

Transference and Terror

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In popular American behaviorism, fear is perceived either as a temporary state of emotional tension sparked by specific external circumstances or as a dysfunctional and irrational reaction to be addressed by techniques of cognitive reinterpretation. In this tradition, the normal psychological state for human beings is that of anxiety-free, rational maximization of pleasure versus pain. Fear, being a negative state, must be dealt with remedially. We find its source in our acquired irrationality, in our circumstances, in enemies and terrorists, and then we remove it. One Trip to the Great Shopping Mall may restore life as it was intended to be. While this characterization is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, few of us have forgotten just how astoundingly out of sync it felt when, soon after the Twin Towers were destroyed on September 11, 2001, we were admonished as citizens to “Keep shopping!”

The tradition within which I work has a very different set of assumptions about the human condition. This perspective goes back at least to Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, and Otto Rank in modern times, but

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

can arguably be traced back through Augustine, the Hebrew prophets all the way to the J author of *Torah*. In this view, fear, angst, anxiety, dread, trepidation, is the emotional and psychological state in which we move and have our being. We are fundamentally a fear-driven species because anxiety is part of the human condition.

Recent evolutionary approaches have also underlined this basic fact of human nature, although from a very different starting point than the psychoanalytic view. The development of weapons occurred as recently as only 20,000 years ago. Until then, for eighty percent or more of our species history, human beings were primarily prey—food for other species. We proclaim proudly in anthropology texts and museum displays that our ancestors were fierce hunters, clothed in the furs of prey. Yet this relatively recent phase of our ancestral history conceals the reality that for millennia, human creatures were themselves quivering animal prey nervously hiding in trees and bushes until the big cats were finished with the carcass of their kill, waiting to pick over the bones along with the other scavengers. It is little wonder that our species remains fascinated with technology in general, and weapons technology in particular.¹

GENERATIVE DEATH ANXIETY

Ernest Becker summarized the tradition within which I work with his theory on death and mortality awareness.² Becker doggedly pursued questions of human behavior through a library of psychological, sociological, and philosophical works, refusing to relinquish a strong commitment to empiricism on the one hand and unwilling to yield to the temptation of facile reductionism on the other. Tragically, Becker suffered an untimely death just as his ideas were coming into maturity. As a result of Becker's early death, there is plenty of space for criticizing, expanding, and extending his insights, which Becker himself understood as bringing closure on religion from the side of social sciences.³ In an interview with social philosopher Sam Keen just days before his death from cancer, Becker compared his work to cultural theologian Paul Tillich. The difference between them, he said, was that Tillich was seeking to connect with the social sciences from the perspective of religion whereas Becker was seeking to connect to religion from the perspective of the social sciences and particularly the science of man.

Becker suggested that the key to understanding the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and behavioral makeup of human beings is found in the clash between our overwhelming species-inherited drive for continued life (survival instinct) and the unique intelligence of human beings that fosters abstract, self-conscious, symbolic thought. Symbolic consciousness among humans leads inevitably to an acknowledgment of the universality of death (mortality awareness). Because human beings have the capacity to think abstractly about their finitude, death awareness soon transforms the rudimentary separation anxiety we see in many fellow mammals into a basic element of the dynamic unconscious. The inevitability of death creates a reservoir of potentially immobilizing, debilitating anxiety.

The psychological defense mechanisms we employ in many directions in daily living were created to allay and cope with potentially stultifying ontological anxiety that results from mortality awareness. Empirical laboratory investigation of Becker's basic ideas about death anxiety is proving this to be a very strong and plausible theory of human behavior, certainly as well defended as competing theories of human behavior in the social sciences. This empirical work, undertaken under the rubric of terror management theory (terror here being psychological, not political) is being published and discussed in many of the leading psychology journals.⁴

Even though we keep trying, the need to flee death in the physical world is ultimately doomed to failure. Despite our hope that technology, from ancient mummification to modern cryonics, will provide the final escape from death, we move our struggle against death into the symbolic sphere. The desire to remake ourselves and our world through creative symbolization becomes a lifelong effort to escape from the reality of death. This ongoing process of creative symbolization, characterized by complex systems of direct and vicarious heroism or striving for immortality at many levels, is motivated at its deepest level by the need to keep death awareness from immediate consciousness. Fear of mortality combined with the inventive powers of imaginative symbolization paradoxically open up in human beings an entirely unexpected and unpredictable capacity for creativity and wonder. For this reason, I have characterized Becker's theory as that of Generative Death Anxiety.⁵

AN EXPANDED TRANSFERENCE

According to Ernest Becker, the most interesting and pervasive mechanism we employ throughout our lives to avoid the reality of death is called transference.⁶ In the psychoanalytic tradition, transference is viewed primarily as pathological. It refers specifically to the relationship between the analyst and the analysand, especially the irrationally exaggerated positive or negative views and expectations the analysand has of the analyst. Later theorists recognized that many interpersonal relationships contained elements of transference, and that it is not viewed as pathological in itself, but should only be viewed thus if it occurs in the context of personal or social harm.

In his outline of transference, Becker argued that it is the foundation of human behavior in the face of anxiety to seek larger sources of protective symbolic power within which to cloak ourselves. This habitual resort to transference in times of fear begins in a small child's seeking parental comfort and continues on in various symbolic forms into adulthood and throughout life. That is, we feel anxious and insecure in ourselves, and so we project security and solidity onto others, parents, and interpersonal relations initially, but eventually expanding this symbolically to many "larger than life" elements of culture; then we embed ourselves into these objects of transference as a psychological means of maintaining a sense of security and allaying anxiety. When a counselor or pastor is a steady and quiet embodiment of stability and power in the midst of fear and anxiety, it is not surprising that he becomes the object of admiration and the presumed source of security and power. "The thing about transference is that it takes root very subtly, all the while that the person seems to be squarely on his own feet."⁷

In Becker's view, objects of transference, from which we seek and maintain our sense of equanimity in the face of anxiety (death) can be people, to be sure and perhaps primarily; but also Becker suggests that our strong attachments to money, to objects, to material accumulation, to icons of all sorts, as well as to ideas pertaining to social ideologies and self-image, also contain a strong aroma of transference. Once we notice this dynamic in action, we see how ubiquitous and essential it is to normal human social functioning. Becker suggested that society and culture itself could be viewed as an extremely complex network of interlocking transference relationships. Each of us has our sources of defense and comfort against an-

xiety, and each of us function in some way as a source of defense and comfort for others. When all is going well, we hardly notice the anxiety-allaying function of our complex social and cultural networks.

TROUBLE WITH TRANSFERENCE

There are times, however, when concrete events pull back the curtain on our social and cultural pageantry, and reveal to us the largely narrative (fictional, symbolic, projected, socially constructed) nature of our transferences. In such times, forced to acknowledge that for us life itself is a finite resource, the repressed anxiety of mortality awareness comes gushing through our carefully constructed barriers and defenses.

On the micro level, such an event might be the sudden death of a close loved one, or watching a transference person (the family patriarch or matriarch, the teacher, the minister) stumble ethically, or be reduced to skin, bones, and adult diapers by disease. Such radical exposure of the concrete vulnerability of our transference objects may well cause disillusionment and cynicism on the personal level, as if by these "hardened" emotional states we desperately seek to patch over our threatened defenses against stultifying anxiety and depression.

On the macro level, whole societies may be violently forced to witness the largely narrative (fictional, symbolic, projected, socially constructed) nature of their transferences, as when situations of war and terrorism, or of nature snapping back, expose their concrete impotence to protect and defend us. In such times, large groups of people, whole societies, may well experience a depressive malaise, a collective anomie, from what can only be described as the "Loss of Belief."⁸

Times of great fear may be characterized, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, as times of "loss of belief" in our sources of transference—our sources of comfort, protection, and assurance against deeply-rooted ontological anxieties of finitude, vulnerability, and death. In such times of great fear, whether precipitated by events on the micro or macro level (and often it is both of these simultaneously) people frantically cast about for new, if even only temporary, sources of comfort, protection, and assurance. Terror compels people to cower in tight, safe places, doing what they would not do in a more sensible mood. When the longing for security and safety in the face of the threats of death becomes strong, we may willingly sur-

render our freedom to doubt or ask questions for the sake of security. The self is sacrificed for a meaning system that will keep us safe from death. Transference, Becker has said, is fundamentally a problem of cowardice. It is how we tame terror.

In such times of fear, a professional caregiver must be able to embody and project qualities characteristic of an adequate, if only temporary, transference object—at minimum an empathetic sense of calmness, a dependable perspective, and a level head. People desperately need to believe there is an island of safety amid the chaos. A professional caregiver ought to self-consciously become a symbol of that “island of sanity,” an embodied source of transference. There is, however, potential danger in this. The transference relationship itself, as we have seen, is rooted in narrative: it is fictional, symbolic, projected, socially constructed. It is our human nature to require, desire, and to construct transference relationships in order to cope with ontological anxiety, and this is intensified greatly in times of pervasive fear.

TRANSFERENCE TERROR

Once the transference object has become one's whole world, there is new terror. Becker referred to this as transference terror: “the terror of displeasing it, of not being able to live without it. The terror of his own finitude and impotence still haunts him, but now in the precise form of the transference object.”⁹ The urge to merge with a power-source also intensified the awareness of powerlessness and the inability to stand out. The object of transference cannot fail or be flawed or be vulnerable and continue to be a buffer against contingency and death.

It is an aspect of professional caregiving to self-consciously project qualities that allow one to assume the role of transference object for others: a caregiver as frantic as everyone else would not be of much service. However, professional caregivers are subject to the same ontological anxieties of finitude, vulnerability, and death as are all human beings. In assuming the role of transference object for others, the danger is that in order to keep it up, professional caregivers may forget that this is a role being played and believe their own press—believe that they really are somehow special and qualitatively different from other (merely human) people.

A second most important characteristic of a professional caregiver, therefore, is the ability to acknowledge her role as role in the human social drama—a vitally necessary and important role, to be sure, but a role, a self-conscious act, nevertheless. In a very serious way, as a professional caregiver, you cannot succumb to the temptation to take yourself too seriously. To be able to recognize and even treat with humor the narrative (fictional, symbolic, projected, socially constructed) nature of one's role as transference object in the company of other professionals and to allow, in manageable chunks, sharing with others (with fellow professionals, with spouse, within the church fellowship) one's own personal senses of fear, vulnerability, and anxiety are necessary survival tools for professionals. These tools are no less a buffer against one's own symbolically inflated sense of control and authority that often accompanies the professional role. For the caregiver, the paradox is this: take very seriously what someone needs in order to be larger than life, and never, never believe that it is true.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What we are outlining here would be described in "normal" times as establishing a therapeutic relationship with the client, remaining in close peer supervision, and bringing an atmosphere of mutuality into the helping process—in other words, established operating procedure taught by many different schools of thought. If one cannot project a sense of being able to help, no bag of therapeutic tricks will get the job done. Researchers note that ability to establish a therapeutic relationship with the client (that is, a relationship in which the client believes the therapist or caregiver can help) is many times more important in predicting positive outcomes than is the particular school of thought or approach to therapy the professional employs.⁴⁰ If one neglects to submit to the watchful eye of one's peers, one too easily becomes isolated and egotistical Lone Ranger. If one neglects mutuality in the therapeutic process, demagoguery at some level is rarely far behind.

In contrast to the optimistic consumerist behaviorism that pervades the American therapeutic marketplace, this sober psychodynamic tradition in which I work sees times of great fear as different in intensity, but not qualitatively different from the fear we deal with every day simply because of our anxious, vulnerable, and mortal nature. Likewise, the habitual defensive coping skills required in times of great fear are continuous with

those we employ consciously—but mostly unconsciously—every day of our lives.

This framework of expanded transference is especially useful for spiritually-oriented counselors. For what better describes spiritual formation than the slow and painful struggle of recognizing and identifying the sources of one's transference objects (idols); determining to humanize them and, thus, relativizing them; and learning better to shoulder and "lean into" the great ontological anxieties of fear, vulnerability, and death provoked by this process? Thereby we continue on toward a more deeply unifying relationship with the one true source of our Being, the object of transference we are truly created to seek, beyond narrative, beyond fictional, beyond projection, and beyond our everyday socially constructed sense of the real.

NOTES

1. This transition from prey to predator via technology, and its ongoing effects on our species, is explored at length in B. Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

2. Important works in this regard are E. Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973) and E. Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

3. Cf. D. Liechty, ed., "Beyond Psychology: A Conversation with Ernest Becker (1974)" in *The Ernest Becker Reader* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2005), 219–229. In an unpublished transcript of this interview available through the Ernest Becker Foundation (<http://www.ernestbecker.org>), Becker summarizes the connection between denying finitude and evil with this statement: "Man's attempt to make the earth what it cannot be, a place free from death, free from accident, free from creatureliness, in effect causes more direct evil than anything else" (p. 28).

4. An excellent summary of Terror Management Theory may be found in the opening chapter of T. Pyszczynski and others, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 2003).

5. Cf. D. Liechty, ed., "Introduction" in *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishing, 2002).

6. Cf. "The Spell Cast By Persons" in Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 127–158; also D. Liechty, *Transference and Transcendence* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995), 83–95.

7. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 273.

8. Though it set himself up as a target and scapegoat, President Jimmy Carter bravely and presciently gave voice to the widespread sense of malaise in the national spirit following the shock of losing the Vietnam War. While steadfastly refusing the

"lesson of Vietnam," American politicians since have certainly demonstrated they have learned the lesson of Jimmy Carter, and as citizens we have been treated to thirty more years of triumphant (and, let's face it, politically successful) declarations of "Morning in America" and "Mission Accomplished!"

9. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 146.

10. Cf. M.A. Hubble and others, *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 1999).

Even Scrabble masters who play in tournaments play words whose meanings they do not know. They know that they can take the seven little alphabet tiles, play them in appropriate squares, earn points, and win tournaments.

As people of faith, our calling is to look deeply in the events of our lives, seeking the meaning of events and discerning what God wants us to do. We are like Shiphrah and Puah, in Exodus 1, who did not understand all that Pharaoh intended, but who knew that what they did had meaning. They took their midwifing seriously, feared God more than Pharaoh, and found a way to live out God's calling. Life is not just a game of Scrabble. Seek meaning without fear.

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Call for Essays for *Reflective Practice*, Volume 29

**Theme: Forming Religions Leaders In and
For a Diverse World**

Every faith tradition is faced with the task of preparing leaders who are equipped to work effectively in richly diverse contexts. What are the unique challenges and possibilities about ministerial and religious formation today? How does each faith tradition enhance and impede responding positively to diversity? What does it mean for the process itself when formation occurs in a diverse or interfaith context? Beyond continuing to attend to our own social location, what must we learn about responding to religious and cultural difference in order to live and lead authentically and peaceably in diverse contexts? What present assumptions about formation need to be challenged in order that future religious leaders will be prepared to lead in changed and changing contexts? Send essays to Herbert Anderson, editor, at handerson@plts.edu by December 1, 2008.