratic” are derived from the Greek word *idios* meaning “a private person,” or one who does not participate in the political world, for the Greeks, the *polis*. There is much truth in etymology, one who did not participate in politics and instead focused exclusively on private matters would be ignorantly denying the complete emersion of human existence in the political realm. If humans are naturally political animals then politics is as much a part of nature as the environment. It seems obvious that we as a species would grow nihilistic when separated from the reigns of this natural political process.

When referring to politics, I do not simply mean only that which goes on in Legislative and Administrative halls but to all human interaction. Beginning in prehistory, human beings and pre-humans

found it necessary to group together. Eventually language and civilization sprang out of this. Like language these groups can be seen as circles of both inclusion and exclusion. There is more to a definition of what they are *not* than a definition of what they are. For example: I am an English speaker. I am not a Spanish speaker. I am not a German speaker. I do not know American Sign Language, and on and on. The natural inclination of human beings to form groups lends itself brilliantly to present day demographic society and genrefication I referred to earlier. As Carl Schmitt described it, there is the familiar and the “other.”

The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is specific for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, *existentially* something different and alien...[my italics]<sup>56</sup>

Yes, enemy is a strong word, but Schmitt disarms it immediately. Just as I’ve attempted to do to with our limited popular concept of what is political or nature, what is an enemy is broadened to “the other.” Politically, as it pertains specifically to governance, this antithesis rule has always been the case. There has always been friend and foe, the familiar and the other. Recently the Occupy movement, by focusing on the “99%” sought to redefine the American “other”. The need for the prehistoric group and the modern constitution arose from the distinction between friend and foe. The divine ordainment of the Sovereign, the constitutional prescriptions for ministers and legislatures: Foucault explains that these are simply “forms that made an essentially normalizing power acceptable<sup>57</sup>.” Norms too can be more easily explained through an antithesis definition. How does one answer the question “what is normal?” except by offering what is not? Law, Foucault says, is no longer simply the sword in the hand of the sovereign,

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<sup>56</sup>Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. University of Chicago Press. 2007. Pg 27.

<sup>57</sup> See *Foucault*. Pg 144.

the power of death for a crime. Law is increasingly a corrective guide, a regulatory track for society to follow. These are the cultural norms both purposefully and unintentionally propagated by the media, doctors, clergy, the entertainment industry and politicians. The creation of these norms is an effect of the estrangement of death and commodification. Life becomes quantified, not just through social media but financially and through material goods and services. There is a need to perfect, discipline and make ourselves as useful as possible. Although we believe ourselves to be living out free will we are confined by our need to not abuse “the right to life.”

Where did this right to life come from however? In ecclesiastical societies, life was a gift with a behavioral ceiling. Today it is the floor that we use as an existential yardstick. Just like the group is defined by the frontiers that surround it, we cultivate our existence based on, not what a meaningful existence is (I can assure that task is impossible), but what is not a meaningful existence. In America, productivity is everything. Often individuals introduce themselves by offering their name and occupation -- if not immediately it is usually one of the first questions people ask when meeting someone new. One example of this occupationalism is the military culture that has developed in this country since the end of Vietnam. Though I was not alive then, I have felt the guilt for the mistreatment of soldiers coming home from Vietnam emanate from those who were. I am well aware of the Vietnam Vet stereotype as a character. Then there is the former “Be All You Can Be” slogan for the Army (the intersection of war and advertising), though it might as well have represented the entire military. After the September 11th attacks, a stint in the army was automatic fulfillment, unfortunately for soldiers this guarantee extended only to those in the periphery of soldiers, meaning, that many soldiers have come back conflicted and with PTSD. However, the idea of one’s existence being given meaning by those around you is an important one. These are the new heroics, however they are eroding and have been for a generation.

Becker writes:

The great perplexity of our time, the churning of our age, is that the youth have sensed -- for better or for worse -- a great social-historical truth: that just as there are useless self sacrifices in unjust wars, so too is there an ignoble heroics of whole societies: It can be the viciously destructive heroics of Hitler's Germany or the plain debasing and silly heroics of the acquisition and display of consumer goods, the piling up of money and privilege that now categorizes whole ways of life, capitalist and soviet<sup>58</sup>

What Becker discovered was that the old heroics, which were for a millennia sufficient to constitute a meaningful existence, no longer held water in the face of new voyeuristic technology like television, and certainly no longer have any clout in the digital age. Like the creation of a cultural hero, existence is given meaning by those around it. Today our access to information has catapulted the boundaries of heroics well beyond the capabilities of most individual's achievement. For example: in the 90's into the early 2000's there was a 15 year period that can be described as an era of hyperbole, by which I mean, everything was "extreme." The spread of the internet into the average American household coincided with the rise of extreme sports to a new level of legitimacy and prominence. Jumping out of an airplane without a parachute, as Travis Pastrana did in 2007, is something most people would consider insane; however, to the extreme sportsman or the avid adrenaline junky, these acts are simply a way to get farther from the floor, which represents normal or even sub-normal. I believe Pastrana is an interesting subject because he appears to be so content, and though his achievements are largely individual, he holds world records that inextricably link him back to the whole of humanity. Pastrana lives out the hyperbole, and the rest of America seeing this fulfillment of the existential task -- a well defined individual who is a part of something bigger than just himself -- buys "extreme" energy sports-drinks, "extreme" flavored chips, t-shirts branded with their favorite extreme

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<sup>58</sup> see Becker. Pg 7.

sports star's logo, dirtbikes, subarus and "extreme" vacations like skydiving just to keep up. Again, whether or not Travis Pastrana personally feels as though he is living a meaningful life is not as important to us, nor could it be known, but rather how he is presented to us is what makes a difference. Travis Pastrana is presented to us as an outlier. We know from retrospection that those who are remembered are outliers and that these outliers are people whose lives seem to have had the most meaning. We can deduce a simple fact that we can not give our own lives meaning or more importantly that fulfillment cannot be achieved from individuation alone. If this need for affirmation from others holds true, then we can begin to understand how the bombardment of information in the digital age has pushed existential answers farther from our grasp.

We began this discussion with Terror Management Theory and the subconscious fear of death, mortality salience, that steers us towards cultural influences as a way to sculpt meaning out of existence. The fact that our folk heroes, men and women like Pastrana, seem to lack mortality salience doesn't quite fit with this theory. In all actuality, these individuals likely have a stronger mortality salience, however, they must have different cultural influences through which to seek meaning. These influences pushed them towards a passion and singular purpose. Einstein, at the young age of twelve, had Max Tamey, a young medical student who introduced him to physics and mathematics<sup>59</sup>. Pastrana had influence in his life that introduced him to motorcycles and mountain biking at age four<sup>60</sup>. These men have talent, but they also have drive and passion which in turn became marketable as heroics. If the Ancient Greeks had the internet their, YouTube would be called Homer.

In reality I cannot say whether or not our existential dilemma is more trying than our ancestor's. I have never lived in another age. All I can do is posit the ways in which I believe we have let new

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<sup>59</sup> Clark, Ronald W. Einstein: The Life and Times. 1971. Avon books. New York. Pg 34.

<sup>60</sup> No author. <http://www.travispastrana.com/#/en/TRAVIS/Bio/>, accessed 2/6/14.

technologies of infinite information, exploration and leisure raise the bar too high too fast. I have experienced the digital equivalent of Columbus's expedition without the safety net of ecclesiastic society. Furthermore, as we discussed above, the internet and the entertainment industry as a conduit of individualism has funneled society into demographics based, not on beliefs or physical appearance -definitely a benefit- but on advertising and purchasing power -a downside. Each group has their heroes that they raise up to prominence, to be admired by a larger part of the whole. Those at the bottom, motivated by individuation, splinter off and create new groups -genres and subgenres- which then raise their own heroes and flags. What we have now is a sea of heroes in which we are all drowning in our own mortality, yet few of us stand out to be rescued from and placed among the true heroes in immortality.



SIPRESS

*"Don't freak out—it's just a save-the-date."*

## concluding...

So we have talked about death, but really it was no more prevalent in this text than it ever is. Death is always there defining existence through limitation. I by no means meant to make a meaningful existence seem unattainable, but rather chose these topics in an attempt to cover a broad range of themes that suggest one thing: that we as a society need a shift in consciousness, more specifically our relationship with death, in order to salvage the dying world we currently occupy. I believe that a shift in collective human consciousness can only come from a change in our relationship with death. That is not to say that we remove the fear altogether, but rather that the effects of mortality salience are malleable and can be adjusted through changes in political involvement and awareness. In essence we must take back control of society to eliminate collective cynicism. Even a slight change in society's relationship with mortality salience would cause a butterfly effect that would change our perception and definition of our time on earth.

The process of changing collective consciousness as it pertains to mortality salience begins with embracing death, not to say that we should jump willingly into oncoming traffic but rather that our society should handle the ceremonious aspects differently. Not much has changed in the US in this regard since our ecclesiastical roots. Revere the elderly, and do not segregate from our population those persons who can give us the most perspective and guidance. Let children be dangerous and do dangerous things and don't allow the dual leviathans of legal liability and insurance to eliminate control and force upon us norms for their own benefit. Learn to read between the lines in the newspaper and internet; there are many people who would wish to scare us all in order to profit themselves including the defense industry, government and media. Don't allow yourself to be genreified, or in other words,



experience the world without arbitrary filters, most of which were designed to get you to buy something or vote for someone. Learn information literacy and participate in dismantling the yokes of for-profit media and political “participation” as they stand now. Be the rational consumer that Adam Smith always wanted us to be: greater freedom comes from doing for oneself rather than expecting protection from deceit and corruption to manifest itself. The nihilism that I have referred to so often in this paper has led to a society that has in large part relinquished control to unseen forces. I believe the difficulty in creating a meaningful existence today stems in large part from this lack of control.

My reasoning for choosing this topic to write about is the same as my reasoning for choosing Political Science as a degree path. This choice allowed me the freedom to research and discuss a wide range of topics. Perhaps death and information literacy are not immediately relevant to each other, however, given our limited time on this earth I feel that a level of brevity is required; an aspect of information delivery that is lost amongst the profit motive. The ailments of modern society exist in this systemic level. To attempt to critique one aspect of society at a time would be to fail to acknowledge a crumbling foundation: to fix the sink in a drafty and dilapidated house, as it were. In my opinion our socio-economic woes are an effect of the perspective placed on life by mortality salience. It is important to note that this work is my first words on this subject. I attempted to cover a lot of ground in order to convey the vastness and subversive nature of mortality salience on the modern American. In a way the above text is a grocery list of topics for further discussion.

In reality the paper was spun out of my interest of survivalist culture and the concept of living one's life openly in juxtaposition to death. I felt as though it was this openness that made this culture group so fascinating. The paper slowly morphed over time into what is now, a study of broader death and its individual and collective effects on humanity. The vastness of this subject is in part a trick I

pulled in order to be able to cover a broader selection from the plethora of subjects I studied at USM. That is not to say that I fraudulently coughed up a paper using a naturally broad subject, in fact, it would be hard to cover the effects of mortality salience without deviations or digressions. It is a subject of seemingly endless connection to our consciousness. The problem was that once I chose a roots-eye-view of human motivation I struggled to find individual magnified instances of human behavior that couldn't be traced back to this connectivity. I did not expect to discover enlightenment nor inspire it in others, but it is my sincerest hope that those who seek similar ends do indeed find some light and contemplative engagement. That you could be closer, and not farther away.



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