



THE WORM AT THE CORE: ON THE ROLE OF DEATH IN LIFE

Sheldon Solomon
Skidmore College

PSYCHOLOGY = PSYCHE + OLOGY

Psyche = soul = BUT NOT THE WESTERN CONCEPTION OF SOUL
BASED ON CARTESIAN (DESCARTES) DUALISM: MIND/BODY
DISTINCTION

RATHER, PSYCHE IS BASED ON AN ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPTION
OF SOUL (MIND) = MONISM = SOUL/MIND IS INEXTRICABLY
CONNECTED TO THE BODY = 'ESSENCE OF A NATURAL BODY
IMBUED WITH LIFE'

THE “SOUL” OF....

- AXE = CHOPPING
- EYEBALL = SEEING
- WOODPECKER = ?
- GRASSHOPPER = ?
- HUMAN = ?

WHAT IS THE 'SOUL' (I.E. ESSENCE) OF HUMANITY?

- HOMO SAPIENS
- HOMO LUDENS
- HOMO FABER
- HOMO AESTHETICUS
- HOMO NARRANS



WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF HUMANITY?

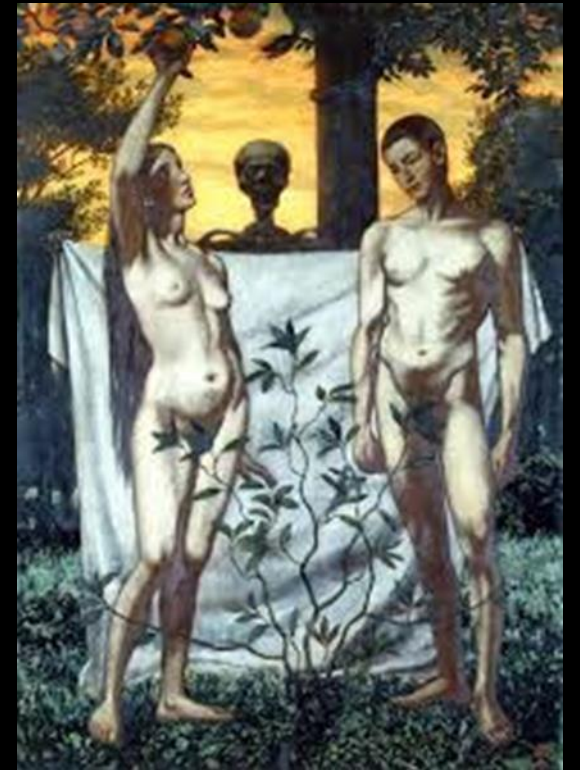
"It is our knowledge that we have to die that makes us human..."

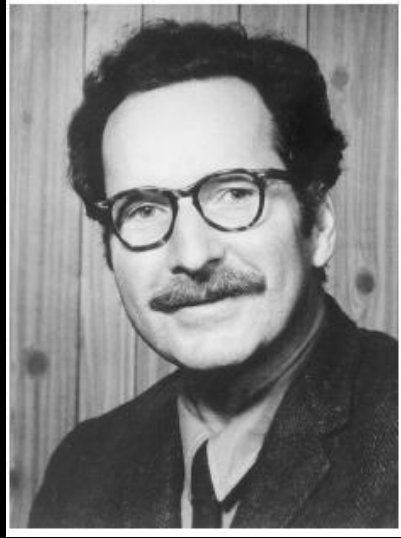
Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp*

DEATH: THE WORM AT THE CORE

*“Back of everything is the great specter of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness. . . . We need a life not correlated with death . . . a good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature. . . . And so with most of us: . . . a little irritable weakness will bring the **worm at the core** of all our usual springs of delight into full view, and turn us into melancholy metaphysicians.”*

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience





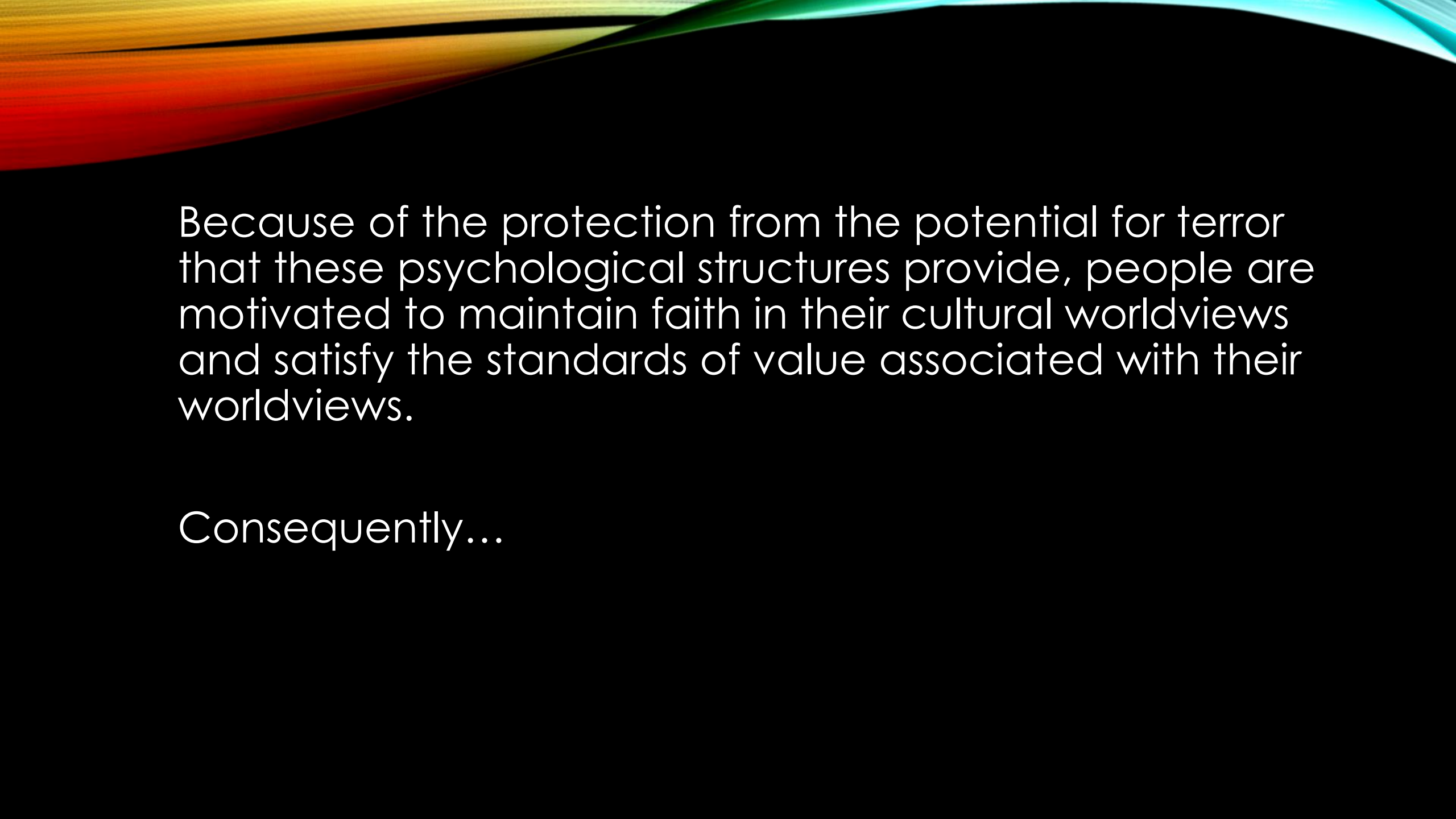
ERNEST BECKER

“...the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.”

The Denial of Death

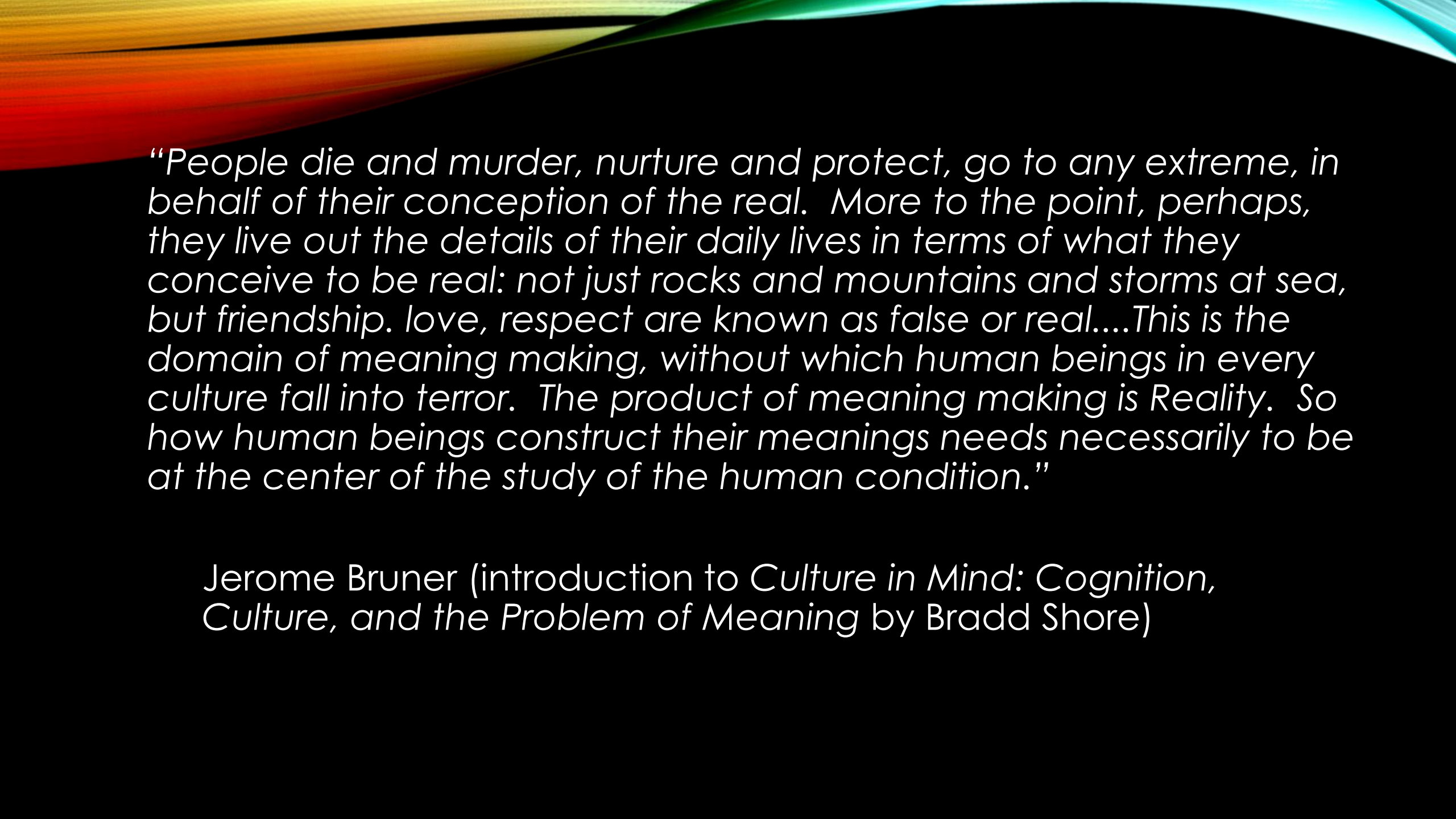
Terror management theory posits that the awareness of death creates the potential for paralyzing terror. One of the most important functions of cultural worldviews is to manage the terror associated with this awareness of death. This is accomplished primarily through the cultural mechanism of self esteem, which consists of the belief that one is a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe.





Because of the protection from the potential for terror that these psychological structures provide, people are motivated to maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and satisfy the standards of value associated with their worldviews.

Consequently...



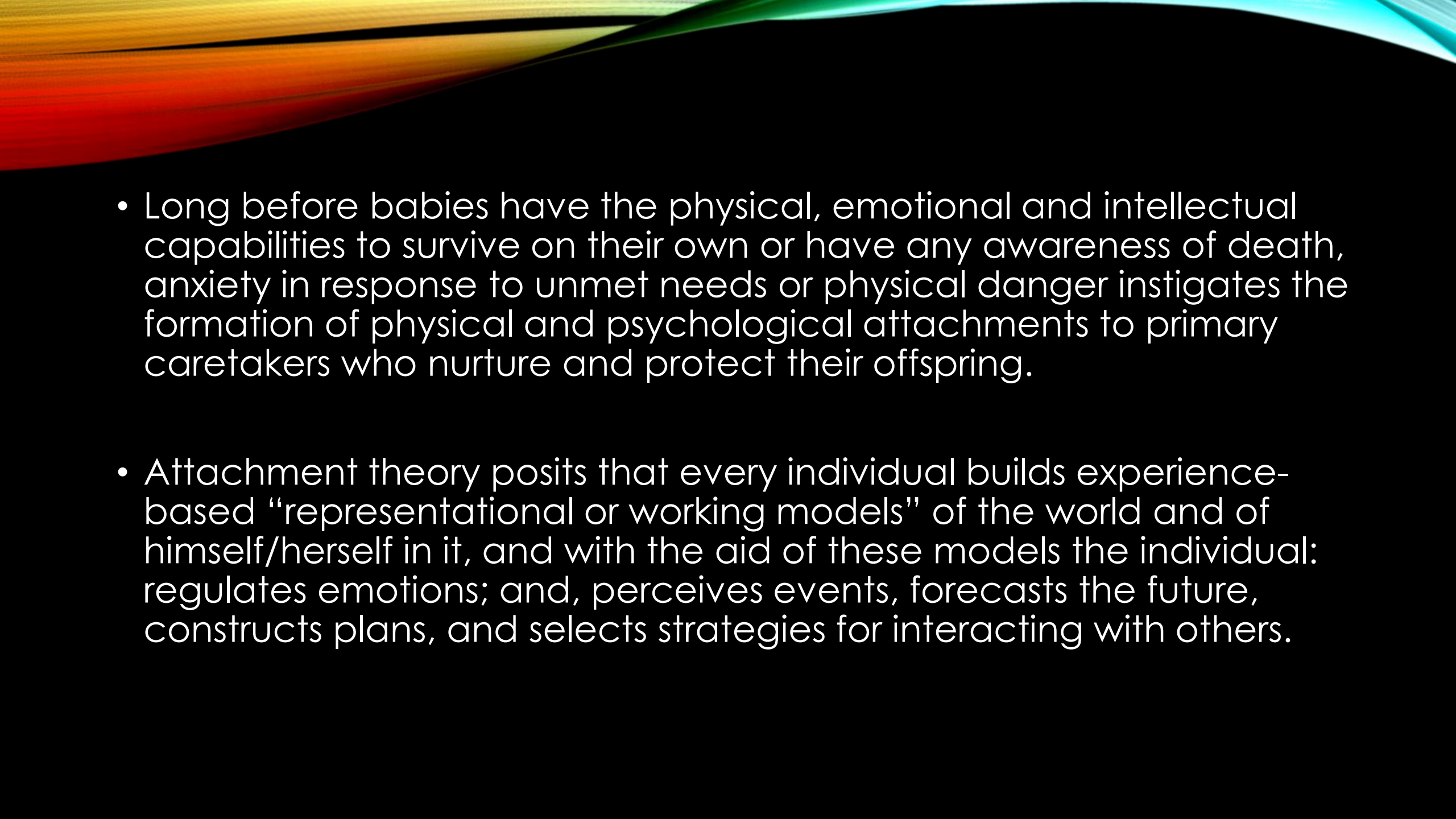
"People die and murder, nurture and protect, go to any extreme, in behalf of their conception of the real. More to the point, perhaps, they live out the details of their daily lives in terms of what they conceive to be real: not just rocks and mountains and storms at sea, but friendship. love, respect are known as false or real....This is the domain of meaning making, without which human beings in every culture fall into terror. The product of meaning making is Reality. So how human beings construct their meanings needs necessarily to be at the center of the study of the human condition."


Jerome Bruner (introduction to Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning by Bradd Shore)





ATTACHMENT AND TERROR MANAGEMENT

- Self-esteem acquires its anxiety-buffering qualities in the context of infant socialization.
- Human infants are born profoundly immature and dependent and prone to anxiety.

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- Long before babies have the physical, emotional and intellectual capabilities to survive on their own or have any awareness of death, anxiety in response to unmet needs or physical danger instigates the formation of physical and psychological attachments to primary caretakers who nurture and protect their offspring.
 - Attachment theory posits that every individual builds experience-based “representational or working models” of the world and of himself/herself in it, and with the aid of these models the individual: regulates emotions; and, perceives events, forecasts the future, constructs plans, and selects strategies for interacting with others.

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- Children must be fully incorporated into their social milieus by learning the language, beliefs and customs of their culture.
 - Toward this end, parental affection becomes increasingly contingent on children behaving in accord with cultural dictates.

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- Children are showered with praise when they behave appropriately, which produces the same feelings of psychological well-being previously associated with secure attachment.
 - Inappropriate behavior begets very different parental reactions, ranging from punishment to rebuke to sullen indifference, all of which involve a distinct absence of affection resulting in anxiety and insecurity (perhaps linked to a fear of abandonment).


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- Over time, children come to associate being “good” with being safe (**good = safe = alive**) and...
 - Being “bad” with being helpless and vulnerable (**bad = insecure = dead**).
 - In this fashion, self-esteem becomes a potent anxiety buffer:

“Without self-confidence we are like babes in the cradle.”

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

FROM ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS TO ATTACHMENT TO CULTURE

- The anxiety-buffering qualities of self-esteem, initially obtained from pleasing parents during socialization, ultimately come to depend on adhering to prevailing cultural standards as children learn the ways of the world by way of their culture's history, religion and folklore.
- The transition is initiated as children become increasingly aware of the inevitability of death. Clinical and empirical evidence suggests this happens as early as two years of age and is often of considerable concern by age nine or ten.

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- Children now find the promises of security and death transcendence afforded by the culture as (or more) compelling and reassuring than even the best efforts of their parents, who children realize, like all humans, are fallible and mortal.
 - Self-esteem is now obtained by meeting or exceeding the culturally prescribed standards associated with specific social roles afforded by their culture.
 - People are thereafter fundamentally motivated to maintain faith in their culturally acquired belief systems, confidence in their self-worth, and close relationships with significant others as a psychological bulwark against existential terror, and will consequently respond defensively when their cherished cultural beliefs, self-esteem, or close relationships are undermined.



EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERLUDE: IS IT TRUE?

“Science is refusal to believe on the basis of hope.”


C.P. Snow


SELF-ESTEEM AS ANXIETY BUFFER

- If self-esteem functions to buffer anxiety, then raising self-esteem (or dispositionally high self-esteem) should reduce anxiety in response to subsequent threats.
- The effects of high self-esteem on anxiety and physiological arousal in response to threat.

MORTALITY SALIENCE PARADIGM


If cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships serve to assuage anxiety associated with the awareness of death, then asking people to ponder their own mortality (**mortality salience; MS**) should increase the need for the protection provided by them.

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- Typical MS induction = two open ended questions:
"Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouse in you."; and, "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die."
 - Other MS manipulations: being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, subliminal exposure to the word "dead" or "death"

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- The effect of mortality salience on cultural worldview defense.
 - The effect of mortality salience on self-esteem striving.
 - The effect of mortality salience on reliance on close relationships.

DEATH THOUGHT ACCESSIBILITY PARADIGM

- If cultural worldviews and self-esteem and close relationships mitigate existential terror, then threats to cherished cultural beliefs or self-esteem or close relationships should increase the accessibility of implicit death thoughts.
- Death thought accessibility is generally measured by a word-stem completion task:
 - C O F F _ _ can be COFFEE or COFFIN
 - S K _ L L can be SKILL or SKULL

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- Christian fundamentalists who read an essay describing logical inconsistencies in the Bible had increased death thought accessibility.
 - Canadians who read an essay belittling Canadian culture had increased death thought accessibility.
 - Students told that they are unlikely to be successful in their chosen vocation had increased death thought accessibility.
 - Securely attached individuals asked to ponder the dissolution of a close relationship had increased death thought accessibility.



SO WHAT?

What can one explain with terror management theory that would be difficult to understand without recourse to the notion that existential anxieties influence a substantial proportion of human behavior?

THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS

Death reminders increase hostility and disdain toward others who do not share our beliefs.

“When the angel of death sounds his trumpet the pretenses of civilization are blown from men’s heads into the mud like hats in a gust of wind.”

George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*

FATAL ATTRACTION: DEATH REMINDERS INCREASE SUPPORT FOR CHARISMATIC LEADERS

Donald J. Trump:
Monstrous Clown or Heroic Change
Agent?



“I AM NOT AN ANIMAL!”

Death anxiety fosters alienation from nature
and contempt for the environment...





LETHAL CONSUMPTION: DEATH REMINDERS INCREASE THE DESIRE FOR WEALTH AND CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

"The human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life ever-lasting."


Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof



PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AS TERROR MISMANAGEMENT

"All individuals are confronted with death anxiety; most develop adaptive coping modes—modes that consist of denial-based strategies such as suppression, repression, displacement, belief in personal omnipotence, acceptance of socially sanctioned religious beliefs that "detoxify" death, or personal efforts to overcome death through a wide variety of strategies that aim at achieving symbolic immortality. Either because of extraordinary stress or because of an inadequacy of available defensive strategies, the individual who enters the realm called "patienthood" has found insufficient the universal modes of dealing with death fear and has been driven to extreme modes of defense. These defensive maneuvers, often clumsy modes of dealing with terror, constitute the presenting clinical picture."

Irvin Yalom, Existential Psychotherapy

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- The effects of mortality salience on spider-phobia
 - Out damn spot! The effects of mortality salience on obsessive-compulsive behavior
 - Hell is other people. The effects of mortality salience on social anxiety
 - Fatal distraction: The effects of mortality salience on psychological dissociation




GRIEF

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

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C.S. Lewis *Grief Observed* (1961)

Grief feels so like fear in that any significant loss undermines the attachment security and terror management systems that, when intact, serve to buffer anxiety in general and death anxiety in particular.



From an attachment perspective, losing a significant other, be it a primary caretaker or any other close relationship (e.g. close friend, relative, spouse) is doubly devastating as it entails:

- The physical demise of (or abrupt dissolution of the relationship with) the attachment figure.
- Reduction or obliteration of the psychological security afforded by the attachment figure in the griever's internal working model that regulates emotion and influences self-perception and interpersonal behavior.

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- From a terror management perspective, such losses threaten to rend gaping holes in the delicate culturally-constructed fabric of meaning that, when intact, make us comfortably situated in our surroundings.
 - This leaves griever disillusionsed in that they no longer have a symbolic blue-print for effective action, and demoralized in that they no longer subscribe to cultural standards from which self-esteem can be derived.

GRIEF WORK

Bolby & Parkes' (1970) stages of grief:

- *Shock and Numbness*: the bereaved experience a panoply of emotions including anxiety, despair, confusion and sorrow.
- *Yearning and Searching*: longing for the return of their loved one while *searching* to restore or replace lost meaning in their lives.
- *Disorganization and Despair* may lead to people to become detached or dissociated from their personal and interpersonal interests and activities, and experience feelings of helpless and despair accordingly.
- *Reorganization and Recovery*: while grief is never entirely eliminated and there are always occasional bursts of sorrow and sadness, the bereaved have more positive memories about their loved ones, and are energized and uplifted by renewed (or new) interests in themselves and their surroundings.



BEYOND STAGES!

Although stage theories of grief (and in general) have been abandoned in light of evidence that there is considerable variation of grief trajectories, current approaches for theory and practice retain Bowlby & Parkes' overarching goals: to restore a functional attachment system in the service of emotional regulation, and terror management system to provide psychological security via a restored sense of meaning and value.




- For example:

- Stroebe & Schut describe grief as oscillation between exploring and expressing emotions engendered by a loss, and instrumental coping to adjust to external demands resulting from a loss.
- Worden views grieving as an active process consisting of accepting the loss, processing negative affect associated with the loss, and adjusting to a new world without the deceased by maintaining connections with them.
- Neimeyer views grief work in terms of restoration in meaning undermined by the loss.
- In essence then, the abstract goal of grief work is to foster restoration of a functional attachment and terror management system.

CODA: COMPLICATED GRIEF

*Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*


William Wordsworth,
Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
(1807)

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- Grief is the price we pay for the depth of our attachments and awareness of our finitude.
 - We dread death in part because we love life:
 - “Give us life, life, life.” (African proverb)
 - Partaking of the joys of living requires that we accept, as Wordsworth poetically explained, “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears”, and the disheartening emotions that accompany them.



Moreover, many of us now grieve, despite not, or in addition to, having lost a significant other:

- Grief as “Mother Nature” reels from our rapacious assault on the natural environment and the resultant impending mass extinctions and decline or collapse of civilization as we know it.
- Grief from the loss of common sense and human decency as populist leaders around the world transform existential fears into ethnocentric rage.

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- Grief from the prospect of extended social isolation and protracted economic hardship in the wake of the current pandemic.
 - Grief from realizing that assuming that the conveniences of modernity will inevitably persist on an inexorable path of progress culminating in conditions on earth comparable to those purported to exist in heaven may be no more than wishful thinking.

NOW WHAT?

“Come to terms with death. Thereafter anything is possible.”

Albert Camus, *Notebooks*





*"THERE ARE SO MANY DAYS THAT
HAVE NOT YET BROKEN" -- RIG VEDA*

"I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

William Faulkner, Nobel Prize acceptance speech

THANK YOU!



Sheldon Solomon –
ssolomon@skidmore.edu