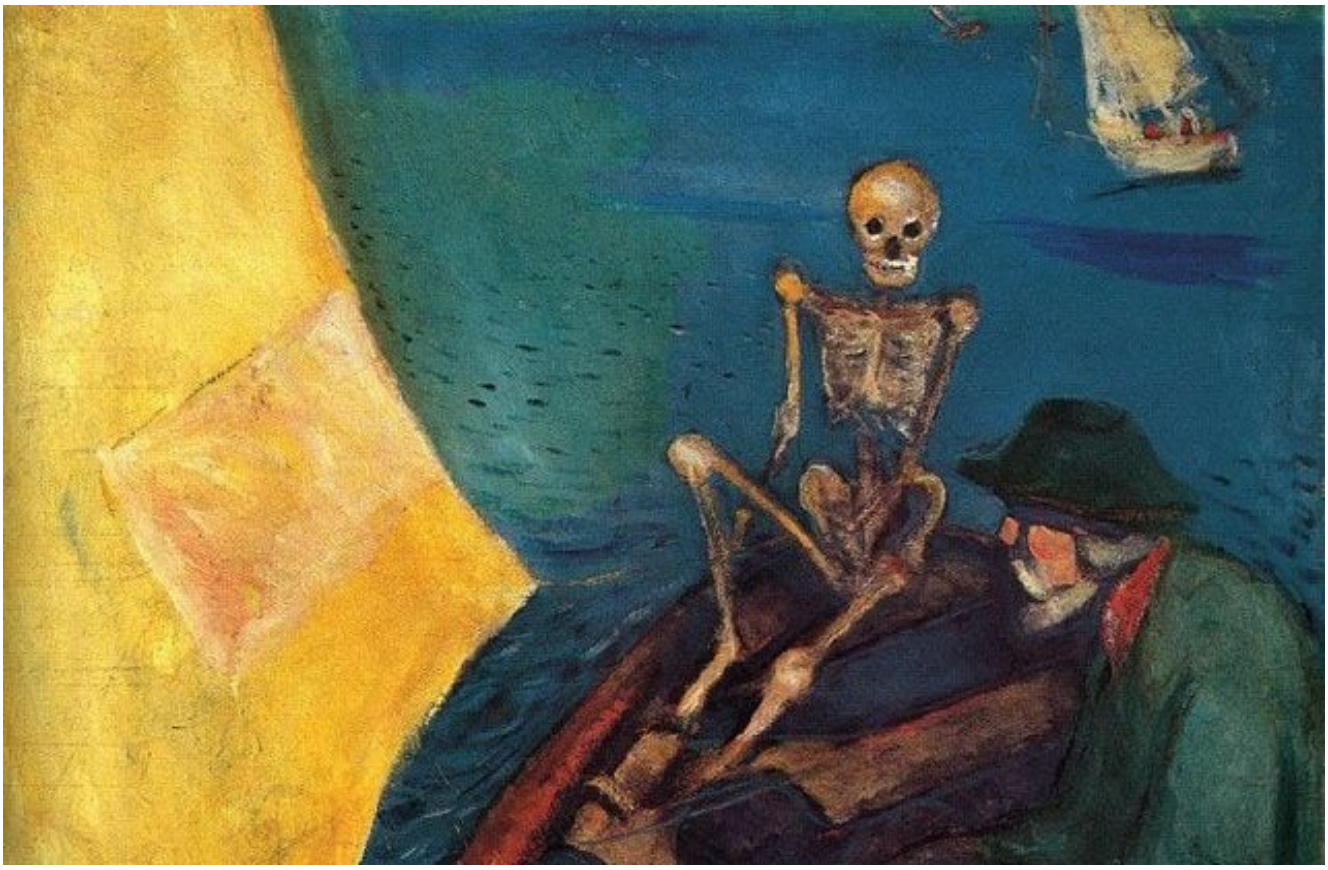
Death by a Thousand Denials

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away. —Philip K. Dick

by Larry McCloskey (September 2024)



Death at the Helm (Edvard Munch, 1893)

> *We are gods with anuses.* —Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1973

I am thinking of death today, and hope it is not because my new novel has just been launched. (It is shameful how I managed to get reference to *University of Lost Causes* into

another *NER* piece). With over 10,000 North American books produced by publishers, and over 500,000 self-published books released each year, it is unfortunate that the birth of book and reality of death are often regarded as synonymous. I am holding out for life after death, as well as life after publication.

As for death itself, that stark event coming at us with the certainty of a Swiss watch and velocity of a fright train, it is remarkable how little we deliberately think about it. The thinking being, I guess, why sweat what we cannot change, whereas the perversity of my mind protests that it is precisely because of its certainty that we must think upon it. Death and taxes are what we can depend on, and we think mightily about taxes, so why not death?

Perhaps the answer is as simple as this: we regard life and death as polar opposites, one having nothing to do with the other—irreconcilable differences leading to psychological divorce. Seems feasible, lacks logic. Since death follows upon life without exception, why do we not conclude that death is a fundamental aspect of life? And if death is an essential part of life, why do we fear, deny, wake up screaming at its prospect rather than ponder and speculate about what the cessation of life says about life?

It is question of meaning, or perhaps more accurately framed for the modern world, the lack thereof. Ernest Becker's 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*, nails the cultural malaise, then as now, with the following synopsis: "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive."

Becker exposes the human dilemma—we are enriched, made complex and potentially complete through awareness, unique to the human species—which also manifests itself as the curse of consciousness for being the only species with foreknowledge of

our physical demise. This foreknowledge is more than vague discomfort or minor irritation. Death, and not resolution of sexual repression as Freud believed, is our fundamental challenge, and possibly reason for being.

For most people the prospect of physical obliteration is simply more than they can handle. Few of us can look death in the eye from a solitary physical perspective and accept that it ends with inglorious ruin and decay. It is an inexplicable reality that leads to explicable insanity. Becker deftly explains the human conundrum: "Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever."

As such, death exists as the ultimate tragic demarcation, a sort of River Styx flowing through our self-induced, schizophrenic consciousness. Which begs the question, what to do? Though inviting the grim reaper to tea may be a bit much, it might help to regard life and death as the Siamese twins that they seem to be rather than as opposite as say, Trump and Biden in heated debate. (Biden's debate was lacklustre performance art; that is, a stiff, death-like performance in advance of the fact—after which his party consigned him to a political death). Maybe life and death are companionable, not because we are morbid or want them to be, but because according to philosopher Anthony Flew's mantra, we are required, "to follow the evidence wherever it leads."

And here's the truly remarkable thing. Atheism and scientific materialism rule in the modern world with an uncompromising narrative of God as illusion, opiate of the people, make-believe. But maybe, the atheistic denial imperative is wrong. Since earliest memory, I've pondered the death question—not as denier, but in weirdly determined fashion— and in two previously non-fiction books —*Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*—I posited the question, where

does the evidence lead? I've been pleasantly surprised to learn that in physics, in biology (despite what Richard Dawkins says), and in logic (with help from Anthony Flew's evidence based conversion), a case for the existence of God and against the necessity for denial is strong. Where the evidence leads contradicts in convincing fashion the bias of contemporary cultural. Articulating some of the evidence may not win you friends or influence people, but more important, you'll never be considered dull.

There isn't space to do justice to the abundance of evidence in this short piece. Still, here are a few morsels of food for thought. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins explains away the astonishing unlikelihood, unfathomable reality of our existence on earth as facts that science will explain in time. The impossibility of life is flattened to mere details, just as the phenomenon of a human being is reduced to cells that live and die. But Biologist Dawkins knows better. When Charles Darwin wrote his opus work, cells were thought to be simple, with the possibility of life emerging out of a steamy swamp under the right conditions. Today, we know that a single human cell contains six billion nucleotide pairs, making it too complicated to explain away as merely facts that we will fully and passively understand in time.

If cellular complexity isn't enough, the anthropic components work with exacting precision to allow for the thin band of possibility that humans need to exist—conditions that for all the unfounded speculation about multiverses, do not exist elsewhere in the universe. Moon regulated ocean tides, distance from the sun for temperatures conducive to human life, among many other Anthropic components, are referred to as the goldilocks effect—as neither too hot, nor too cold—for precise, synchronized functioning. Bioinformatician Eugene Koonin worked out the probability of life arising on its own to be 10 to the 1,018rd power. If remotely predictive, this figure indicates that even life's humble beginnings face

greater odds of just spontaneously happening than picking a single designated grain of sand from all the sand in the world. Faced with these odds—like winning a trillion, trillion lotteries in a row—Dawkins does concede that we've been a wee bit lucky.

This piece is not about faith nor to argue the existence of God, but I do think it is worth thinking about what denial costs us— to individual mental health as well the cultural implications of ubiquitous societal denial. Denial of death and the possibility of life after death cannot be balanced by the smallness of our busy lives, many causes, and preoccupation with immutable identity parts. Anxiety cannot be mitigated by distraction or even a thousand strands of smallness—the curse or blessing of awareness informs us we are more than that. "Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it onto meaningfulness on the largest possible level."

Becker concludes we have to find a substantive narrative we can live with. "People create the reality they need in order to discover themselves." Our narrative has to have direct personal relevance; that is, we have to draw a picture we can see ourselves in. The relevance issue is interesting. Until very recently, narratives tended to exist in the narrow range of possibility outside of self, namely God, family and country. Today, narrow has ironically broadened—but actually has further narrowed— into the subjective illusion of endless choice, otherwise known as me, myself and I.

There are many modern substitutes for meaning outside of the archaic narrative trifecta of God, family and country. Identity politics and fashionable ideological causes are superficial narratives that people invest themselves into, often without knowing the efficacy of foundational claims made that create disillusionment and perpetuate grievance. These borrowed ideological narratives are akin to religion shrouded in the thin guise of virtue and righteousness. Becker

understood the questionable efficacy of ideological narrative, and anticipated our deep hunger to find a personal, sustaining narrative.

A personal narrative is not necessarily original. Belief in our own originality should always raise a red flag about the need for self-reflection. Actual originality—which is quite rare— happens from the perch of giants' shoulders with their inspired moments being our best glimpse at revelatory possibility beyond the material world. (i.e. Michelangelo's 1499 La Pieta cannot be reduced to its component parts. Its identity may be marble, but its essence is beyond. We know this even if we don't know why.)

In the safest, most affluent time in history, deteriorating mental health statistics, particularly among young people, are at an all time high and rising. A collective sense of doom, pervades our waking hours and stalks our panicked nightmares. Dystopian books and films flourish, and we bury ourselves ever deeper into what we pretend is the safe space of the virtual world. A 2020 Netflix documentary entitled *The Social Dilemma*, provides uncharacteristic insight into the problem; that is, tells us what we intuitively know. Algorithmic-driven social networking is intentionally developed to be addictive, has the same self-injurious affect on brain function as hard drugs, and, most telling, the rich creators and beneficiaries of all this pain and acrimony are uniformly determined to keep these products away from their own children.

And why are we and our children so vulnerable? Applying Becker's reasoning, it is avoidance of the unpleasant and denial of the unfathomable. Yet, despite or perhaps because of our evasive efforts, we suffer ever more. For all the complexity of the problem, how we arrived at this outcome is not complicated. The Grand Canais telescope that was designed to allow us to gaze upon the universe has been turned around with ever more penetrating vistas of our own naval. We are gazing in the wrong direction, at the wrong subject with

troubling, if predictable, results.

Becker concludes that we cannot face the inevitability of death on our own or with narratives that exclude a transcendent version of life and death. To be clear, Becker is not arguing for the existence of God, rather he is saying that for our mental health, indeed for our sanity, dealing with death—even if antithetical to modern scientific materialist orthodoxy —requires transcendent understanding. In this way, Becker doesn't argue for God, rather he concludes that waking to the phenomenon of God is a necessary developmental step towards full maturation. As such, the compulsion to deny death becomes less compelling than the self-evident truth of death's meaning.

Which modern sceptics find neither self-evident nor true. Still, for all our hubris of knowing, we have not been around long and have little idea what preceded us. In *Things That Matter*, brilliant Charles Krauthammer writes about a museum display representing the expanse of earth-time preceding the historical heartbeat of human existence. Four and a half billion years of earth-time takes the entirety of a very long wall leading to a single strand of human hair representing all of human-time. To expand upon Krauthammer's example, human-time displayed along the same long wall might have another single human hair representing the entirety of the 20th and 21st Century. We are newbies, we know less than we think, we commit the folly of believing what we think must be true, even though we know not whence we came nor why we are here.

Throughout human history leading to our solitary follicle of time (men tend to be sensitive about their solitary follicles) man was in awe of nature, regarded natural events as necessarily having transcendent origins, and the notion that we—who did not create ourselves—create our own "ruling narrative" would be ridiculous. Before Hobbes, there was awareness that life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and

short”—and that struggle against scarcity for collective survival was reason for ritual and reverence as means to meaning.

We both over-think and don’t think enough. Fear drives us to ever more elaborate and self-centred narratives, and our failure to use the astonishing gift of consciousness to search and ponder the universe is formula for an un-lived life.

“People create the reality they need in order to discover themselves.” Implied in Becker’s statement is that people also create the reality they need in order to lose themselves. And perhaps most depressingly, that describes where we are today.

Which is strange because the answer to life and death’s purpose exists in our vehicle of denial: consciousness. Richard Dawkins may disagree, though for all his arguments as the high priest of our atheist times, he is weakest when discussing consciousness. Consciousness cannot be explained or explained away as a function of evolution. That is, the incredible potential of consciousness to reason and roam is beyond the necessity to forge and grouse for food and shelter. As well, it is the right brain ability to create and understand nuance and metaphor, poetry and music, philosophy and language that allows for god-like, though often unrealised, potential. We are biology and transcendence, in the same confusing and fascinating package.

And yet, we take our above animal-grade thinking for granted. We often regard consciousness as simply grey matter utilitarian brain function, that which keeps our heart beating and bowels moving. If not for the prevalence of denial, we know we are more than that. Our grey matter can mostly be located—though what we know of utilitarian brain function continues to mystify. As for that other, the astonishing and little regarded function of consciousness, we actually have little to no understanding, which to the modern need to know, inspires denial rather than awe. Perhaps we lack understanding

because it is not to be understood. Nor is the transcendental nature of consciousness to be denied.

For those who cannot believe what cannot be empirically understood, consider this—consciousness literally does exist except for the self-evidence of our thoughts that we use to deny its existence. I think therefore for I am has meaning. The fact that we have awareness and also deny meaning in death is the self-evident proof of consciousness' selective power and little used potential. My personal proof for the efficacy of transcendent consciousness is this: try to imagine your own non-existence—no, not what death might feel like, but imagine complete non-existence, that state to which scientific materialists purport to know is our sorry end. Even the futile attempt to imagine non-existence is proof that we cannot—and yet we believe more in the sorry end narrative than soaring possibilities. We are strange little creatures more invested in the smallness of our many preoccupations than our god-like potential.

In contemporary cultural and in political arenas we are stranger still. Immutable, individual identity parts, and not mutable, shared consciousness is our obsession even though it doesn't lead anywhere. (Buddhists believe in the concept of the continually residing mind, taking the shared nature of consciousness somewhere quite fantastic. How else to explain Jung's fascination with archetypes and the collective unconscious?). Coming to understand that death is a shared passage, rather than an individual horror, allows for a diffusion of fear, an acceptance of death, and passionate wonder at what might emerge.

If the cessation of our physical being is not the end of life, if the evidence leads to another version of life's purpose and death's meaning, if death is to be accepted rather than denied, we can hold out hope for emerging as gods with or without anuses.

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife. His website is larrymccloskeywriter.com.

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