

# Memento mori

[Life](#), [Death](#)



|| Memento Mori- The Phrase that Scared the World || Alice Greider || Elizabethtown Area High School || Death, the ultimate unknown, pervades every aspect of human life, crossing geopolitical, racial, and religious borders. The overbearing arm of the death system protrudes into society so much that society wouldn't exist without it. A mixture of seventy-five students and teachers at a high school ages 13-60 participated in a survey that asked questions regarding their fears and beliefs about death. In addition, the Director for Palliative Care at a local hospital was interviewed for his insight. It was found that despite age and religious differences in the participants, the uncertainty of death forces people to turn to religions and cultures to develop a life-sustaining death belief which explains its meaning. Despite this however, the fear of death and the anxiety it brings is intrinsic to human nature. Ultimately, people simply deny their mortality in order to live their life, adopting a culturally-binding identity that defines their relations with other people holistically. Using studies from the Terror Management Theory, and the works of Ernest Becker (The Denial of Death), it was found that our most aggressive behaviors are even a result of this fear, which is the cause of one's relations with other people and societies beyond one's own. The beliefs that people hold in their views and fears of death are instrumental in shaping society, whose elements would have no purpose if death was not there to generate fear of it. In the next 12 months, 54 million people will die. Death is universal, experienced by every living thing on this earth. Every society has different views, mythologies, and cultures concerning death. We have conquered our physical limitations, exploring space and beyond, developing the means to become rulers of the

natural world, defying gravity in moving faster and farther than anything else. We even scientifically manipulate and conquer our own body and genes. " All this, yet to die" (Shen & Bennick, 2003). Our greatest limitation is the only thing left to conquer: Death. It is the only thing we cannot master, arguably rendering every single one of our accomplishments insignificant and futile. On a day-to-day basis " we participate in a multitude of activities to distance ourselves from harm and death. " Everything from choosing clothes to wear in the morning to putting our seat belt on in the car is meant to prevent death. Yet we know that " these day-to-day strategies are doomed to fail. " The fact that we will die is irrefutable. As a species, we have the mental capacity to ponder the infinite, " yet [are] housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping, decaying body". We know that we will die, but we are wholly unable to do anything about it. Philosophers and ordinary people alike have conjectured about what death is, what comes after death, and what place it has in our lives. But as the author and philosopher Sam Keen says, when it comes down to it, " Death is unacceptable. I did not sign that contract.... we love life, and death is an insult to our spirit" (as quoted in Shen & Bennick, 2003). The fact that people do not know what happens after death, coupled with the fear of the process of dying, makes them even more afraid of the inevitability of their own deaths, to the point that they even deny it. Fear of death is perhaps the greatest motivator of human behavior, at times prompting a desire to understand, seek knowledge, and contribute to others. But modern man eventually accepts death with a sense of foreboding and horror, but anticipates that he may be able to prevent and conquer disease, even aging and delay the inevitability of death. Ultimately,

the beliefs, views and subsequent fears regarding our eventual death motivate and influence human behavior to the point that societies wouldn't exist without its' vast influence. Death pervades every aspect of life and to fear it is a response that is hardwired within us; it is instinctual. And yet, the industrial world has sterilized itself so that we may hear about death on a daily basis, but rarely interact with it firsthand. Pick up any newspaper, and there will be headlines about a death or large number of deaths. There is a famine in Somalia, militant group skirmishes in the DRC, murders of the drug war in Colombia and Mexico, earthquakes in Turkey, and religious factions fighting in Northern Ireland every day, yet as a world psyche we do not collectively notice these deaths. The social taboo upon death means that one can only feel qualified to deal with death on an individual basis. Go beyond the death of someone close and people cannot deal with it. They do not feel sadness at these deaths as they do a death they know, and although that can be attributed to the need for emotion to have personal connection, it is still worth noting that one can pass human demise and destruction off as casually as if someone told them about the weather for the day. At the same time, death has an overwhelming presence in everyday society. As in many countries, the American death system acts to keep death at a distance from everyday life and to gloss over many of its harsh aspects. Dying is not cheap. The death industry rakes in hundreds of millions each year through pre-medical treatments, cadaver dressing (which includes make-up, artificial skin inserts, and wigs), freezing, embalming cremations, burials, funerals, casket-building, urn production, home-visiting, and church and temple services (Langwith, 2008). Additionally, the societal death system can be expanded to

include people (life insurance agents, lawyers, doctors, coroners, and florists), places (funeral homes, cemeteries, hospices, and health care institutions), occasions associated with death (Good Friday, Memorial Day, and specific person's death anniversary), objects (tombstones, hearses, obituaries, sympathy cards), and symbols (black armbands, skull and crossbones) (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). The apparent presence of death systems reflects the prevalence of death in society and the importance of addressing it. The sheer magnitude of the far-reaching arm of the death industry is irrefutable. Despite the fact that there is a societal taboo on talking about death, the fact cannot be ignored that death plays a huge role in society, almost to the point where society wouldn't exist without it. The prevalence of death in our society, coupled with our inquisitive desire to know, means that people are forced ask themselves what the meaning and place death has in their lives. We are mortal- but why? Why do we even have the capacity and instinct to live if we are just going to die in the end? When death intrudes on our lives, is life irrevocably lost, as if death is a wall into which we crash and cannot get over? Furthermore, what impact does our death have over the value and significance of our lives? The fact that we as humans know in advance that we will die is unique to our species, and as such we place philosophical importance on how one views and values death. It could be a stage of life; a stair to climb, a door to pass through, or a river to cross. Believing in no afterlife, although an unthreatening view, means a loss of loved ones and values forever, as opposed to other religions that say that you will be united with loved ones after death and retain your personal self through death (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). In viewing and understanding

death, society needs an explanation for this ultimate, perilous, and unknown death, so they turn to their religion to give to them some feeling that despite the fact that they will die, their life had meaning and will continue beyond that death. Each of the five major world religions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, teach different views about the afterlife and man's relationship with his fate after death (Riley & Haberstein, 1968).

Christians believe that a soul can be forgiven of its sins and go to heaven and be with God, or that a very sinful person is punished by Satan in Hell.

The idea of salvation gives emphasis on an afterlife in which the identity of the person remains intact. Although the Judaic faith believes in a spiritual higher state of being as an afterlife called Olam Ha-Ba (The World to Come), there is very little dogma about it, for Judaism believes that death is not the end of human existence and is more focused on actions in life here. Muslims retain the belief that Allah is ready to receive the true believers in heaven.

People's lives are weighed on a balance, and if the good deeds outweigh the bad ones, then the person goes to heaven. But if the bad deeds are heavier, then they suffer in the eternal inferno of Hell (Jahannam).

The Eastern religions are less concrete in their beliefs and do not provide an exact afterlife, but rather a process to reach spiritual completeness. Buddhism teaches that nirvana, a spiritual oblivion, is attained through a process of reincarnations, which are based on the karma, the deeds of past lives.

Hinduism bases its ideas on the relationship between the dharma, a person's civic and religious piety, and moksa, the attainment of salvation (Riley & Haberstein, 1968). Many beliefs of a person's acceptance into their afterlife or spiritual completeness hinges on their deeds during life. Judgment and

salvation, along with the concept of heaven and hell, means people can be divided into good and evil. From that comes the fear of 'where will I be sent?' In essence, the idea of religion is to give meaning and continuation to one's existence. It helps answer the question: "if I am going to die what does it matter?" and dissipates some of the fear that shrouds death (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). Religion is a part of every society; 86% of the world, but without that fear of death, much of the beliefs in it would have no grounds (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). But beyond the questions concerning what we know objectively about death, perhaps the biggest question to ask is "why do we fear death?" and "what is it that makes dying so terrifying?"

Scientifically, the fear of death is named thanatophobia. Fear results from the care we take to preserve our lives; we only live once, so we are careful with ourselves, but are afraid that simply being careful is not enough (Kagan, 2010). Fear is a response to danger, and it goes without saying that death is dangerous to us. But the different types of fear of death are numerous, chief amongst them being the fear of the unknown. It is part of the human condition to want to know and understand the world about us, but one knows so much about life and so little about death that it creates a huge amount of fear in one's mind. And because one does not know for certain what lies beyond the grave, one worries that one's personal beliefs in an afterlife may be wrong. People go through life each with their own convictions of what happens after death, but there is always the chance that those beliefs are wrong. Then what? When faced with the reality of their own mortality, people tend to question their beliefs. In the case of a dual-afterlife, the worry can then shift to, "will I get into heaven?", "will Allah accept me?", or "have I

done enough good in this life to be rewarded in the next one? " In addition to the mystery of being dead is the fear of the process of actively dying (Fritcher, 2011). Societies and people fear dying just as much as they fear the uncertainty of what comes after it. Dying means that people lose control of their lives, their authority, and of their dignity, as with such chronic deteriorative diseases like Alzheimer's, Multiple Sclerosis, and cancer. Furthermore, there is great fear over the possibility of a long, painful death. People tend to be afraid of extended pain when it comes to dying (Fritcher, 2011). In a survey conducted on students and teachers ages 13-60 in a high school, when given the question, " what would be the worst way to die" the majority answered with some sort of pain or extended suffering. " Burning" and " drowning" were common answers. Death is frightening in many ways because people fear the loss of this control and the pain that comes with death. Nobody has been able to tell us what it feels like to die, so that unknown factor terrifies people. There is also the fear of dying quickly or too soon. A sudden death leaves no time for the person to take care of " unfinished business": reminding their mother they love her, telling their friend or mentor how much they appreciate their support and guidance, even simply thanking the mailman for delivering their mail (Fritcher, 2011). The fear of an untimely death is very prominent; carpe diem stems from the idea that one should accomplish something before they die. It is considered tragic when a child dies because they still had their life to live and experiences to experience. Similarly, another common fear is the concern about what will happen to those one leaves behind, as discussed previously. People fear for the sadness their death will cause others. Study subjects show an



overwhelming preference for dying in one's sleep, with no distress or with no prior knowledge of the fact. In the same survey, the majority of test subjects also answered that they would not want to know when they are going to die and would still be afraid of their death even after knowing. Life is dangerous. This fact coupled with the unpredictability of our death leads to death anxiety, the fear and anticipation of a future danger in our death. Across continental, economical, and political cultures, " death anxiety is a common denominator- no one is immune" (Shen & Bennick, 2003). It pervades every aspect of human life, so we try to secure our safety and security in literal ways. We participate in activities everyday meant to prevent us from being killed and dying. We eat so we do not starve; we bathe so we do not contract disease; we look both ways before crossing the street so we do not get hit by a car; we wear clothes appropriate for the weather so we do not fall ill. Nearly every human behavior can be linked somehow to combating our anxiety of death. Death anxiety is not specific to or more prevalent in any one culture. It is a universal phenomenon, but by looking at various studies conducted, some trends emerge. Most importantly, death anxiety is not linear; it may depend on life accomplishments and past and/or future regrets as well as factors such as gender, age, race, and religion. Nonetheless, women seem to have greater death anxiety than men, but they are also more likely to admit it, so that observation may be just be due to the nature of genders. Older adults report less death anxiety than younger people, as do people with those with strong religious convictions. It makes sense that older people are less afraid of death, because they have lived their life to some extent; young people have not had the chance to live, and

consequently they fear being deprived of that opportunity. Respectively, those with strong religious convictions are sound in their belief system, so have little worry or question as to their fate. Those in the middle, being only somewhat religious, experience the doubt and question of what the afterlife will bring, and so are afraid of that unknowing factor (Langwith, 2008). (Corr, Nabe & Corr, 2003) Looking at age demographics of death anxiety also tells a revealing tale. The fact that we will die is commonly understood. But for children, the developmental process of understanding this fact shows itself in stages as a child grows. These stages effect how a child deals with death, whether it be the death of somebody close to them, a pet, or being ill themselves. In 2002, 1.5 percent of the 2.4 million deaths were of children, totaling 35,910 deaths (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). In children, death is seen as reversible, not final. In early stages of development, death is seen as indefinite, then as a tangible person, whom they can send away and defeat. It is not until the final stage that children recognize that death is a process operating within us. Children who are grieving or coping with an illness may feel as if it is their fault, that they are being punished for something (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). Youths have a low tolerance for death, stemming from little structuring of the future (Riley & Haberstein, 1968). They often do not think of death as applying to them, as is seen by the stereotypical thrill-seeking teenager or young adult high on the possibility of danger. Adrenaline junkies and scary-moviegoers revel in the thrills of high-risk activities and stories because it takes them to the edge of death and back. The fact that they survived heightens their feeling of being above death. On the other hand, the elderly, age 65 or older, have been found to have less anxiety of

death than younger persons. They have lived long, full lives and have had the chance, with the death of their peers around them, to view their own acceptance of death as a socialization process that they must go through. Additionally, they may feel that because they are old and have had a chance to live their lives, they are not as averse to giving it up as a younger person would. Death is less of a threat. However, loss of dignity, fear of isolation and of dependence play a key role in death attitude among the elderly. Most elders want to die at home and in peace without becoming a burden on their families, for less apprehension is found if the person is surrounded by their family and home for support. In a youth-oriented society, the elderly may be cast off as "expired," but their attitude towards death is often the most harmonious least conflicting. In accepting death, they can enjoy what they have left. (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003) Instrumental to considering the place of death in life and how people view it are questions regarding how society deals with the death of others and acts accordingly. For it is through the death of others around them that people get their beliefs about it. When someone dies, it brings the reality of death immediately close to their loved ones. The bereaved are directly subjected to death, heightening their awareness of their own. Although grief responses to the deaths of others vary, the positive or negative transition determines one's view in support or lack of a belief system, death, and self-confidence. Grief and coping with death, exhibited by the Kübler-Ross model, follows the pattern of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, through which we come to terms with death's inevitability. Each personal reaction shapes one's own view of death. An intensive care nurse is going to have a different outlook on

death and will react differently when someone close to them dies than a teenager who has never lost anyone before. The fear of death and loss drives these people to be who they are. Realizing the reality of someone else's death forces one to realize the fragility and value of one's own life. From there one must come to terms with their mortality, something we instinctually avoid due to fear. (Gregory, 1987) One strategy for coming to terms with our mortality is quite simply denying it. Influential social psychologist Ernest Becker, in his book *The Denial of Death* argued that human society is essentially an elaborate, symbolic defense mechanism against the knowledge of our mortality (Hughes, 1998). People develop strategies to fend off the certainty of their death and to escape into the feeling they are immortal, such as belief in an eternal soul or afterlife (Becker, 1978; Hughes, 1998). In the great Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, the character Yudhishthira says: " The most wondrous thing is that all around us people can be dying and we don't realize it can happen to us. " Becker would argue that this is because people purposefully deny their death to preserve their life. Denial of death keeps us functioning, for if we were constantly aware of our fragility, of the nothingness we are a split second away from at all times, we'd go crazy. Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to distract him from his fate. He drives himself into an oblivious state by playing social games, psychological tricks, and harboring personal occupations. Previously, it could have been argued that aesthetics serve no survival or aggressive purpose in helping us live and not die, however Becker allows for arts and beauty by saying that they are a distraction from the death that awaits. Actions that have no purpose for

survival are simply a way for people to forget that their life will end. To have that inescapable doom hanging over one's whole life, it would make sense that one would want a distraction. (Hughes, 1998) But that distraction does not change reality, and deep down, people still know that they will die. Despite this though, throughout history people have had methods to prevent their death. People brewed, drank, and used potions, alchemy, and herbal medicine to prolong their life. Egyptians were buried with all their possessions in life, so to extend it in the afterlife, and Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang, fixated as he was with the fear of death, sought out the Elixir of Life, and insisted upon being buried with over 8,000 terracotta soldiers to protect him against whatever awaited him after death. Today, although the methods have changed, we still do many things for the purpose of extending our lives; taking vitamin and supplements, aging reversal techniques, genetic manipulation, and other medical advancements (Shen & Bennick, 2003). Although life expectancy is drastically higher than it was in the time of elixirs and potions, and the chance of death lower, death anxiety is still as prominent. Death threatens our life; it suggests that it has no meaning. We want our life to have meaning, so people construct a death illusion; a life-sustaining immortality system to soothe the realities of life and death and to convince themselves of the death denial. As previously discussed, today we turn in part to religions, which partly serve to provide an existence after death. But even in ancient times, no civilization was without myths regarding views on death, which irrefutably shaped the society and provided that death illusion through which they could deny the finality of death. The religions of ancient times served as modern ones do today to provide for an afterlife, a

reassurance of continuation of life after death. Nearly all had a concept of an Underworld, a place usually below or separate from earth and populated by souls of the dead. Whether it be the Greek Underworld, the Norse Valhalla or the Egyptian Duat, ancient civilizations developed that concept of existence after death to satisfy their death illusions (Wilkinson, 2011). The ancient people understood that death inevitably happened, but needed an explanation as to why, so they created myths and monuments to the dead. The Great Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, and the Terracotta Army in the tomb of Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang most famously were all built as monuments meant to honor and preserve the person in death, just as graves and memorials are today, an ever-present reminder of death. We are burdened with the anxiety and the knowledge that we will die. Because our physical world is doomed, we turn also to the immortality of symbols and culture of which we are a part to live on after us. Being part of a culture provides meaning and a sense of security in an unsure world, and many cultural arrangements involve coping with death fear and denial, for every culture mourns and fears death. By identifying ourselves with something that will extend beyond our lifetime, we ensure that we will be a part of that extension and thereby live forever. People found identities on something enduring, because it connects their lives with what endures. Celebrity and fame means to live on after you die, and from that comes the obsession with becoming famous or well-known in society, particularly when viewed as part of the American dream. People do not want to be a 'nobody' because then they are forgotten after they die; they strive to be a 'somebody' and ensure their longevity. Growing up, people go to school and achieve acceptable

grades so they can get into a college or begin a career so they can make something of themselves and be remembered. Remembrance is only a combatant against the fear of being forgotten after death. (Shen & Bennick, 2003) In addition, heroism plays into our quest for immortality. " Heroism is an attempt to transcend the limits of mortality, " says Merlyn Mowrey, a professor of philosophy and religion at Central Michigan University (as quoted in Shen & Bennick, 2003). Lending one's legacy to legend is a surefire way to ensure that they will exist after death. On a similar tract, even procreation is an act inspired by fear of death and a method to secure one's continuation after one dies. Children are the symbols of life in the future. By essentially creating copies of oneself, they lend their life to the future and thus secure one's genetic continuation. By this logic, raising and acting for the benefit of our children and family are included as acts motivated by fear of death. People get a job and work so that their family is provided for so they can secure immortality for their family as well as themselves. Adult lives are consumed by their raising their children, but in essence they do it so that they will live on after death. Upon even closer examination, more and more human actions within society can be attributed to the fear of death. The Terror Management Theory (TMT), developed by social psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg, states that all human behavior is motivated by the fear of mortality. They point to mortality salience, the awareness of one's own death, as affecting the decision making of individuals and societies alike. TMT basically says that when reminded of their own death, people react aggressively to those of a different cultural, political, or religious background. As previously discussed,

people need to be a part of a culture that will survive them. By adopting a culturally sanctioned immortality system, people can feel less anxious about death. Individuals need to have faith in a meaningful worldview and feel as though they are valued, protected members of significance within it. If that worldview and culture are threatened by someone with a differing immortality system, people have a need to feel anxiety. For example, if a person is part of a Christian society, then they adopt the belief that the world was created in six days by God. Then along comes someone from Malawi, for instance, who believes that the world was created out of a drop of milk. Who is right? The Christian is threatening the Malawian's belief system by believing something different, for if the Malawian is wrong, then he is fearful because it brings up that uncertainty about his death- belief system, and vice versa. TMT says that the person will be aggressive towards the other person because they undermine their immortality system. Our most aggressive behaviors are a result of death anxiety; without the fear of death driving them, how we interact as societies would be very different. To prove this, the developers of TMT conducted an experiment. Test subjects completed a standard personality questionnaire designed to remind them of their own death, then were instructed to allot an amount of hot sauce to give to a person of a different political, religious, or cultural background. Those given death reminders allocated a significant amount more hot sauce than those without the reminders. So people's attitudes towards others even change when reminded of their own death. People are intolerant of those who do not share their death illusion. It reminds them of the impact conflicting immortality systems have on the validity of their own. On a



realistic scale though, it would be much more than hot sauce at stake: war, genocide, terrorism, guns, weapons, or even giving or withholding aid to countries in need. Ultimately, people are motivated by their fear of death in their actions towards others (Shen & Bennick, 2003). The implications of the Terror Management Theory study are monumental. People reject other cultures because they do not share the same death illusion- they question people's own beliefs of their mortality. That fear drives the need to assert that their way is right, through dejection, assimilation, and war. People need ways to seem immortal and reassure themselves against their death anxiety, so they conquer somebody else. Bloodlust, violence, war, competitions, and sports all satisfy the belief in one's immortality. The result: millennium of civilizations fighting for the right to be called victor in this war of fear, no matter the name history has given to the causes. "My God is better than your God, and we'll kick your [butt] to prove it" explains Sheldon Solomon, a psychology professor at Skidmore College, "and I'm willing to give up my life, and many other lives, to see my immortality system prevail". (Shen & Bennick, 2003) This has been seen in recent history with the 9/11 Terrorist attacks. The damage to the American psyche due to the death reminder made them feel threatened as a culture. Following the Terror Management Theory exactly, Americans built up their cultural symbol again and took aggressive action against those who caused that death reminder. Or rather, they are still trying to take aggressive action against the threat of the Al Qaeda terrorist group. So actually, "humans cause evil by wanting to triumph over evil in the quest for immortality" (Hughes, 1998). It seems almost like a catch-22; death is such a part of life that it seems to define it.

Evidence from Becker and the Terror Management Theory support the idea that death impacts every part of human life. People adopt a cultural identity and even behave a certain way towards other people simply because they will die. The societal taboo on death only strengthens it, makes it even more prevalent. Because death is supposed to be invisible, only seen if absolutely necessary (despite it's proven wide-reaching arm), it is feared all the more. That fear shapes people, forcing them to adopt belief systems that refute their mortality. Denying one's death is the only way one can function. But nothing can live forever, despite the myths and stories. In the meantime though, people can study what the existence of death does to societies. Life without death would change everything. The death system, for one, wouldn't have any purpose. Religions wouldn't need to exist as they do now. People would act on a more long-term basis, and lifestyles would simply slow down. Human interactions would be completely redefined; people would not act on the basis of being threatened. Their thinking would change monumentally, just as society would, no longer driven by the fear of death, but rather disconnected from it. Perhaps the most famous example of disconnection from the fear of death comes from Socrates, who explained in *Phaedo* and *Apology* why we cannot fear death. He says: " To fear death is nothing other than to think oneself wise when one is not. For it is to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not even turn out to be one of the greatest blessings of human beings. And yet people fear it as if they know for certain it is the greatest evil..." (as quoted in Lickerman, 2009). Let awareness of death purify our motives in life and make us live knowing what we will die in the end (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). Living as

such is to be strived for, because as Mark Twain said, " the fear of death followed from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time" (as cited in Lickerman, 2008). " We are all afraid of death, but we need to use that fear as a way of helping us live" (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2003). Doing so will help us face the real terror- dying before you've really lived. " You don't conquer anxiety over death, you meet it with courage.... you have to believe that life is good, even in spite of your death" (Sam Keen as quoted in Shen & Bennick, 2003). So perhaps the better question is not ' what are we to do with death', but rather ' what are we to do with life?' References

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