

Neil Elgee:

I am Neil Elgee, the President of the Ernest Becker Foundation, and it is my privilege to introduce the incomparable, the one and only, Sheldon Solomon, who will keynote, this, the 8th Love of Violence Conference.

Sheldon is a Professor of Social Psychology at Skidmore College, and one of the trio of researchers who have just produced the book, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. He will speak to us using a title he created by conjoining the title of a Becker book with a famous definition of history by James Joyce, *The Structure of Evil: and History is a Nightmare from Which I am Trying to Awaken*.

Sheldon Solomon.

[Applause]

Sheldon Solomon:

My hope this evening is to really just provide something that some of you all have endured endlessly in the past, and that's just a basic overview of Ernest Becker's ideas with regard to his understanding of why it is that people have historically had such a terribly difficult time getting along with other people that are not similar to themselves.

And I took the title of this talk by juxtaposing two phrases. *The Structure of Evil* is a title of one of my favorite Ernest Becker books, and this notion "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awaken" is a phrase that I hope some of the literary types are familiar with. It's a very famous phrase, happens on page nine of one of my favorite books, *Ulysses*, from James Joyce. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awaken" I think pretty much sums it up when we think about where we now stand. I like the phrase "Man's inhumanity to man." We might want to extend that and note that women can be pretty vicious also.

But I think what we want to try and understand is basically something that has already been mentioned ought concern all of us, especially right now in human history, and that is why is it that things have been so unhappily problematic for so long. As some of you have heard me say before, even a really benevolent glance of human history reveals quite an ugly ongoing succession of genocidal atrocities occasionally punctuated by brutal subjugation of designated in-house inferiors. And this goes back really to the dawn of recorded human history.

We don't know what our protohuman ancestors were up to, but we do know that from the minute that people have started keeping track of each other to the extent that there's a tangible historical record, that things have been rather bleak. And again, at the risk of being redundant, with no desire to ruin your dinner, whether you've had it or not yet, let's just note that way back three-or-so-thousand years ago we see **bas reliefs** from Assyrians, where every time they would come in and raid a neighboring village the first thing that they would do would be to stick the inhabitants of the village alive, on poles, so that they would run through their backs and out through their shoulders. So you would see these pictures of people rather unhappy as they dangle alive, skewered on poles.

I'll spare you the rest of history, except to give you a 30-second travelogue. We can go through the Trojan Wars, the Peloponnesian Wars, we can think about Attila the Hun, the Crusades, the Inquisition, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Cruel – delightful names. And while the names may change, I think the point that we want to note is that the basic dynamic, just human beings being sadistically and atrociously vicious to other folks, have been really a hallmark of the human enterprise.

Well we just got done with the 20th Century, as I know most of you are aware if you've got a calendar or a clock, and as you also know, either from direct experience, depending upon your age, or from the history books, you know, that century got off to a pretty good start with World War I, the war to end all wars. Sounded good at the time, but as you know, that was just the frightening precursor to arguably *the* most vicious and stupid century until this one. We had World War I followed by World War II, where Hitler very “cleverly” – and I mean that in quotes of course – combined genocide with business in order to exterminate over 100,000,000 people in Europe.

Forget about Korea and Vietnam; we've got the Killing Fields of Cambodia, we've got the genocide in Rwanda, where it took less than ten weeks to exterminate one-third of the population at the time. We've got Yugoslavia or whatever it is that they call those countries these days. We've got the Middle East situation, which we don't have to even say more about except to note how horribly problematic it is these days. We've got the Palestinian bombs exploding in Israeli towns; we've got the Israelis retaliating with their targeted assassinations. It's like using a wrecking ball to flick a flea off your forehead; it'll do the job, but there's substantial collateral damage in the process.

And then last week we've got just the terrible activities that happened in Bali that I'm sure you're all aware of. And again, at the risk of offending you, but noting that humor's sometimes the only way to deal with these kinds of frightening things, I'm sure the people that were happily at the bar that night, when you say, "I'm going out to get blasted tonight," I don't think that's what you have in mind with regard to ultimate outcomes.

Anyway, when I talk about these kinds of events what a lot of people say is, "Yeah, you know, that's just terribly gruesome. But happily in los Estados Unidos, that being the United States, we don't have those problems, that kind of savagery just exists elsewhere. We don't have to worry about that." But as many of you know, we do have to worry about that. In fact, we're not any different in some ways than these other folks. It's always easier to recognize the hideous behavior of others.

And yet, to just bring us up to date, as you all know, the so-called new world, when our ancestors got here in the 1500s, was not particularly new to the indigenous inhabitants who had been happily and rather peacefully existing here for several millennium. And the first thing, as you know, after we got done with disposing of 90% of the population with germs, was to just annihilate the other 10% in a genocidal takeover.

I like – I'll read you a little quote from a diary in 1637 in New Netherlands; some of you will know that today as New York. When the Dutch came and they took over New York for some reason the Indians who lived there were not overly enthusiastic about that and something had to be done. And so what we did was to kill them. But we didn't just kill them; we did so with a heinous delight. So here's a diary.

This is from a cool book, it won a Pulitzer Prize, it's called *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. Anybody familiar with this book? It's very, very excellent book. This is a diary from the Dutch who witnessed this event, and this is talking about the guy who was the head of what's now New York at the time, and it talks about how he "laughed right heartily, rubbing his right arm and laughing out loud as they tortured and butchered the Indians. The soldiers seized one, threw him down, and stuck his private parts, which they had cut off, into his mouth while he was still alive, and after that, placed him on a millstone and beat his head off, delighted." While they did that, his mother-in-law allegedly amused herself all the while by kicking the heads of other victims about like footballs.

The point that I want to make is that – and we can just leave it at that, or maybe we can't leave it at that – is that we have a history that may not be much to be proud of because we started with genocide, the country was then constructed on the backs of slaves, it's been sustained by bigotry and malice towards those who are different ever since. It's not my intent this evening to participate in an anti-American tirade; we can save that for another time. But my point is that we do a disservice at the issue at hand if we cavalierly declare ourselves in possession of any moral ground based on our own behavior. In fact, if anything we are subject to the same kinds of heinousness as are the other folks whose atrocities we're trying to understand.

Well as some of you know – or actually let me back up; I'll do one other thing because I like this. In 1955 a guy that we're very captivated by named Herbert Marcuse wrote a book called *Eros and Civilization*. And I think Marcuse put everything in perspective as we totter into the 21st Century when he said, "Intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom. Throughout the world of industrial civilization the domination of man by man is growing in scope and efficiency. Nor does this trend appear as an incidental, transitory regression on the road to progress. Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, atom bombs are no relapse into barbarism, but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man by man takes place at the height of civilization, when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow the creation of a truly free world."

And that's where I see us sitting today. And I think without being overly polemic or histrionic what I'd like to claim is that we're literally in some way at the crossroads of human existence. On the one hand, for the first time in human history we really do possess, at least abstractly, the technology to provide for everyone's material needs; there's enough Twinkies to go around and there's probably enough condominiums and recreational vehicles if we wanted to make it that way.

On the other hand, I think it's the case that only the willfully ignorant or intellectually dormant will deny that the technological sophistication of existing weapons of mass destruction juxtaposed with the apocalyptic visions of our more malignant leaders, be they Hitler, Osama bin Laden, or George Bush for that matter – at the

risk of offending some, but maybe not everyone – I think renders us ripe for extinguishing ourselves as a form of life. In other words, we run the risk of being the first natural form of life to be directly responsible for its undoing. Even the dodo bird needed some help to obliterate itself; we may not.

Well, how do we understand this and how do we understand this in ways that may render us in somewhat of a position to do something about it? And here's where we believe that the ideas of Ernest Becker are especially pertinent, as some of you already know, and as I hope to convince others of you this evening. Ernest Becker was a cultural anthropologist who existed – Neil, correct me if I get the dates wrong, or Dan, anybody – 1924 'til 1974. Becker, a cultural anthropologist, spent a substantial proportion of his professional life trying to understand the psychological basis of human evil. And what I'd like to do very simply, just to set the tone for the program that we are hopefully about to experience collectively in the days to come, is to just provide a working overview of the core constructs that informed his understanding of the basic nature of the human animal.

What Becker said, and this is one of the things that appealed to my buddies, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski and I when we first encountered Becker's work, was that if we want to understand human evil we have to back up a bit. And the first thing that we need to do is to understand what it is that motivates human behavior in general. And one of the things that I always liked about Becker's ideas is that he had a spectacular knack for expressing them in ways that avoided jargon and that just very clearly said what it is that he had in mind. So when Becker talks about human motivation he's really asking the question, "Why is it that people do what they do when they do it?" And so Becker says, "Let's try and figure out what it is that impels people to behave as they do."

But before he gets too far with regard to his conceptual analysis he backs up in the *Structure of Evil* book that I borrowed as part of this title, and he says, "Let's just talk about some epistemological kinds of questions." That makes people nervous in my undergraduate classes; they always say, "I have no interest in urinary tract disorders and so why do we have to take this kind of detour at this point?" And I'm not right – I picked the wrong word. Let me back up a bit, because the philosophical types – I know we're at an erudite university, so I know the students here are familiar with epistemology; that's just the study of how it is that we acquire knowledge.

And Becker said, you know, “Before we get ahead of ourselves let’s go through the ground rules. What are the presumptions that we’re going to make before we theorize?” And he has four of them. And again, as we totter into middle age, maybe beyond middle age, into early old age, when Tom and Jeff and I think about these things I think this is one of the reasons why we were so attracted to these ideas to begin with.

The first thing that Becker says is, “Look, any attempt to understand the motivational underpinnings of human behavior must be done from an interdisciplinary perspective.” Long before it was fashionable to do so, Becker insisted that no single discipline has a lock on the truth, and that therefore we need to be able to be willing to entertain ideas from every discipline, academic and otherwise. So of course as an anthropologist he was interested in anthropology, but he also said, “We’ve got to look at things from a biological point of view. We’ve got to look at things from a psychological point of view, from a sociological point of view, from a philosophical point of view, a historical point of view, a literary point of view. We’ve got to look at popular culture. There’s no place from which it is inconceivable that a good idea might come from and we need to be willing to entertain them all.”

And he was indeed a rather really all-embracing scholar, well versed in lots of disciplines. And I think one of the reasons why his analysis of human behavior is so potent, it was then and is now, is because he literally takes the best ideas that have been kicking around, Western and even Eastern thought, for many, many centuries, and presents them to us in a way that is engaging and just amenable to our own understanding and hopefully reactions to it. So that’s thing one, is that these ideas should be interdisciplinary in nature.

The second thing that Becker argues or his second epistemological assumption, if I can get technical on you for a moment, is the idea that if we’re going to get anywhere in terms of understanding human behavior, we need to go about it in an empirical or scientific fashion. On the one hand Becker said, “Look, every idea should be considered. Everybody’s got a right to an opinion, but not all opinions are created equal.” In other words, for Becker you have a right to be wrong.

Who’s familiar with post-modern thought? Anybody know the post-modern types? I don’t have time to argue with you today and

I don't know where you stand on this issue, but it's currently fashionable in academic circles to insist that any idea is as good as another. So a brain surgeon is no better or worse than someone who reads the entrails of dead animals in order to predict the weather. Well, I disagree, and so would Becker.

Becker's claim was that ideas that are apt to be powerful – and I want to avoid the word “truth” so we can dodge the issue of what it means when you declare an idea to be true. Becker's point very simply is that, historically speaking, the most powerful and enduring ideas are ones that can be subjected to empirical scrutiny. And while Becker himself never went out and tested his ideas directly, that's one of the things that Jeff and Tom and I have done, along with a host of other folks, some of whom you'll meet this weekend. And we think it's important to note that just about every one of the ideas that comes from Becker that we have subjected to empirical scrutiny has held up quite nicely. So that's the second point, is that all things being equal, ideas that are subjectible to empirical scrutiny will fare better than those that are framed in ways that do not allow that to occur.

Becker's third insistent notion that I find particularly and poignantly relevant to our collective concerns in the context of this meeting comes from his really unabashed commitment to both the enlightenment tradition as well as the pragmatic tradition of the American philosophers of the 20th Century. Becker really did believe, and maybe a little smattering of having grown up or existed in the 1960s, in the hippy days – as many of you know, the enlightenment tradition, those were heady times because the idea was that human beings could rationally try to understand the world around them and they can use what they learn in an effort to modify both themselves and the world around them to make the world a better place. That sounds like Walt Disney to some these days, and yet Becker took that idea quite seriously. He was not a big fan of the stodgy academic notion that one acquires knowledge for the sake of knowledge per se, but again, rather following the pragmatic philosophers like Peirce and Dewey, he insisted that knowledge is only useful to the extent that it informs action, either personally or at the more broad social level.

Finally, Becker said that we will fare much better with our theories about human behavior if we ground them very solidly in the context of Darwin's ideas, vis-à-vis the Theory of Evolution. Again, I'll spare you a longer tirade just to avoid getting hung up here, but the point that Becker makes is that Darwin's Theory of Evolution, whether it's “absolutely true or not, is without a doubt

the most potent and enduring theory in the history of science. It's been here for quite a long time, it's yet to be disconfirmed. It has led to stunning predictions about the nature of reality that have proven to be true, and therefore it would behoove us to frame our theoretical conceptions about human motivation in the context of what Darwin had to say."

All right, with that in mind, let's launch very quickly into Becker's understanding of the basic motivational underpinnings of human behavior, and then let's see how that helps us understand the kind of vicious human behavior that I insist has characterized the history of humankind to date, and then let's very briefly ponder whether or not that analysis may help us move in directions that are useful and productive vis-à-vis the future of the species, and then let's hope that I shut up and we can have some snacks and talk to each other.

All right, let's start with Darwin and the Theory of Evolution, that I think everyone here has at least a rudimentary familiarity with. As you know, Darwin argued that all forms of life share in common a biological predisposition towards self-preservation in the service and survival and reproduction. I think that's pretty straight ahead. Darwin just said that living things like to keep living, and that's something that we share with every other living thing on the planet.

But what Darwin also said is that there is a really fantastic and diverse variety of really elegant and clever ways that different forms of life have been able to adapt to the demands of their physical surroundings in order to be able to survive and prosper. And so to use some silly examples, we could think about the turtle; it's not going to win any races in the Olympics, and yet the turtle's got something going for it, and that's that shell that it can just duck into and hide whenever it needs to. It comes in pretty handy.

We can think about, I don't know, the eagle; it's got pretty good vision. Supposedly an eagle can read the date off a penny from the air. I don't know who has determined that, but being able to see has definitely helped that creature out fairly well. Dogs have a good sense of smell, as anyone who has one will attest.

The point that Becker makes and that Darwin was also very painfully aware of is that if you contrast human beings with most other forms of life what you find is that we're quite frighteningly and almost pathetically impoverished when you just look at our physical attributes. The average human is a monstrous spectacle,

starting from minute one and then working our way up through the lifespan. There's nothing more heinous. There's baby Olive there, can't roll over, can't sit up, can't grab the cell phone and dial out for a pizza; completely unable to engage in even the most rudimentary of instrumental behaviors.

But even the more mature amongst us are not particularly well suited according to Darwin to function independently and autonomously by virtue of our physical attributes. We're not excessively large creatures; not overly fast creatures; our eyesight, mine especially these days, is getting quite impoverished; our sense of smell terrible; we don't have sharp teeth; don't have especially sharp claws. The point is is that there's no way we would be sitting here today if we had to survive by virtue of our individual physical attributes.

Well, what do we have going for us? Well, according to Darwin and according to Becker we've got two things that are especially handy; we've got the fact that we're especially social or gregarious creatures, and we've also got the fact that we're pretty intelligent. Although let's not be too homocentric here, intelligence is vastly overrated. The Unabomber's a smart guy, but that doesn't mean that we want to honor him for that. But I digress just a bit.

Let's talk about humans being both highly social creatures as well as vastly intelligent creatures. The point that Becker wants to make is that it's those two things that render us alive today. On the one hand we're social creatures; none of us can survive by ourselves. But when we cooperate with each other in the service of constructing a host of elaborate institutions that facilitate our collective survival we can do great, so we've got – we can't make it by ourselves, but we've got hospitals, we've got schools, we've got takeout Chinese food, all the important things that we need in order to be able to make it on our own.

We also have the fact that we're pretty bright. And one of the things that Becker wants us to marvel at, and he takes this idea from one of his major influences, that being a guy named Otto Rank, is the notion that human beings are so smart that we can actually imagine things that don't yet exist and then have the audacity to transform our dreams into reality. Rank has one of my favorite phrases; he says, "Human beings make the unreal real."

And let's note that without, again, getting too far afield, that human beings are indeed the only creative form of life on the planet. Plenty of other creatures are quite bright, but those

creatures, for better or worse, must adapt to the world in the form in which they originally encounter it. Only human beings, to borrow a phrase from Nancy Reagan, “just say no” to reality and instead conjure up their image of the way they would like the world to be and then actually transform it in accordance with their desires. I hope it’s obvious that that’s one of the reasons why human beings have proliferated and thrived in a wide variety of environmental circumstances that would not otherwise be fit for human habitation.

Well, the point that Becker makes is that we need to sit on this idea and we need to take Darwin’s notion that we’re social creatures and intelligent creatures. And we now need to combine it with the ideas of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who in the 1840s pointed out that there’s something interesting about humans, and that is that we’re so smart that we know that we’re here. All right, without technical language we can call this notion self-awareness, we can call it self-consciousness, call it whatever you want. But what Kierkegaard pointed out is that we’re so smart that we know that we’re here.

I’ve actually gotten a little squeamish about this ‘cause when I’m at Skidmore I often, I ask my classes, I say, “Look, this is not a trick question, but how many of you are aware of the fact that you’re here right now, either listening to me or wondering about when I’ll stop droning so we can have some snacks?” You know, I’m like, “Raise your hands if you know that you’re here.” Can I get some hands, just as a rhetorical question?

All right, good, I got about 50%, and that’s about what I get at Skidmore. In more friendly venues I can get almost everybody to admit that they know that they’re here.

And the point that Kierkegaard wants to make is that a blade of grass is here but doesn’t know that it’s here, an insect is here but doesn’t know that it’s here. I’m not going to get in any debates with you about whether your cat knows that it’s here or your dog knows that it’s here. All I would insist for present purposes is that you’re here, at least some of you – no, you’re all here, but most of you will admit that you’re here.

And what Kierkegaard said is, look, the minute that you know that you’re here you experience as a human being two uniquely human emotions that he designated as awe and dread, respectively. So Kierkegaard said, “Yo, it’s awesome and dreadful to be here and know it.” All right, now on the awesome side of things – and let’s

not lose track of this because I think ultimately it may be our salvation, Kierkegaard said, “You know what, there’s something spectacular about being alive and knowing it, and that each one in our better moments enjoys just the sublime privilege and joy that comes from the recognition of our very existence.”

Who’s ever had – it’s another one of those rhetorical questions – all right, I did better than you admitting you’re here! This is great. So you can admit that every once in awhile you have one of these magic moments; you wake up, it’s a beautiful day, you walk outside, you get a face full of fresh air, you see like the sun glancing off a flower, and you’re like, “Oh my god, it is fucking tremendous just to exist.”

Now you didn’t do anything great that day, you didn’t win a Nobel Prize, you didn’t win the lottery, and fortunately, because the best things in life are indeed free, that’s quite unnecessary, because you are really just basking in the ultimate human prerogative, which is to be alive and to know it. That’s awesome. And only in America is it tough to get people to admit that it’s great to be alive, but let’s leave that issue aside for just a moment.

The point that Kierkegaard makes is that it’s awesome to be alive and to know it, but for Kierkegaard and for Becker it’s also dreadful to be alive and to know it. Kierkegaard’s point is that unless you’re a child or an idiot, if you’re intelligent enough to know that you’re here you are also intelligent enough to recognize that you’ll not always be here. And so very simply Kierkegaard called it the paradox of finitude in the context of infinitude.

On the one hand we have a mind that is literally capable of transporting us across time and space. Who’s ever thought about what it might be like back in the days of the dinosaur? Or is that just me? Or back in the days of the Roman coliseum? I usually put myself in the stands as opposed to on the floor itself. All right, who’s ever thought about what it might be like if you could be like doing a little dance on the North or South Pole? You ever have one of those, “Oh, I wish I was there right now”? Who’s ever thought about what it might be like 1,000 years from now if you were here?

In other words, the point is that we have these amazing minds that are capable literally of pondering infinity, but those minds, as far as we can tell, Descartes’ rantings notwithstanding, are permanently embedded in this corporeal body that’s destined to die. So the first thing that Kierkegaard said is that one of the

problems that is of necessity engendered by the awareness that you exist is the consequent recognition of your mortality. But what Becker points out is that it's not only that that's problematic to human beings, because it would be bad enough if all that you had to be concerned about is the fact that you will someday die. But for Becker that concern about dying becomes magnified by the fact that you're also concurrently aware of the fact that death can occur at any time for reasons that no one could never anticipate or control.

And of course from some of the novelists that some of us admire, a lot of books are written just about this idea. I call it the notion of tragedy; just that bad things happen all the time to good people for reasons that we could never anticipate or control. And again, silly perhaps, but you each know the next time you get on an airplane and it appears to be flying lower than it ought, that you might be next to be vaporized against the side of a building, and you know the next time you open a card and that white powder falls out that it might not be talcum powder, and you know the next time you get a headache it might be a migraine, then again, it may be a baseball-sized inoperable tumor, a harbinger of your last six weeks on Earth. The problem is that you know all of those things.

Well, things are looking ugly, but it gets even worse because Becker points out it's not only the fact that you're going to die, it's not only the fact that you know that death can occur at any time for reasons that can't be anticipated or controlled, now what he does is following Freud he says, "You know what, there's another problem, and that's that you're an animal." You're a breathing piece of defecating, urinating, vomiting, expectorating, perspiring, menstruating, ejaculating, exfoliating – somebody stop me – post-nasal dripping, you're a piece of meat, and you're no more significant or enduring than a cucumber or a cockroach, and you know those things.

Well, Becker's point is that the ongoing awareness of the reality of the human condition, that you are mortal, that you are vulnerable, that you're a cold cut with an attitude, Spam with a plan without the can, a talking sausage, does not sit well with the average human being, and that in fact we would literally be paralyzed with abject terror if that's all we thought about. Think about that for a moment. Well, maybe don't think about that.

But the point is that if that's all you thought about, "I'm going to die. I could walk outside and get stricken by a meteor," meat with a beat, you would not be sitting here with any modicum of

psychological equanimity; you would be a quivering blob of biological protoplasm cowering under the table, groping for a Valium the size of a Buick.

But you're not. And so now the question is – that's a Woody Allen thing, by the way. I'd love to claim credit for that joke. What movie is that from? Jeff, do you know that one? I don't know, anyway, Woody Allen film.

But the point is, but we're not, we're all sitting here more or less still composed. A few people are looking a little shaky, but you'll be all right; we have snacks. And so now the question becomes how is it that human beings have from an evolutionary point of view responded to the interesting existential dilemma engendered by the awareness of death that is in turn a product of our vast intelligence?

What Becker hypothesizes, using the ideas primarily of Otto Rank and another guy named Norman Brown, is that human beings solve the problem of death using the same cognitive capabilities that engendered it in the first place, and that's our vast ability to think abstractly and symbolically through the construction and maintenance of what we would call culture.

Now Becker defines culture as “humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that are shared by people in groups in order to minimize the anxiety engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death.” Now we're going to hear a lot more about some of these notions tomorrow, so let me just preview this idea by suggesting that for Becker culture reduced anxiety with respect to death in two ways, which he refers to as “lending meaning” and “conferring significance” respectively.

So the first thing that Becker says is that what cultures do, and there's a whole lot of different ways of doing this, and he can speak with authority as an anthropologist, is to provide their constituents with answers to universal cosmological questions about the nature of life: where do I come from, what do I do when I'm here, what will happen when I'm no longer around. There is a wide variety of different cultural constructions, both past and present, but what they all share in common is they offer an account of the origin of the universe, they offer a prescription for how one ought behave while you're here, they offer an explanation for what happens to you when you die – wait a minute, I've got to take a time out – when you die, and they offer some hope of immortality

to people who behave in appropriate ways, either symbolically or literally.

In a book called *The Birth and Death of Meaning* Becker talked about both symbolic and literal immortality. He said, “Look, symbolically” – and here he’s just following the ideas that Plato originated a while ago – I can’t even say with authority how long ago that was – but Plato said, look, that’s one of the reasons why people like to do big stuff, like build pyramids and skyscrapers. It’s one of the reasons why we want to amass big fortunes. It’s one of the reasons why we want to write that famous book. It’s even one of the reasons why we want to have kids; we know on the one hand that we may not be here forever, but we’re comforted nevertheless by the prospect that a physical manifestation of ourselves remains nevertheless.

Again, to borrow from Woody Allen, he said, “You know what; I like my immortality to be literal. I don’t want to be known forever by my work; I want to be known by living forever.” In other words, if push comes to shove the average person would prefer literal immortality to symbolic immortality, and that’s the primary function of organized religion. With one or two important exceptions, and I think even these are explicable in the context of the theory that I now advance, every organized religion offers some hope of immortality of individuals who behave on earth in a way that will then get them to everlasting life in the future.

So most of us are familiar with the Christian afterlife, some of us are familiar with the Hindu notion that you keep coming back until you get it right and then you get to exist in perpetuity in some kind of ephemeral mist – and I don’t mean any of this cynically. I should foreshadow some of the ideas that are to come, because if anybody’s in the audience thinking that Becker is disparaging of religion and mocking any of us who happen to have strong religious proclivities, you’re going to be wrong, because as you’ll see if not by the end of this evening, by the end of this weekend, that for Becker religion happens to be an utterly essential and non-silly human attribute.

But let me get back to the point. All cultures as far as we know offer some hope of literal immortality to their constituents. So one point that Becker makes is that culture provides us with a sense that we live in a meaningful universe. He insists, however, that while the belief that life has meaning is necessary, it’s not in and of itself sufficient for psychological equanimity. In addition to the idea that the world is meaningful, he claims that each of us needs

to believe that we as individuals serve a value and significant role in that meaningful universe.

How many of you when you were little, long before you maybe are the way you are today, ever dreamed of doing something special or important? Who ever laid around in your bed at night and said, “Yo, I’m going to win a Nobel Prize” or “I’m going to win an Olympic medal” or “I’m going to discover a cure for cancer”? I used to do all those things at once; I’d be like, “I’ll win a gold medal and I’ll get a Nobel Prize and then I’ll write a book on the plane over to get it,” and so on. But maybe that’s just me. Some of you all may be more content for a more modest dose of heroism.

The point that Becker makes is that that’s not the raving lunacy of a narcissist – it may be in my case – but rather the normal yearning of the human animal. We each want to feel like we serve a valuable and significant role in the universe, and the way that culture allows us to pull this off is by the provision of social roles with associated prescriptions of acceptable conduct, the satisfaction of which allows you to perceive yourself as a person of value in a world of meaning. And if you’re lucky enough to feel that way, in his language you have self-esteem.

So for Becker self-esteem is the dominant motive of the human animal. It consists of the belief that you are a person of value in a world of meaning. It is the psychological mechanism by which culture exerts its anxiety-reducing, death-denying influence. Well, that’s what Becker has to say.

In fact, he has a lot more to say, and I’ll leave it to some other folks that you’ll hear this weekend to do that. But now the question becomes, so what if – or how rather does this analysis help us understand human beings’ atrocious propensity to be brutal to those that are different than themselves. And here Becker offers us two really I think profoundly stunning insights in another book with evil in the title, called *Escape from Evil*. Now Becker says, “Look, if in fact I’m right, if your beliefs about the nature of reality serve a death-denying function then there are two problems.

Problem number one is what happens when you encounter someone who has different beliefs.”All right, Becker’s point is whether you’re aware of it or not, the very existence of an alternative conception of reality is fundamentally threatening, because if you believe something, let’s say that God created the Earth in six days before taking a well-deserved break on the seventh, and you run into, let’s say, someone from the South

Pacific, where they believe that the Earth emerged from a giant coconut shell out of the side of a palm tree, well, there's a problem, because if you accept the validity of an alternative conception of reality you do so necessarily by undermining the confidence with which you subscribe to your own perspective, and when you do that you expose yourself to the very anxiety that your beliefs were constructed to reduce. Does that make sense?

That's the closest thing to a technical thought that I have, so I'm going to actually say that again, because Becker is very clear about what's happening theoretically here. If your beliefs about reality serve a death-denying function, when you run into somebody that's different, that's problematic because if you accept their beliefs you necessarily undermine the confidence that you have in your own. When you do that you expose yourself to the very anxiety that those beliefs were designed to ward off, and when that happens it instigates a host of compensatory psychological mechanisms that are designed to restore your psychological equanimity.

All right, so that's point number one, is that if Becker's ideas are true then we're going to have a problem when we run into people that are different than ourselves.

Point number two is in some ways even more gruesome and discombobulating, because what Becker goes on to say is, "You know what, even if there weren't different people around to annoy us, we would designate somebody as different because we have to." All right, well his argument is as follows, as articulated in the *Escape from Evil* book. What he says is, "Look, no matter how powerful and convincing your culture is, it is ultimately a symbol. All cultural constructs are symbolic, they're human creations; however, death is a very real, physical phenomenon." And the point that Becker makes very simply is that no symbol, regardless of its power or potency, will ever be sufficient to overcome the physical reality of death. It's like mixing apples and oranges.

Consequently, and I've got to degenerate into some psychoanalytical language, which is probably okay for some, less so for others, what Becker says, again borrowing from William James, he says, "You know what, therefore no matter how good your culture is or how much you believe in it, there's always going to be some residual anxiety about death." And you're not aware of that, he claims, because that anxiety is repressed.

And then, using Freud's ideas, what Becker says is that repressed anxiety is projected onto another group of individuals, either inside

or outside of your culture, that you designate as the all-encompassing repository of evil, the eradication of which would make life on Earth as it is in heaven. He calls them scapegoats, and I think we're familiar with them; they're either in-house or external ones. Either way, Becker says, we've got a problem; either you run into people that are different and that's a problem, or you declare somebody to be different and that's a problem. Because what Becker then goes on to do, borrowing very heavily from some sociologists that we're very fond of, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in a book called *The Social Construction of Reality*, what Becker does following Berger and Luckmann is to talk about the psychological processes that are instigated when people encounter others who do not share their beliefs, or encounter somebody who they have designated as different.

I'm going to abridge this list a bit just to get us through the evening and just stick to the basics and talk about three reactions that we're all familiar with. Reaction number one we call derogation, I think because Berger and Luckmann called it that. That's just a high-dollar word for berating or belittling somebody. So I believe that God created the Earth in six days and took a break, those people in the South Pacific believe that the Earth was created out of a giant coconut shell. Well is that a problem? Of course not, those are ignorant savages that live in huts and worship piles of sticks and mud. They don't have CNN or email or beepers, and so no wonder they have such a stupid conception of reality. I'm being facetious here; I'm not meaning to be taken literally.

The point that I want to make is that the first line of psychological defense when we encounter those that are different than ourselves is to belittle the possessor's of an alternative conception of reality as a sub-human, unintelligent form of life, because once we do that diminishes the challenge that their conception of reality poses to us.

How's that sound? Does that make sense? A couple of head shakes for an emotional boost. Awesome.

All right, thing number two is while we berate these folks, we generally simultaneously try to get them to divest their ridiculous ideas about the nature of reality and to adopt ours instead. I think Burger and Luckmann call this assimilation, or we do, I can't remember. But we're more familiar with the term conversion, and this usually happens politically or religiously. So the next thing that we try to do is to get folks to drop their ideas and to adopt ours instead. And let's think about this for a moment because I think

this is very important. It certainly is for Becker because we need to understand what's at stake.

Becker's point is that there's a sense in which culture is a shared illusion. And what he means by that very simply is that if we grant that cultural beliefs are human constructions, what we also need to note is that there's lots of different ways to apprehend reality, and there's no absolute way to insist that any one of them is of necessity better than another. How's that sound? Well, as a result, the way that we maintain confidence in our beliefs is by social consensus, so the more people that share our beliefs the more confident we can be that they're correct.

And again, I mean no offense, although I'll be happy to offend if necessary. If you're a single person in the train station in New York City – and anybody who's been on the East Coast are familiar with these types, walking around, it's July, you've got a winter coat on and a big shopping bag full of crap and you're walking around gibbering how this large bearded guy created all of humanity in his image and the rest of the world in six days. If there's only one person saying that stuff, you're going to reach for the bottle of antipsychotic medication and pass it on. You're just going to say, "That is so maniacal that that's beyond belief."

Well, when half of the world has that belief it's not so maniacal; it's the received wisdom of one of the world's dominant religions. And again, I mean no offense here. The point that I want to make is that if it's just *your* belief it's autism; if it's everyone's belief it's culture. And it doesn't change the fact that one of them is no more or less right than the other.

So the point that Becker makes is that we go to enormous lengths to get other folks to dispose of their ideas and to adopt ours instead. I don't want to single anyone out in particular this evening except to note the Christian missionaries and the United States are the biggest of the converters in terms of religion and politics respectively, and I think it's for the same psychological reasons. And we can maybe talk about this later on if we need to. The Russians were right up there, but they weren't as good at it as we are, and so they're out of the running these days.

Well, next thing that we do according to Becker is just to annihilate those folks that are different, thus removing them from the face of the planet and confirming that our God and our vision of reality is the true one after all. As some of you have heard me

glibly say in the past, my God is better than your God and we will kick your ass to prove it.

All cynicism aside and all silliness aside, the point that Becker wants us to seriously entertain is that ultimately all ethnic strife, all armed conflict is the result of a psychological inability to tolerate alternative death-denying cultural constructions.

Now let's not be simple-minded, this is not to suggest that there aren't geographical, political, and economic considerations that pervade human conflict, there certainly are. Many of you know – I didn't until I looked at a map – but many of you know that there's a reason why Afghanistan's been contested for thousands of years; geographically it's an important trade route. And silliness aside, I don't think we'd be that concerned about what's going on in Iraq if it was the repository of the world's largest pile of dog shit as opposed to oil. And surely there are tangible reasons why people often have conflict. Booty and land are part of the equation; let's not forget about that. But let's also note that for Becker we would still have the same ugly problems, even if there were not practical considerations.

His point very simply, and I think very poignantly and profoundly, is that most wars are ultimately a collision between competing death-denying ideologies, each of which denies the right of the other party to exist. And I think the best example of this that we see right now every day, actually two best examples, you've got what's going on in the Middle East. Until very recently the official policy of the Palestinian Liberation Organization with regard to the desired whereabouts of the citizens of Israel is where? Where do we want them?

In the sea. So the official PLO mandate was we're not done 'til all the Israelis are pushed into the ocean. And what's the quaint slogan that the Israeli's came back with? "The only good Arab is a dead Arab." All right? And who remembers when the Iranians took over the embassy in America, what'd they call us? The great Satan. And what did Ronald Reagan call Russia? The evil empire. Are these the words of rational discourse by which intelligent people can come to a reason to compromise, or is this not the histrionic shrieking of death denial? I would argue the latter.

I see the same polemic language pervading our current conflict with regard to radical Islam squaring off against frankly an equally radical and equally problematic fundamental vision that comes from our end of things. So we see Osama bin Laden and his

declaration of war, declare that the entire West is a malignant form of life that must be eradicated, and if we can do that the world's going to be a good place.

Was it Jerry Falwell or the other neo-Nazi? Was it Falwell or Pat Robertson who just declared Mohammed a terrorist and Islam an ugly religion, the disposition of which would render life on Earth as it is in heaven? Bin Laden and Falwell would do fine at the same table; their clothing is different, but their attitudes are the same.

Well, the point that Becker makes – and I've really talked too much and I'm hoping to shut up in the next five minutes or so – is that if these ideas ought be taken seriously then what are the implications of them for us as human beings in the world in which we now inhabit? And at the end of *Escape from Evil* Becker really has some interesting thoughts, one of which I hope is quite wrong, because he wonders at the end of that book if human beings are a viable form of life. He just says, "You know what, we have to think about the fact that we may be a giant biological mistake. We are not an incredibly old species."

Who's aware that modern Homo sapiens, we've only been here for about 100,000-or so years? Who's also aware of the fact that every human on the planet is descended from a tiny breeding population of no more than 200 individuals? Is anybody aware of that? We're an accident, quite frankly, and a rather young one at that. Bacteria have been here for 6,000,000,000 or so years; they've definitely proven their mettle. And other forms of life have been here for quite awhile.

The human being has not been here for that long, Becker reminds us. And what he points out is that having self-conscious pieces of mortal meat may not have been that good of an idea. In the short-run it may have been good because we have been fantastically successful, but now that we possess the technology to exterminate each other with about the same amount of effort necessary to play a video game, things may not work out too well.

It would be arrogant and stupid to proclaim ourselves detached from nature to the point where we have some kind of privileged position that renders us immune from self-imposed catastrophe. And as I've joked with many of my students before over the years, there's a very real possibility in the absence of a radical change in the way that we conduct our affairs that in a few thousand years you'll have cockroaches the size of us looking at a few humans in

jars of formaldehyde in museums next to some dinosaurs. They'll be going, "Yo, there's the dinosaurs. There's those people; they ruled for a tiny time and then they really screwed up, and there they are in a jar."

Cockroaches will be fine; they thrive on radiation, so when we're long gone the world will be a better place for the roach. And just like mammals were midgets until the dinosaurs got snuffed and then we got big, maybe the roach is a midget waiting for our demise. They're robust creatures and they'll do fine in our absence.

Let's hope that that's prematurely unfortunate, because if that's where we stand let's just stop the conference and head to the nearest brewpub and drink as much as we can as fast as we can. Let's hope that there's a different direction that we can go in and a more hopeful one.

And I'd like to think that just our presence here today is, I think, a hopeful beginning to what might be a small but nevertheless significant start to a chain of events that twists things in a more productive direction. Remember I started this tirade by saying that it's both awesome and dreadful to be here and know it. And now the trick becomes how can we parlay our intense intelligence, how can we parlay the joy of being alive into a way of living that does not ultimately result in catastrophic implications for folks that are different than ourselves.

Well, quite frankly, the answer to that question is I don't know. Just like Becker, he was about to die when he finished *Escape from Evil*. I hope I'm not about to die. So his problem was he was dying; he didn't have time. My problem is that I have a small mind so I can't think of anything off the top of my head specifically about how we ought pull this off. But I will leave you with two things, and they're both Becker ideas, maybe three things.

All right, thing number one is that I like Becker's idea that comes from the enlightenment and pragmatic tradition that knowledge is power. I think all things being equal, historically whenever we've understood something, that's helped us out immensely when it's come time to fix it. All right? So when we learned that syphilis was caused by a bacteria, well that helped us figure out that we need to develop penicillin in the service of obliterating it. Until then we hadn't a clue and we weren't doing too well. Similarly, when we wanted to learn how to fly a plane, the Wright brothers

learned about aerodynamics and then they got a plane in the air. People said it couldn't be done, and yet they did it.

And so when people say to us, "Oh, humans are always going to be like this. We're just vicious creatures. You can't change. It can't be otherwise." Well, I disagree. I don't understand why we have to start with that attitude. Why not start with the attitude that the better we understand ourselves the better we render ourselves in a position to rectify and improve our circumstances. So that's point number one, and that is that there's a hope, I think, that the more that we know, the better we have an understanding of why it is that we behave this way then we're in a better position to do something about it.

Point number two, and this is a Becker point, and I'll be intentionally obscure in the hope that we can continue to discuss this idea and that other presenters in the program to come will address it more directly, is that Becker also insists that there's got to be a religious dimension to any serious effort to improve the human condition. He basically said, "You know what, there's no way that we're going to get out of this without dabbling in religion broadly defined." One of my favorite Becker quotes in *The Denial of Death* is that "Psychology can only take you so far, at which time it drops you directly on the doorstep of religion."

Well what does he mean by that? His point very simply is that every one of us, whether we liked it or not, just to get up in the morning we have to believe things about reality. Every one of us has beliefs about reality. They may be religious, they may be secular, but every one of us has beliefs about reality. And if we're honest with ourselves, there's no way that those beliefs about reality can ever be unambiguously confirmed.

Well, then why do you still have them? Well you still have them because you have faith, and the moment you get the f-word – that's not the f-word that most people are used to hearing me say – but the f-word, the minute you get faith into the equation you're beyond the boundaries of psychology and enter into the domain of religion. And one of my favorite phrases from this Oswald Spangler guy – who's ever read *Decline of the West*, or heard of that book? Anyway, Spangler says, "Faith is the beginning of all intellectual inquiry." Because if you didn't have faith you wouldn't bother to think about things to begin with.

And so Becker's point is that we need to have faith. We need to have faith that it is possible to envision a world other than the one

that we currently reside in. And then we need imagination. We need to be able to imagine what it is that that world might look like. When Da Vinci drew pictures of helicopters people were like, “Oh, what a lunatic. What’s wrong with you, bro?” and yet 500 years later we’re flying around in those machines. Would it be so ridiculous to imagine a world even slightly more pleasant than the one that we now reside in?

And then on top of imagination, to have the courage to act in ways to make it actually happen. So I like – that’s a nice triumvirate for me: faith, imagination, and courage, and I think that’ll take us a long way.

Anyway, I’ve talked much more than I had hoped, so let me just leave you with one last fortune cookie-type phrase and then I’ll be done and thank you for your wonderful attention, ‘cause I’m sick of hearing myself.

But I was, a couple of weeks ago, in Ohio at a literary conference for one of my favorite authors, a guy named Sherwood Anderson. Anybody know Anderson’s work? I actually was originally acquainted with it through someone at the Becker Foundation. And part of the conference was a tour of the little town that Sherwood Anderson lived in. And we got to go to the cemetery where he was buried. And at first I’m like, “Oh, you know, I don’t need to see any more dead people. I can go to the cemetery anytime.”

But anyway, we went to the cemetery and on Anderson’s tombstone is this wonderful little epitaph that I think is a perfect way for me to shut up, because then what it says on the tombstone is “Life, not death, is the great adventure.” And I saw that and I’m like, “Yo, dead people are really wise.” That’s a fine idea and a nice way for me to stop.

I talk about these ideas and a lot of people here talk about these notions quite a bit. And very often what folks often say is, “Oh man, this is so demoralizing. It’s death this, it’s death that.” A lot of people say Becker’s ideas would be great if he wasn’t always so preoccupied with death. But the point I want to make is it’s not about that. Sure, it’s thinking about death, but it’s pondering our demise in the service of enriching our lives. So I like that, “Life, not death, is the great adventure.”

So I’ve talked too much, but I hope what I’ve done is to convince you of at the very least the – well, actually I hope that – let me

back up. I hope I presented Becker's ideas in ways that first of all make sense, secondly, that are relatively true to what Becker actually says. And if I've messed up, believe me, there'll be plenty of people to fix me in the next day or two.

I hope that for those of you that are unfamiliar with Becker's ideas that this has been enough to provoke you to join us for the rest of the weekend, because we have an unbelievably wonderful program that is quite multi-dimensional in nature. We have a big dose of empirical studies, we're going to be hearing from people that will talk to you about the research that's been done to verify Becker's ideas, and then we're going to hear from the real people that actually work in the community and help others, and we're going to see how these ideas might be put in action, and hopefully we're going to have plenty of time in between the formal program to just talk to and with each other in the service of advancing our, I hope, collective interests in making the world, if not perfect, at least a tad less troubling than it currently is.

All right, thank you very much.

[Applause]

Thank you. That's too much.

[End of Audio]