


# Ernest Becker at Simon Fraser University (1969-1974)

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## **Abstract**

The cultural anthropologist and humanist Ernest Becker spent the final four and a half years of his life at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in British Columbia, Canada. During these years, Becker's thought and work underwent a profound transformation that resulted in the publication of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, and a highly praised companion book, published posthumously, *Escape From Evil*. However, surprisingly little has been known about Becker's final years at SFU. In this biographical essay, based on Becker's papers and letters, university records and documents, and interviews with several of those who knew him best during this period of his life, Becker's years at SFU are revealed as a professional, existential struggle, one that was both heroic and tragic—a struggle in which his work merged with his life as both drew to an end.

## **Keywords**

Ernest Becker, biography, life and work, *The Denial of Death*, existential humanist, theorist of life and death

As many readers of this journal will know, Ernest Becker's book, *Denial of Death*, won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1974, mere months before the author's premature death. Given the considerable impact of this

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book and the stature of Becker as arguably the predominate theorist of the psychology of life and death, there has been considerable speculation amongst humanists in psychology and psychoanalysis about Becker's final few years of life and the possible relations that might have existed between his work and his life during that period of time. When I first arrived at Simon Fraser University (SFU) as a young assistant professor in the summer of 1975, I had expected to see considerable evidence of Becker's prior presence at the University. However, there were no memorials or monuments, no displays of his writings in the library, no university grounds or buildings named in his honor. Indeed, it was hard to find anyone who knew him well enough to tell me about him.<sup>1</sup> At that time, I made a promise to myself that one day I would research and write about Becker's time at SFU, and make available to his many fans and admirers the story of those final four and a half years of his life. This biographical essay is the result of my efforts to keep that promise.

## Introduction

On March 20, 1969, the Board of Governors of SFU approved the appointment of Ernest Becker to a professorship in Behavioural Science Foundations in its Faculty of Education, effective September 1, 1969, at a salary of Can\$19,000 (at the time, US\$17,670). On April, 23, 1969, SFU's Acting President, Ken Strand, wrote to Becker, conveying the terms of his appointment, adding, "I am pleased to welcome you to the staff of Simon Fraser University." Approximately 2 years later, President Strand wrote to Becker to confirm

that the Board of Governors, at its meeting of April 22, 1971, approved the transfer of . . . Dr. E. Becker from the Educational Foundations Centre to the Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology (PSA), effective May 1, 1971.

On January 8, 1974, President Strand sent a memorandum to the Acting Chairman of the Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology (PSA) granting an extension of a sick leave for Dr. Becker to February 28, 1974. A few days later, on March 6, 1974, Ernest Becker passed away at Vancouver General Hospital. He was 49 years old. On May 7, 1974, Ian Whitaker, Chairman of the PSA, wrote a memorandum to faculty and students of the Department announcing Ernest Becker's posthumous receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for his book *The Denial of Death*.<sup>2,3</sup>

During his four and a half years at SFU, Ernest Becker wrote the final 3 of his 10 books: a much revised second edition of his earlier book, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*,<sup>4</sup> and what he referred to as his only mature works, *The*

*Denial of Death* and the posthumously published *Escape From Evil*.<sup>5,6</sup> Together, these three volumes reflect a significant change in Becker's theory about the human condition and the nature of an appropriately human science.

In his previous seven books, influenced by Rousseau and Dewey and in reaction to Freud, Becker had understood the cultural world of roles and meanings to furnish and constrain the individual's self-constitution, requiring an exchange of individual potential and possibility for a functioning identity and self-value supported by social and cultural conventions and practices. In these writings, Becker understood life as a struggle for meaning and self-esteem within the dual prisons of our bodies and our cultures. We are bounded by, and suspended within, the creatureliness of animals and the symbolic practices and powers of gods, and somehow must create a self-regard adequate to living within such a perilous circumstance.

However, in the three books written at SFU, Becker understands persons as simultaneously terrorized by the necessity of both living and dying, embroiled in the guilt and shame of the former while experiencing the dread and injustice of the latter—a deeply dark perspective that has drawn the ire of both secularists and theists. At this stage in his life and work, Becker no longer accepts a unifying principle of self-esteem maintenance as his fundamental organizing concept, viewing such a principle as too abstracted and lacking a required “universal, energetic content in the form of specific, inflexible motives” (Becker, 1975, p. xvii). These motives he now found in the work of Otto Rank, “in his insistence on the fundamental dynamic of the fear of life and death, and man's urge to transcend this fear in a culturally constituted heroism” (Becker, 1975, p. xvii). For Becker, the problem of life and death becomes paramount when collective ideologies fail and individuals experience the full impotence and terror of their limitations and inevitable destruction—a terror capable of unleashing uniquely human forms of evil with disastrous consequences for people and their societies. At the same time, Becker also found inspiration in his discovery of Rank's oeuvre in the early months of 1971. Having been under the sway of the more misanthropic insights of Marx and Freud, Rank's emphasis on the power of art and love to heal the brokenness of men and women lifted Becker's sights to a higher plane of cosmic creativity and joy. Infused with the exhilarating positive life force of Rank's creative will, Becker was now able to set alongside the terror of extinction an ode to joy, the kingdom of death in balance with the kingdom of life.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I interpret Becker's years at SFU as a professional, existential struggle, one that was both heroic and tragic. To set the stage for this interpretation, I begin with a brief synopsis of Becker's life prior to SFU, with the aim of establishing the final period of his time at SFU as a *new*

*beginning*, even if one that was not entirely welcomed by Becker himself, and from which he continuously attempted to escape.

## **Crossroads: The Mixed Promises of a New Beginning**

Ernest Becker was born on September 27, 1924, in Springfield, Massachusetts, into a first-generation Jewish family.<sup>8</sup> His nuclear family was small for that time, with just two boys (Ernest and his older brother, Louis), but was integrated into a larger family unit. Ernest's father, Sam, was a businessman who helped his younger brothers become established in professional positions, primarily as lawyers. His mother, in addition to managing the household, was a well-known local entertainer, who frequently sang and performed at the local Jewish Community Center and other Springfield venues. However, despite her lively humor, she too shared in the family's practical orientation to life. Immersed in business and professional undertakings, neither Ernest's immediate family nor his extended family had any interest in academic pursuits. Within this family context, Ernest stood out as unusual, both for his intellectual interests and his strabismus, a condition that he learned to minimize but never had corrected. At this time and later, Ernest experienced considerable ambivalence toward his family, often feeling as if he were on the outside looking in.<sup>9</sup> After completing his schooling, with an emphasis on practical subjects (as dictated by his parents' desires), Becker enrolled in the U.S. Army, and saw action as an infantryman in World War II, during which time he witnessed directly the human tragedy and toll of the Nazi concentration camps.<sup>10</sup>

On his return to the United States, Becker eventually took advantage of the GI Bill that afforded educational opportunities to returning veterans and completed an undergraduate degree, majoring in cultural anthropology at Syracuse University in New York. However, before he was able to do so, he spent a year back in Springfield, living with his parents while he completed several high school courses in subjects required for university admission. With his qualifications for admission in place, Becker applied to both the Department of Language (French) and the Department of Anthropology at Syracuse, eventually deciding on anthropology, where he studied with Phil Singer, a close personal friend.

After graduation from Syracuse, Ernest and Phil Singer both found work in U.S. embassies abroad. Using his fluent French, Becker settled in Paris as an administrative officer in the American Embassy, while Phil headed to London. Although fond of Paris and the experiences it offered, Ernest found

diplomatic life somewhat stifling and became disenchanted with his prospects in the diplomatic corps.<sup>11</sup> Returning to Syracuse University in his early 30s, he pursued graduate studies in cultural anthropology, eventually settling on philosophical anthropology (especially in reaction to its renderings by Marx and Freud) as his abiding and passionate interest, one that was to endure throughout his lifetime. Becker's search for the motivational triggers of persons locked within the harrowing human condition (bounded by birth and death, and enabled and confined by sociocultural experience) was fostered by the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach to which he was exposed during his graduate education. Especially important in this regard were his interactions with his thesis supervisor, the Japanese specialist, Donald Haring, whose teaching style and intellectual approach Becker greatly admired.<sup>12</sup> This work explored mechanisms of transference in Japanese Zen in comparison to Chinese thought reform and American-style psychotherapy.<sup>13</sup> During the summer of 1960, Becker retreated to Maine where he completed the manuscript for his first book, *Zen: A Rational Critique*.

At the end of the summer of 1960, Ernest Becker's prospects looked promising. Not only had he been hired as an instructor in anthropology by the Department of Psychiatry in the Health Services Center of the State University of New York (SUNY) at Syracuse, he had also wed a young woman whom he met at Syracuse, and who would be his lifelong companion and partner. For Ernest and Marie, the future looked bright. In his new position, Becker became friendly with the well-known critic of psychiatry, Thomas Szasz. Szasz's antiauthoritarianism appealed to Becker, and during the next 2 years he spent considerable time and energy investigating psychiatric practices and relating them to his developing philosophical anthropology and to his own transactional thinking about mental illness. Two new books evolved from Becker's lectures to first-year medical students and his other experiences at SUNY-Syracuse: the first edition of *Birth and Death of Meaning*<sup>14</sup> and *Revolution in Psychiatry*.<sup>15</sup>

Not only was Becker's time at SUNY-Syracuse intellectually rewarding, it also proved to be extremely rich at a personal and social level. In addition to forming his life partnership with Marie, he also initiated lifelong friendships with Szasz and a number of other SUNY and Syracuse colleagues, including Ronald Leifer,<sup>16</sup> Martin Hoffman,<sup>17</sup> Mahinda Silva,<sup>18</sup> Roy Waldman,<sup>19</sup> and Harvey Bates.<sup>20</sup> All in all, the time they spent in Syracuse was an oasis of varied social contact and friendship for the Beckers.

Unfortunately, despite his scholarly productivity and general professional success, Becker's position at SUNY was terminated because he supported Szasz when the latter was stripped of his teaching duties at SUNY because of

his public criticism of (including court testimony in actual legal cases challenging) the involuntary hospitalization of psychiatric patients. Becker's support for Szasz was based as much on his strong commitment to academic freedom as on his continuing friendship and respect for Szasz personally and professionally. Indeed, this event was to prove prophetic for Becker's subsequent career path, that of a peripatetic scholar, whose interdisciplinary commitments frequently challenged the limits of the somewhat restrictive forms of academic freedom extant at most North American Universities during the 1960s and 1970s.

After a recuperative year in 1963<sup>21</sup> with Marie in Europe, mostly in Rome, Becker returned to Syracuse University, this time as a sessional instructor, with the assistance of old friends in the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology. After almost 2 years, his position was once again terminated—this time, at least in part, according to the “four-part sketch of Ernest Becker and his work” available on the website of the Ernest Becker Foundation, because of speaking out against encroachments on academic freedom he recognized in the ways in which funding from business and military sources was handled at the University.<sup>22,23</sup>

So, by the summer of 1965, Ernest, Marie, and their first-born son, Samuel Steven (Sam), were on the move once again, this time to the Department of Sociology at the University of California (UC) at Berkeley, Ernest having accepted a 1-year contract, which had been offered at the recommendation of Erving Goffman, UC Berkeley Professor of Sociology. Years later in a letter to Harvey Bates dated January 7, 1970, Becker wrote, “We left many good friends in Syracuse, and in this short life, friends are few.”<sup>24</sup>

However, at Berkeley, Ernest and Marie continued to add to their growing list of close friends—most notably Goffman (whom they got to know well before he departed for a position at the University of Pennsylvania), Jack Scott (who, together with his wife Micki, later achieved considerable fame and notoriety as an advocate for reform in college athletics and through his association with members of the infamous Symbionese Liberation Army—including Patty Hurst),<sup>25</sup> and the DeFremerys.<sup>26</sup> Their circle of Berkeley friends also included a few Syracuse friends, such as Martin Hoffman who had also relocated to the San Francisco Bay area.

After completing his first year at Berkeley, Becker received another 1-year contract, this time in Berkeley's Department of Anthropology. In both the Sociology and Anthropology Departments at Berkeley, Becker developed a reputation as a rivetingly relevant and highly theatrical lecturer. What typified his “standing-room-only” teaching performances in the capacious Wheeler Auditorium on the UC Berkeley campus was the way in which he

spoke directly to the students' sense of alienation, leading them on an interdisciplinary exploration of the possible causes of their life experience as considered within his interpretations of the human condition and the challenges of striving for meaning and significance within it. A typical course might require students to read widely across intellectual and literary works by scholars and authors such as La Barre, Freud, Frieden, Kafka, Rousseau, Buber, Comte, Small, Ward, Hoffman, Foucault, Engles, Ortega, Goffman, Dostoyevski, Jarvie, Dewey, Sartre, Szasz, Kierkegaard, Huizinga, Evans-Pritchard, Hazard, Voegelin, Emerson, Erikson, and, of course, Becker himself (whose oeuvre had now been enhanced with the publication of *Beyond Alienation: A Philosophy of Education for the Crisis of Democracy*).<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly, Becker's popularity as a teacher led to his involvement with two groups of students who undoubtedly influenced the future course of his career. One group included students who were highly conflicted between their love of their country and their despair at what they considered to be an unjust war in Vietnam. The other was a group of theological students whom Becker frequently invited to his home for evening discussions. The former group left Becker torn between his academic attachments and his desire to do whatever might be required to keep these young people away from harm. The second group rekindled his interest in religious belief and practice as a pervasive and possibly necessary facet of human individual and communal life.

Unfortunately, the same commitment, interdisciplinarity, relevance, and theatricality that excited his students caused concern to Becker's more traditional colleagues and Berkeley administrators. Or, perhaps more precisely, the latter objected to Becker's diminution of what he regarded as inadequately theorized empirical pursuits in the social sciences and his refusal to limit himself to conventional canons of the social science disciplines. In consequence, Becker's contract was not renewed, despite a protest and petition on the part of a couple of thousand students that led the student government to vote to pay his salary of \$13,000 from their own coffers.<sup>28</sup> The University responded with a plan to use these funds to hire Becker as an "educational consultant" who would offer only noncredit courses. *Time Magazine* (Friday, March 10, 1967) covered the story in a column lamenting the entire affair:

A notable yearning of today's college students is for broad courses that cut a swath across academic disciplines and focus on major social issues. One problem, however, is that there is rarely a niche for such freewheeling scholars in the modern, highly compartmentalized university. Berkeley Lecturer Ernest Becker, 42, who attracted overflow crowds in a 900-seat auditorium for a wide ranging course embracing religion, anthropology and sociology, was reminded of that disturbing fact last month when Cal's anthropology department failed to rehire him.

Becker, seeing that there was no viable alternative, decided to leave Berkeley, and accepted a job at San Francisco State College (SFSC; now San Francisco State University) for the 1967-1968 academic year, and he, Marie, and Sam, with new arrival Gabriella, moved across the Bay.

However, after the intellectual excitement at Berkeley, Becker never was happy at SFSC, and soon became disillusioned with the way in which SFSC President S. I. Hayakawa, himself a distinguished interdisciplinarian, with the backing of State Governor Ronald Reagan, called in the National Guard to maintain order when the student revolts of 1967-1968 erupted on the SFSC campus. Without other job options, Becker, deeply troubled by both the campus and his own situation, resigned in 1969. In his resignation letter of January 27, 1969, to Professor Rausch, Becker stated,

When Mr. Hayakawa took his present office he said he would welcome with alacrity the immediate resignations of any professors who felt they could not work under his regime. I gave it a fair try, but found it impossible. Accordingly, since I find it impossible to pursue scholarly work and teaching in the campus atmosphere as it now is . . . you may consider this an official confirmation of my resignation from State College. (Ernest Becker Papers [EBP], Columbia University)

To provide some sense of Becker's state of mind at this time, it is instructive to consider two sources in which he talks about his perceptions and reactions to his situation as 1968 drew to a close. In considering these statements, it is useful to keep in mind that both were crafted in December of 1968, approximately 4 months before SFU Acting President Ken Strand wrote to offer Becker an appointment at SFU. The first is a journal entry (Becker was an occasional diarist at several different periods of his life) dated December 10, 1968 (as reproduced in Kramer, 2007, p. 471).

It is clearer to me lately that I am masking my fear of finitude, of death, of being stupidly killed and ended, and my life having no real weight or meaning. I am masking this by devotion to the family, what would happen to *them* if I were to die, etc. Who would educate Sam and Gaby into the kind of historical-personal perspectives that alone can help them become persons, etc. Now there is some justification for these misgivings and anxieties. But goodness, man, you have got to live on the world's terms, like all flesh: you have got to travel on its roads and in its skies, you have got to take your insignificant place with all men; you have got to die; you have got to have only the tiniest weight in the destiny of man, if you have any weight at all. You have got to accept this and live it, and trust God. If he created you into this kind of situation, then that's the kind you have to live in. To try to stretch this into something greater is not going to be done; you are defying God in effect, if you try to secure your life and fashion your own weight. The trouble with the creative person is that by throwing off the yoke of the people



around him, he also throws off the unquestioned acceptance that daily action is right. Then he sticks out and starts to question and fear. The task, then is clear; that after he wins his freedom, he has to contrive to slip back into the daily dumb acceptance that sustains all other men. There is no alternative.

The second statement appears as part of a letter written by Becker on December 30, 1968, in response to an offer by UC Davis to deliver a lecture on “the new humanistic-existential approach to interpersonal relationships” (EBP, Columbia University).

Thank you for your kind invitation of the 16th, which just reached me. It catches me full in the middle of my two-yearly ritual of looking around for another post to move myself and my family. I finally saw the apt analogy for my situation: namely, that of the classy prostitute who is in great demand for an hour, but who no one would think of moving permanently into their home.

I am under a continual barrage of invitations to lecture, but when it comes to offering me a regular position, there is great embarrassment over “where exactly to fit me.” Imagine that. In the eight years since my Ph.D., I have been at four successive universities, and have been shown the door at each one. And now at State—which is embarrassing to me, since it is hardly a very high-class place.

To carry through with the above analogy, I am sure that you will understand that even prostitutes have their pride; and my policy is, if I’m not proper enough to take home, then no hour’s pleasure either.

I’m sure you’ll have no trouble recruiting rich talent from the plentifully endowed tenured posts in this area, for your lecture series; albeit they are probably a bit plain. And I’m sure that you won’t take personally my little esthetic manipulations—probably the only controlled joy we have left.

Fortunately, even this level of despair and frustration could not stem the tide of Becker’s literary output, as what many regard as the finest of his pre-SFU books, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*, was published in 1969,<sup>29</sup> and a new collection of his essays appeared in 1969 under the title *Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man*.<sup>30</sup> But despite this prodigious output, Becker still had not secured a full-time, tenured position in the Academy, and by the summer of 1969, the Beckers were off to SFU, with Ernest both frustrated and depressed, if nonetheless wondering what life on the Canadian Southwest Coast might have in store for him.

## Life at SFU and in Vancouver

The main campus of SFU is located on top of Burnaby Mountain (365 meters above sea level) in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, the Greater Vancouver

suburb immediately to the east of Vancouver. SFU enrolled its first students in 1965, and quickly established a reputation for innovative pedagogy, experimentation in institutional organization and governance, and student and professorial radicalism. Becker's new home, the Behavioural Science Centre (BSC), was one of five centers (the others being Professional Development, Social and Philosophical Studies, Physical Development, and Communications and the Arts) that comprised SFU's Faculty of Education. Initially, these centers had been intended as loose organizations that would group professors in areas of expertise in ways that would make that expertise available to a novel teacher-training program, which was the real centerpiece of the Faculty of Education. The then Director of the BSC, Robert Harper, had recruited Becker by telling him about the exciting intellectual climate that he would experience at SFU.<sup>31</sup> By the time that Becker arrived in 1969, the BSC offered a variety of workshops and a small number of short courses for teachers in training and the master teachers seconded by the University to assist with the practical side of teacher education.

Interestingly, in the fall of 1969, Becker's future home at SFU, the Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology (PSA) was in complete turmoil. Shortly after, and completely unrelated to, Becker's arrival on campus, a number of PSA students and faculty began an illegal strike to protest the University's imposition of a new, university-wide system of tenure and promotion decisions that would not permit the localization of such decisions at the Departmental level. Between 1965 and 1969, some radical students and faculty in PSA had been at the vanguard of a campus revolution that had "unseated a president, democratized departments (introducing elected chairs), and moved erratically and partially towards student participation in university and department government."<sup>32</sup> However, by the fall of 1969, most of SFU's faculty and student body had accepted a new state of relative calm, which included more peaceful relations between students and faculty and the central administration. Consequently, when, in October, 1969, the PSA strikers disrupted classes and created confrontations with other faculty and students (including many within PSA itself), President Strand felt justified in obtaining a court injunction ordering several of the most prominent strikers to desist. Striking faculty members were suspended, and dismissal proceedings were initiated.<sup>33</sup>

In the midst of this renewed campus disruption, Ernest Becker began his career at SFU, his first and only tenure stream appointment ("appointment without term," subject to the University's renewal and tenure provisions) as a university Professor. Despite his past record of taking public stands on matters of academic freedom, there is no evidence that Becker became embroiled in

any but the most routine of university politics during his time at SFU, either during his stint in the Faculty of Education or subsequently (as of 1971) in the PSA Department.<sup>34</sup> In fact, during his four and a half years at SFU, Becker seems to have performed as an excellent teacher, an increasingly renowned scholar, and a good citizen, serving on various committees and undertaking at least one major initiative (suggesting a new curriculum for the PSA Department), without becoming embroiled in any notable conflicts with students, administrators, or other faculty. There were, of course, occasional expressions of minor upset, but these tended to be confined to matters that had an immediate and localized impact, such as concerns with respect to salary, teaching assignments, sabbatical applications, departmental hiring, and so forth.

### *Becker in BSC (1969-1971)*

The one and a half years that Becker spent in the BSC (also referred to as Behavioural Science Foundations by its inhabitants) in the Faculty of Education were mostly unremarkable, and seem to have been the occasion for Becker to get himself and his family settled in the University and in Vancouver, in addition to completing work on the second edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. The main, continuing professional friendship he formed in this brief period of time was with a colleague in the BSC, Karl Peter, a Canadian sociologist. Peter and Becker supported each other professionally, and when Becker moved to the PSA Department, Peter also moved to PSA. Nonetheless, they were very different personalities and held quite different political views, with Peter tending to be considerably to the right of Becker.

Others in the BSC with whom Becker worked included Fred Brown and Bernie D'Aoust, as well as Robert Harper. Prior to Becker's move to SFU, D'Aoust sent a very kind letter to Becker, then still in San Francisco. In it, Bernie explained how the main, and apparently only, course that Becker would be teaching, Education 201, had been taught in the past, gave useful information about expectations and procedures that governed the teaching of this and other courses, and extended a warm and flattering welcome:

The preliminary billing I have been providing for you amongst the students since I heard you were coming goes something like this: "By the mid-70s, Becker will be the intellectual guru of the students of North America as Marcuse was for those of the 60s." (Letter dated June 16, 1969)

Becker responded (letter dated June 19, 1969) affably, thanking D'Aoust for his generous letter, indicating his general plans for Education 201, and

closing with, "I shall certainly be pleased to be working with you in such a congenial atmosphere" (both letters in EBP, Columbia University).

While in the Faculty of Education, Becker taught Education 201: Theory of Education three times. The outline for the first offering in the fall of 1969 stated, "The purpose of this course is to give the student a broad interdisciplinary look at human behavior. Specifically, it will unite those perspectives that (in the Instructor's opinion) constitute a liberally educated mind."<sup>35</sup> The format of the course consisted of two lectures and one tutorial each week of the fall term. The approximate enrollment was 500 students. Required readings included books by Becker (*Beyond Alienation*), Buber, Collingwood, Cornford, Eliade, Huizinga, Ortega, Redfield, and Engels.

In the spring of 1970, Becker had subtitled Education 201: Theory of Education as "The General Theory of Human Nature and Its Relationship to the Essentials of a Liberal Education." The course description contained the sentence: "What we will do is to examine the cross disciplinary data on man and articulate a general picture of his nature." Required readings were Becker's own *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, LaBarre's *The Human Animal* and *The Cultural Basis of Emotion and Gesture*, Freud's *Character and Culture* (one volume of his collected papers), Rousseau's *Émile*, Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, and Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique*.

By the fall of 1970, Becker had changed the description of Education 201 to orient students to "the general theory of human nature and its significance for educators," with the orienting question, "What is the Oedipus complex, and what is its significance for educators?" Required readings were reduced to five books (Rousseau's *Émile*, La Barre's *The Human Animal*, Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, Fritz Perls' *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, and Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique*) and Emerson's essay on "self-reliance." Students also were to question, "Is man basically 'good' or 'evil'? [and] What does the fact that self-esteem is a dominant human motive, mean for education"?

Becker's lectures are remembered by many of his students (e.g., B. Kappell,<sup>36</sup> personal communication, April 7, 2011) as highlights of their university experiences. However, his personal style did not suit all, as evidenced by a stridently worded criticism by George Keter, a regular columnist for SFU's student newspaper, *The Peak*, in his weekly contribution, titled "George Keter: Uncut Acid."

Students enrolled in Education 201 ought not to take Prof Becker's sanctimonious mouthings too seriously. . . . the man is tremendously vain. He refuses to go into tutorials and talk to students because he fells [sic.] it would ruin his "presence" as

a lecturer. That, in my opinion, doesn't speak well for his desire to teach. As for the "presence" itself, he comes across to me like a gaunt Groucho Marx. (*The Peak*, Wednesday, January 28, 1970)

In addition to teaching Education 201, the large lecture course that was required of all Education students, Becker was asked to make himself available to provide workshops for the teacher education program and to consult with master's-level students in Education, a task to which he devoted considerable time and energy, typically working closely with a small group of about six graduate students throughout the academic year. In addition, he offered a number of public lectures, such as the one he delivered on the Thursday evening of October 22, 1970, at the Georgia Hotel in downtown Vancouver, titled "The Lost Science of Man," based on the then-completed but as yet unpublished manuscript for his 1971 book *The Lost Science of Man*, in which he extended two earlier essays crafted during his Berkeley and SFSC days (the complete text of this talk is in EBP, Columbia University). He also lectured on several occasions at both the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the University of Victoria and taught a short course at the Vancouver Public Library for individuals working in Immigration and Public Welfare. Back at SFU, he served the BSC and the Faculty of Education on standing committees concerned with tenure and promotion and undergraduate studies and curriculum.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Becker had begun to include work by Fritz Perls—the main spokesperson for and practitioner of Gestalt psychotherapy—in his required readings for Education 201 by the spring term of 1971 reflected his own personal relationship with Perls and his wife Laura. Perls had come to Vancouver in the late 1960s to escape what he regarded as an unspeakably vile political system in the United States of that time period.<sup>38</sup> It was Sol Kort (then Director of the Centre for Continuing Education at the UBC, Vancouver's more established and traditional university, located on Point Grey in the far West side of Vancouver) who introduced Becker to Perls. Kort, always on the look out for talented West Coast scholars in the humanities and sciences, whom he could invite to participate in series of lectures and workshops he coordinated on the UBC campus, had begun a correspondence with Becker in 1968. So keen was Kort about Becker's ideas that in a letter to Becker, dated October 8, 1968, he had asked Becker for a "spare copy" of his *The Structure of Evil*, which Kort could share with Canada's

swinging Prime Minister . . . Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who behaves . . . in the great tradition of the great figures of the French Enlightenment . . . he speaks of government in the spirit of a "Just Society" . . . It seems to me that your pleas for

the primacy of the social scientist in politics and public affairs . . . would meet with considerable understanding and cooperation by Trudeau. (EBP, Columbia University)<sup>39</sup>

Becker's friendship with Kort led to many interactions, sometimes over fine food, wine, and scotch at the UBC Faculty Club and at Kort's home, sessions that included other prominent scholars of the day, such as Ted Roszak (author of the 1969 book, *The Making of a Counter Culture*), Alan Watts (well-known English philosopher and interpreter of Eastern philosophy for a Western audience), and Sam Keen (an editor of *Psychology Today*, who was to write a well-known deathbed interview with Becker a few years later). Once Becker and Fritz Perls were both ensconced in the Vancouver area, they were frequent guests at the home of Shirley and Sol Kort,<sup>40</sup> and their relationship strengthened to the extent that when Perls passed away, Becker was a featured speaker at the memorial to Perls arranged by Kort at the UBC on November 13, 1970. Becker began his tribute, which also contains his own critical assessment of Gestalt psychotherapy, by saying, "I say genuinely that I'm sorry that Perls couldn't be here tonight. I think it is awful that we almost always commemorate people after they've died," and ended with

Everyone lies about how the world is as a defense against reality . . . But, if you peel away your lie, you can start looking at things a little more pristinely; you're no longer so driven. And then there might be a possibility for more authentic awareness at that point, and I think this is Perls's great idea and lasting contribution. (Remarks subsequently published in *The Gestalt Journal* in the fall of 1993)<sup>41</sup>

Becker's interactions with Kort and the various guests he invited to speak at the UBC campus provided a congenial intellectual home for Becker and involved him in wide-ranging conversations, in which he could try out some of the ideas he was now developing, based on his increasingly rigorous reading of the texts of Norman O. Brown, Eric Fromm, and, most important, Otto Rank. Perhaps because of his participation in this new conversational arena, there is some evidence that the depression he experienced immediately prior to and during his arrival at SFU had begun to lift a bit by the spring of 1971, although he never could be described as entirely happy in his new surroundings. In a letter to an old friend, Mahinda Silva of Mount Lavinia, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), dated February 2, 1971, Becker wrote,

My life is much less burdensome than yours, God knows, yet I carry it with as little grace as ever. I seem to have been born with a heavy heart, and have dragged this heart wherever I went. Perhaps this has been good for my work, infusing in it a

necessary seriousness absent from commercial-industrial society. But that's probably all the good it does to sit uncomprehending and sighing on this planet. Oh, I don't have any major complaints: the family is well, I continue to write, things are as well as expected. It looks like I will settle into Simon Fraser for as long as I care to, all things being equal, since they have given me tenure . . . it looks like we are not about to move for the foreseeable future. I was not involved in the dispute here [referring to the PSA strike and dismissals], being in a different department. Also, there was nothing I could do of a moral nature, or even really wanted to do: I believe it is unspeakably naïve to try to make the university the seat of social revolution. (Letter in EBP, Columbia University)

Given the sentiments expressed here, it is hardly surprising that shortly thereafter in a letter (dated March 11, 1971) responding to an invitation by several sociologists at Central Washington State College to help form a "Radical Caucus" at the Pacific Sociological Association's annual meeting to be held in Hawaii in April of 1971, Becker writes,

I'm afraid that the idea that we overcome our sociological neutrality . . . by a welfare relationship to ghetto businesses hardly attracts me. As a way of expiating professional guilt and remedying personal alienation to some degree, it may have some meaning. But is this any substitute for developing a sociology at the height of the times, for making the sociological associations forums on national policy?

Becker ends his letter by writing, "I seem to prefer to sit on the sidelines. Still, I think that your efforts are vital if you like to work that way, and I certainly wish you the luck and courage that you need" (EBP, Columbia University).

Of related interest, and perhaps contradicting some of what he says to Silva and the "Radical Caucus," is Becker's letter of January 4, 1971, to David Sprintzen, Professor of Philosophy at C. W. Post College, who wrote insightfully (with coauthor Alan Rosenberg), complimenting and critiquing Becker's then-extant oeuvre, for the journal *Main Currents in Modern Thought* 2 years later.<sup>42</sup> In this particular letter, however, Becker is responding to a piece (by Sprintzen and Rosenberg) sent to him by Sprintzen in late 1970 and is complimenting Sprintzen and Rosenberg on their efforts to go directly

to the cutting edge of the problem: how to instrument social theory as a political program . . . The point you make about not being able to talk beyond people's anxieties is basic—what, then do we do? There must be found a way to instrument political changes that simply does not give the anxieties of the most twisted and repressed people the representation (disproportionate) that they want. In this sense,

the crucial definition of fascism is the disproportionate representation of block repression in the political process. Needless to say, I'm not terribly optimistic about this, judging from history, but who is to say? We're still alive anyway . . . and able to work and speak freely. (EBP, Columbia University)

However, all is not work and drudgery, as despite his move to the "wild and wooly Northwest" (a phrase he uses in several letters of this period), Becker still finds time to indulge his fondness for his guitar, family, old friends, and what he regards as "the good life." For example, in a letter to his and Marie's friends Jack and Micki Scott on March 17, 1971, Becker expresses the hope that they can discuss their mutual accomplishments (including Becker's forthcoming new edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, for which he has just finished the page proofs) when Jack and Micki next come to visit, and adds "When you do, don't forget to bring 100 (duty free) cigars with you: the biggest DANNEMANN'S that Grant's Pipe Shop on Market St. has" (EBP, Columbia University).

### *Becker in PSA (1971-1974)*

During his time in the Faculty of Education at SFU, Becker had begun to gravitate to some of his colleagues in the PSA Department, collecting several of their course outlines and displaying a general interest in some of their activities. So it probably is not surprising that it was not long before he eventually moved to PSA from BSC. At the time of Becker's move in the summer of 1971, PSA was being described by many at SFU as a "rump department, barely surviving" after the dismissal of 8 of its 15 professors. Heribert Adam, Chair of PSA at the time of Becker's move, recalls that not many in what remained of PSA were interested in Karl Peter joining them:

However, everyone was keen on Ernest Becker joining . . . But Becker made it a condition that if he was to join the Department, the Department must also welcome Karl Peter. . . . We were generally very happy to have Becker, a very well-known and widely respected academic. (Telephone interview, May 18, 2011)

Perhaps an expression of this general happiness was a very positive and welcome biennial review of Becker's first 2 years at SFU that was completed by Adam and communicated to Becker in a memorandum of August 21, 1971 (SFU Archives). In consequence of Adam's recommendation, Becker received a 10% increase in salary that raised his annual wage to Can\$24,430, a figure that Adam mentioned should be kept confidential. Becker was enjoying a very good August in 1971, with this news coming as it did on the heels



of another encouraging memorandum dated August 5, 1971, this time from the Chair of the SFU President's Research Grant Committee, Lorne Kendall, congratulating Becker on the receipt of a small research grant to continue his work on what started out as "A Reader in Humanistic Psychology" but had by this time turned into an original book "on the post-Freudian understanding of human nature and its relevance to social theory" (SFU Archives). So, things in PSA were off to an exceptionally good start.

During his time in PSA, until his sick leaves, Becker pursued two main projects, other than his own continuing reading, study, and writing: (a) an attempt to assist with the rebuilding of the PSA Department by recruiting new members of faculty, which included an attempt to rationalize the curriculum of the Department, and (b) developing close working relationships with a small number of graduate students, whose thesis research he supervised. The most satisfying of these efforts was his work with his graduate students, who were fiercely loyal to him, and he to them. Unfortunately, the attempt to rationalize the PSA curriculum as a basis for recruiting talented faculty to rebuild the PSA Department, despite resulting in several new hires, yielded few results that Becker was prepared to celebrate. Consequently, by the time he fell ill, Becker was once again dissatisfied in his academic position and had begun to make inquiries at other universities, particularly in Ontario and the Northeastern United States, concerning more appropriate postings.

Becker's graduate students included Larry Warren<sup>43</sup>; Stewart Mackay, who followed him to PSA from BSC; and Ken O'Brien. The most brilliant and successful of these students, in Becker's opinion, was Ken O'Brien, who completed his PhD thesis on Eric Fromm under Becker's supervision in the spring of 1972.<sup>44</sup> For the remainder of Becker's life, he kept in touch with O'Brien, initially in person (prior to O'Brien's departure from the Vancouver area in 1973, he was an occasional dinner guest at the Becker home) and later by telephone and through letters. With Becker's support, O'Brien found a teaching position in Xavier College on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, and was offered a permanent position in Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania, which he informed Becker (in a letter dated October 13, 1973, EBP, Columbia University) he intended to take up in May of 1974. In that same letter, O'Brien displays a temperamental similarity to his mentor:

Now that I am away from Vancouver I reflect on the isolation of our intellectual activity but you taught me the importance of humility, and I am trying to live it. Now when something disappointing happens, I ask myself "why am I entitled to anything more, why should I escape the things which are facts of life for most people?" Thank you for teaching me this lesson. In all our long discussions this

past year I tried to grapple with your concept of The Tragic View of Life, this theoretical question must be linked to a practical concern with the meaning of our personal humiliation as academics.

In addition to his work with graduate students, Becker taught undergraduate courses in PSA during the fall term of 1971 and the spring and fall terms of 1972, before his cancer was diagnosed. In the fall term of 1971, he taught PSA 101: Sociological Theory I, the purpose of which he construed as to “give the student the basic concepts for a broad, critical, interdisciplinary understanding of man in society” (EBP, Columbia University). Required readings were books by Buber, Eliade, N. O. Brown, Frankfort et al., Huizinga, and Engels. In the spring term of 1972, he taught PSA 474: Cultural Evolution, an offering he described in his course outline as follows:

The purpose of this course is to give advanced students a grasp of the basic problem underpinning the theory of evolution of society, as well as the general theory of human nature—namely, the nature of the primitive mind or world-view. In some ways this is an almost insoluble problem because Westerners are not primitives, and all such explorations must be speculative. But in other ways we have much excellent empirical and theoretical work which gives us a key to primitive thought; and also, as humans, we have the potential for entering somewhat into any frame of reference given the desire, study, and imagination. What I want to do is to explore those perspectives which I think are most fruitful for such an entry into primitive thought. (EBP, Columbia University)

Required readings were books by Boas (*The Mind of Primitive Man*), Levy-Bruhl (*The “Soul” of the Primitive*), and Otto Rank (*Psychology and the Soul*).

In the fall of 1972, Becker taught PSA 432: Philosophy of Social Science, using works by F. Manuel, F. Hayek, Buber, F. Matson, Levi-Straus, F. Markham, and his own book, *The Lost Science of Man*. After that term, he remained on sick leave until his death in March 1974. However, he continued to plan courses he hoped to teach in the future, including an offering of PSA 401: Sociological Theory: Current Themes & Issues and PSA 801, a graduate seminar that he intended to focus on Nazism and the Frankfurt School, the purpose of which he framed in the following terms: “To get on top of the Frankfurt School’s sociology, it is necessary to get thru [sic] the phenomenon on which their disillusion or sophistication is based: Nazism” (EBP, Columbia University). He also indicated that the course would continue with an examination of the works of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm, with an emphasis on “the merger of Marx and Freud.” Once again, as probably is

entirely appropriate and true of most scholars, Becker's teaching reflected his current scholarly interests. His plan to examine critically the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer (recorded in a brief set of his own typed notes relating to PSA 801) is especially interesting given ongoing discussions between Becker and other faculty in PSA, especially the then Chair of the Department, Heribert Adam, in which Becker was urged to become more familiar with the works of members of the Frankfurt school. "Becker wasn't really interested in Adorno or Horkheimer. He didn't ask questions about the Frankfurt school . . . which [at the time] put me off him a little bit" (H. Adam, interview conducted May 18, 2011). Apparently, Becker was more responsive to his colleagues' urgings than they assumed at the time. In recognition of Becker's illness, Karl Peter agreed to coteach PSA 801 with Becker in the fall of 1973, despite the fact that Peter already had been assigned two other courses for that same term.

A powerful portrait of Becker as a lecturer is offered by then PSA graduate student, Janos Maté, who worked as a teaching assistant for Becker in the fall of 1971.

He was a brilliant performer. When he got in front of an audience, he was totally centered, totally focused. There was standing room only. People would come from other disciplines and faculties to listen to his lectures. About half an hour before he would go on stage, he was not to be interrupted. He was collecting his thoughts and focusing on the lecture he was going to give. He had an amazing capacity to demonstrate universal themes through ordinary, everyday occurrences, to give examples of larger themes through newspaper articles and so on. He had a sort of cosmic humor through which he was able to entertain and educate at the same time—educate through humor to show how different parts interconnected. (Telephone interview, May 11, 2011)

Given this extraordinary lecturing capability, Maté, apparently unaware of Becker's strabismus, was surprised to discover that Becker's manner during their one-on-one conversations was quite different, one in which he displayed considerable "nervous energy, a hard time looking me in the eye. He would always be looking someplace else." However, Maté was quick to add that Becker nonetheless would "very carefully listen to you talk about your own experience. He could be very challenging, but mostly in a supportive, humorous way" (Telephone interview, May 11, 2011). Summing up, Maté said,

My overall sense of him was one of great inquisitiveness, and having a holistic view of personal, emotional life. He really synthesized different ideas and aspects of reality. My personal feeling was one of being privileged to have access to this person.

Heribert Adam (interview, May 18, 2011) said that Becker was “an inspiring teacher and students generally liked him, but there were also complaints” and gave the example of Becker sometimes cutting short his lectures, if he felt the students’ attention was wavering, “telling them to go home and think about what he had said.” In this same interview, Adam recalled Becker as “a charismatic figure when he lectured,” so much so that on one occasion “a particularly insistent woman who pursued him obsessively, came to one of his lectures and placed a parcel on the lecture podium. I remember that he said to me, ‘You have to protect me from that woman.’”<sup>45</sup> Adam also noted that Becker was “very good” to his graduate students—“Once he had a student, he was supportive in every respect”—an observation confirmed by the fact that even during his final days on his deathbed in Vancouver General hospital, Becker continued to draft letters of support for his students for various awards, positions, and publishing opportunities (EBP, Columbia University).

In addition to his teaching commitments on campus at SFU, during the academic year of 1971-1972, Becker took part in a series of eight 1-hour, late-evening programs televised by the Vancouver area Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, titled “Dialogue on Man: Between the Biological and Cultural Levels on the Basic Nature of Man.” These involved Becker and the biologist Fulton Fisher, as principal discussants with a group of students, and visiting guest participants, including a group of Vancouver area scholars (a psychiatrist, a philosopher, an ethnologist, a theologian, a geneticist) and a special guest, the systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo from the New York University at Geneseo. This series of dialogues was sponsored by the UBC Continuing Education Centre and organized by Sol Kort.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to teaching and writing, Becker was very active in attempting to assist the PSA Department to rationalize its curriculum and its teaching needs in a way that could be connected to a rather grand plan for Departmental renewal, including the replacement of those faculty dismissed as a result of the PSA strike of 1969. On October 1, 1971, he forwarded to the executive committee of the Department a

draft of the philosophy of the PSA curriculum as I understand it, to be used as a working paper to present to you, and then as a further working paper to present to the department, and then to the Dean. Attached to it, later, will be a list of the positions we need. (SFU Archives)

Becker begins this four-page document by mixing his interpretation of the pedagogical history of PSA with his own sense of the general state of the academy in the early 1970s:

The orienting idea underlying the PSA department has been specifically the educational failure of the disciplinary approach to knowledge, however successful that approach has been scientifically. The curse of the modern university is the rampant specialism that bites off smaller and smaller areas of reality, and so fails to give to the student, the prospective citizen of democracy, precisely that grasp of himself and his world that the university is supposed to be for. The PSA represents an attempt to remedy this by giving the student an understanding at the height of the times, and at the same time one based firmly on the best disciplinary work. And it does this by being frankly committed to a significant picture of the human reality that blurs lines, a depth of perspective and scope, so to speak, rather than disciplinary expertise.

In order to get an understanding at the height of times, the student must understand what man basically is and what happened to man and society in evolution and history that has brought us up to where we are today. The task of anthropology is thus to show man at his basic levels of social and cultural life, “in the beginning” so to speak, the way things were for over a million years. Then the sociological understanding takes over to show the break-up of primitive society, the origin of the state as a structure of amalgamation and domination, and the nature of these structures from earliest times up to the present. Political theory joins sociology in this historical, comparative, and contemporary picture of the social system.

With this combination of three disciplines geared to one coherent perspective on man, society, and history, the student has a grasp of where things began, what happened in history, and where he stands today—what the problems are and what the dynamics of those problems are. (SFU Archives)

Becker continues his working paper by arguing that the educational perspective he has sketched is not, despite what he contends is its historical embeddedness in the brief history of the PSA Department, adequately reflected in the Department’s curriculum as it currently stands. He emphasizes that “the PSA does not want to develop specialism of the disciplines” and that “the PSA exists as a generalist department to make available a substantive understanding arrived at by the pooling of talents in three disciplines of the human sciences.” Relating this basic stance to the anticipated project of Departmental renewal through future hires, Becker emphasizes that “hirings will be justified in terms of the general task of PSA and not according to the special ambitions of a discipline to push its inquiry further into precise problems.” He also stresses that each of the 12 new positions needed in PSA must be filled by “hiring teachers who want to teach and who have a feeling and a talent for it,” ending with,

Specialist disciplines can afford to hire people who are not interested in teaching but only in research and the training of further specialists—which largely explains

too, the failure of the university institution mediating to the young significant knowledge and an intelligent world-view.

With his manifesto of renewal delivered to the executive members of the PSA, Becker wasted no time in writing to a number of individuals he thought fit the description of the generalist pedagogue he had described, including Paul Roazen at York University in Toronto (the eminent historian of psychoanalysis and Freud); Willard Oxtoby of Trinity College, University of Toronto (interested in merging social science with religion, using Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis); and Herbert Blumer (the symbolic interactionist and interpreter of G. H. Mead). During a very brief stint as Chair of Appointments for PSA that preceded formal plans for PSA renewal, Becker actually offered Blumer “a three-year contract at the level of a Distinguished Professorship that should not be less than what you are making now,” adding, “This contract will almost certainly be renewable for a similar period” (undated letter to Blumer from Becker sometime in the summer of 1971, EBP, Columbia University).

However, by the fall of 1972, it was clear to Becker that neither the PSA Department nor the University was willing wholeheartedly to endorse his vision of the future of PSA. Further complicating things for Becker was the departure of one of his PSA colleagues whom he most admired, Arthur Mitzman, for a position in Amsterdam. In a letter to Paul Roazen, dated March 17, 1972, Becker laments this state of affairs:

I was not “chairman” of PSA, merely of the Appointments Committee for the briefest of time, until I was deposed brusquely. I now have no power here at all . . . I am already too much psychological for them; the word “Freud” fills the PSA Central Committee with loathing; they are now proceeding to fill up with what they consider to be “marxists” on junior levels; so I guess I will have all I can do to try to crawl into the woodwork and remain unnoticed and untroubled to pursue my work. (Letter contributed to the Ernest Becker Foundation by Robert Kramer)

Later, in a letter dated October, 1972, to George Morgan, Chair of Human Studies at Brown University, Becker wrote,

My efforts toward any kind of university reform, and even toward a meaningful role for myself as a teacher, have been met with defeat and frustration ever since my earliest academic post. After Berkeley, I just about gave up. And Simon Fraser, which promised me much, has gone the way of the rest. Now, if this were merely a personal confession, one could chalk it up to male menopause and have done with it. But I feel that it is much more, namely, merely a replay of the failure that

has dogged such men as Kallen, Dewey, Mumford, and so many others. Each generation seems to go through it. At least, so it seems to me at this time. (EBP, Columbia University)

The upshot was that immediately prior to his diagnosis of cancer in the late fall of 1972, Becker was once again looking elsewhere. In a letter to Roazen, dated November 7, 1972, he indicates that the University of Toronto recently approached him with a post:

But I couldn't talk my wife into moving again at this time. Actually we seem to be finally settling in here, and it isn't so bad except that Simon Fraser is nowhere. But on that I've adopted Erving Goffman's attitude: 'This is where I get my mail. (EBF Archives)

Heribert Adam (Chair of PSA for the time that Becker was active in the Department and before his illness) offers a somewhat different perspective on Becker's time in PSA, especially his relations with his colleagues there. Adam (telephone interview, May 18, 2011) described his relationship with Becker as a reasonably close working relationship, explaining that they also met socially on a frequent basis, sometimes at each other's homes.

It was a normal, somewhat formal relationship, but it wasn't the kind of intellectual friendship I would have expected or even hoped for. One on one, we got along always very well . . . But, he wasn't interested in developing anything more than what was required to fill the conventional requirements of the University. He was interested in himself, in his own writings, and in reactions to his books, and that was it. He wasn't in any way objectionable. The Department was sort of in awe of him, and that may have hindered others from taking the initiative and making contact with him. He was almost an alien in the Department, without normal interaction. He did not seek out others, and probably considered most of the Department as intellectual inferiors. He wasn't an amiable colleague in this regard. He sat in Departmental meetings and you had the impression that he kind of suffered through it, rather than being engaged by it.<sup>47</sup>

### *Life in Vancouver*<sup>48</sup>

When Ernest and Marie and their two children, Sam and Gabriella, first arrived in the Vancouver area, they hoped they might settle into and experience some kind of university community, as they had done at Syracuse, Berkeley, and San Francisco. However, Simon Fraser's location at the top of Burnaby Mountain, and the absence of residential housing on the hilltop, effectively precluded any such community and resulted in SFU, at least

during its early years, being predominately a commuter campus. Initially, the Beckers lived in a crumbling old rental off Clark road in Coquitlam (the Greater Vancouver suburb immediately east of Burnaby) that overlooked a gas flare from a nearby refinery. Describing Ernest's state of mind when they arrived, Marie recalled, "I think he was in a depression when we moved up here. Everything was changing and he was sensing that and having a hard time . . . I think he was having real problems in trying to cope with everything" (telephone interview, June 15, 2011).

The Coquitlam house was rented from a group of radical students in the PSA Department at SFU, self-styled communists but with an obviously entrepreneurial side. Perhaps not surprising, the Beckers' neighbors assumed that the new family shared the political convictions of their landlords, and Ernest, Marie, and their children were met with suspicion veering on outright hostility, as when a group of neighborhood children taunted and threatened Sam and Gabriella while the two Becker children played in the Beckers' backyard.

After the disappointment of Coquitlam and some parting disagreements with their landlords, the Beckers pooled their resources (augmented by gifts and loans from family and friends) and bought a lovely home on Pine Crescent in the Shaunessey neighborhood of Vancouver. (Several SFU professors emeriti, including Heribert Adam and Jerry Zaslove [personal communications] recall terrific parties that Marie and Ernest hosted at their Shaunessey residence.)

During much of his time in Vancouver, Ernest was preoccupied with his work (mostly a large manuscript synthesizing his interpretations of Freud and Marx that eventually was divided into *The Denial of Death* and the posthumously published *Escape From Evil*). As was his habit, he often would write through the night, especially when he was excited about the progress he was making in relation to what he thought of as the central purposes and problems of his work. Playing his guitar, walking, and the occasional family driving holiday were his primary recreations that were mostly unconnected to his writing, teaching, and other SFU responsibilities. Nonetheless, the Beckers still found time to socialize with local and visiting academics at both SFU and UBC. As for the children, the majority of responsibility for their care fell to Marie. Ernest was a proud and doting father but often from a distance.<sup>49</sup> After settling into their Shaunessey home, Ernest also began to purchase the tools required to execute a wide range of household maintenance and repair projects.

Marie and Ernest both subscribed to the idea that children should be given as much freedom as possible to explore the world and their interests, stopping short of harming each other or anyone else. As Ernest put it in the second edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, "You cripple the person when you continually repress his spontaneity, his natural appetite, his joy in



self-discovery and in the unfolding of his world” (p. 173). Beverley Kort (interview, April 29, 2011) recalls “Ernest sitting in this one room of his house with Marie bringing in food and him locked in conversation with my father [Sol Kort], with the kids free to run around like crazy in the house.” Beverley also found Ernest to be

morose and detached, with a cynical sense of humor—you never knew whether he was serious about what he was saying—and a dark sensibility. . . . I think that he was a presence who was difficult to engage in anything that he was not totally interested in.

He seldom, if ever, engaged Beverley in conversation. In contrast, Beverley found Marie to be “lovely and engaging,” and in a way, “she [Marie] protected him.”

Nonetheless, in his letters to old friends, Becker mentions spending time at the UBC swimming pool and the Vancouver area beaches with Marie and the children (letter to Jack Scott, dated November 21, 1972, EBP, Columbia University) and spending time

painting our house, and fixing things up (going to night school to learn some things about plumbing, electricity and woodworking, of all things!). This is a restful and meaningful change for me, from my total and unrewarding investment in scholarly work. (Letter to Roy Waldman, a former student of Becker’s at Syracuse, dated November 14, 1972, EBP, Columbia University)

In this same letter, Becker also mentions that Szasz had just visited, being in Vancouver to give a lecture at UBC—a reminder that the Beckers continued to socialize with the Korts and their revolving coterie of visiting and local scholars and others, including what Shirley Kort refers to as some very memorable and “very metaphorical, intellectual Seders, not [to be confused with] our family Seders” (interview, April 29, 2011).<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, a letter to the Scotts (dated November 21, 1972, EBP, Columbia University) testifies to Ernest and Marie’s continuing feelings of isolation in Vancouver: “We really appreciated your spontaneous phone call, which makes us realize how isolated we have remained here; at the same time, that our few friends are in a similar boat—makes it easier to take.”

## The Big Manuscript

One of the reasons that Becker’s years at SFU and in Vancouver are of particular importance is that it was during this time that he experienced the intellectual shift that was to be so evident in his final two works, *The Denial of*

*Death and Escape From Evil*, both of which, as previously mentioned, initially were parts of a single lengthy manuscript, tentatively titled *Marxism and Psychoanalysis*. Although various aspects of this shift will be explicated in the remainder of the story told here, it is useful to remind readers of the overall change of direction that his SFU works represented in comparison with his pre-SFU oeuvre.

The overall aim of Becker's intellectual work was to understand why human beings do the things they do, both the good and the bad. Central to the unique blend of pragmatic, humanistic, psychoanalytic, and existential perspectives he brought to bear on this question was his conviction that all human striving ultimately comes back to our awareness of our own mortality. In his early- and midcareer works, Becker emphasized the human need to maintain a unifying and realistic sense of self-esteem as a means of asserting ourselves in the face of necessary sociocultural constraints to our personhood and the inevitability of our mortal fate. Such a realistic self-esteem, if targeted at projects aimed at maximizing our individuality while simultaneously maximizing our communities, could help us avoid the social, psychological paralyses of alienation and meaninglessness. However, in his later work—that done during his years at SFU—Becker came to appreciate more fully the difficulty of such a project, especially in terms of the kind of heroism it demanded of contemporary individuals who must somehow strive to transcend the challenges of life and death without the kinds of collective myths and rituals that had sustained members of earlier civilizations. Increasingly influenced by the works of Otto Rank, Becker came to understand that a major obstacle to the dual goal of maximum individuality and maximum community was the propensity of human beings to seek transcendence through evil acts—acts by which transcendence of the terrifying conditions of life and death is achieved through the exercise of tyrannical, brutal power over the lives and deaths of others.

In his preface to *Escape From Evil* (1975), Becker recognizes the implications of his intellectual shift for his enlightenment project of educating human beings about their condition and possibilities.

Obviously it is an enormous problem: to show that man *is* truly evil-causing in much of his motivation, and yet to move beyond this to the possibilities of a sane, renewing action, some kind of third alternative beyond bureaucratic science and despair. Whether I have succeeded in leaving open the possibility for such a third alternative, while looking man full in the face for the first time in my career, is now for others to say. . . . Let me just say that if I have changed my views on many things, this change leaves intact, I believe, the basic premise of the Enlightenment which I feel we cannot abandon and continue to be a working scientist—namely

that there is nothing in man or nature which would prevent us from taking some control of our destiny and making the world a saner place for our children. This is certainly harder and more of a gamble, than I once thought; but maybe this should reinforce our dedication and truly tax our imaginations. . . . There is a distinct difference between pessimism, which does not exclude hope, and cynicism, which does. I see no need, therefore, to apologize for the relative grimness of much of the thought contained in this book; it seems to me to be starkly empirical. Since I have been fighting against admitting the dark side of human nature for a dozen years, this thought can hardly be a simple reflex of my own temperament, of what I naturally feel comfortable with. Nor is it a simple function of our uneasy epoch, since it was gathered by the best human minds of many dispositions and epochs, and so I think it can be said that it reflects objectively the universal situation of the creature we call man. (p. xviii)

By the spring and summer of 1971, Becker had decided to give up his earlier work on the history and philosophy of social science and to focus his energies on what he and several of his correspondents began referring to as “his Magnum Opus” (e.g., letter to Becker from Edwin Seaver, editor with George Braziller, Inc., dated June 25, 1971, EBP, Columbia University). In a short letter to John Romanyshyn, a professor of social welfare at the University of Maine (dated April 1, 1971, EBP, Columbia University), Becker declares,

I am definitively leaving this area of philosophy of science and history of science, and plunging both feet into psychoanalysis and society—which is my first love anyway. I am terribly excited by the kinds of things that are falling together these days.

In earlier letters to professional friends (e.g., to Roy Waldman, dated March 17, 1971, EBP, Columbia University), Becker mentions his discovery and study of the works of Otto Rank as being pivotal to his new direction. In a subsequent letter to the English sociologist Ronald Fletcher (dated June 30, 1971, EBP, Columbia University), Becker elaborates,

For the past few months, I have been hard at work on what I like to imagine is my own magnum opus, a synthetic work that seeks to make up for all deficiencies of my previous writings (and so, takes in a lot of territory!); it will be several more months before I am through with it. I fear I am trying to make it a definitive statement (for our time, of course) of “the merger of Marx and Freud.” We’ll see.

Becker provides further elaboration in a letter to Professor Momin (undated letter in response to a letter from Momin, dated July 21, 1971, EBP, Columbia University):

The main shortcoming of my work is that I have not really accounted for human viciousness as I should have. It is not that man is “evil,” but he is not “neutral” either. He is terribly afraid of his own death, and of the insignificance of his life, his “creatureliness.” And so, his whole life is a protest that he “is somebody,” and this protest he takes out on others: he will even kill them to show that he can triumph over death. I think that the theoretical problem for our time is to harmonize this knowledge with the possibility of a humanistic science, and I am now writing what I think is my most mature work to that end. . . . In this light, one of the most important writers for social science is Otto Rank, see especially his book *BEYOND PSYCHOLOGY*. Also, Erich Fromm is, I think, of great importance, although not so brilliant as Rank, and not so sophisticated with anthropological-sociological data.

On March 17, 1972, Becker mailed his magnum opus, titled *Marxism and Psychoanalysis: An Essay on the Natural Merger of Science and Tragedy*, to Edwin Seaver, Editor in Chief, George Braziller, Inc. (EBP, Columbia University). Shortly thereafter, on March 21, 1972 (EBP, Columbia University), he writes to Joseph DelaGrotte (a historian at the University of South Florida) to say, “I have just emerged for air from my large study of *MARXISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS*, and am marking my relief at having mailed it off to the publisher by catching up on back correspondence.” “It looks very much like what I need is a good Rolfing<sup>51</sup> at this point. I once asked Fritz Perls what effect it had, and he said it added an inch to his height—which he felt was a positive thing; but it didn’t cure his smoking.” “I am feeling more and more like the old Jew that I am these days.” However, on March 28, 1972, he writes to Virginia Robinson, President of the Otto Rank Association in Pennsylvania, saying, “This is the first book I am eager for you to see and to learn your reaction to it,” and describes it as “a contribution to the forthcoming full scale reintegration of Rank into the center of modern thought where he always has belonged” (EBP, Columbia University). It seems clear that the rigors of producing his magnum opus have left him exhausted but hopeful.

As it transpired, the publication of this work proved to be anything but straightforward. On April 26, 1972 (EBP, Columbia University), Edwin Seaver wrote Becker concerning his and George Braziller’s reactions to the manuscript:

It seems to me that what you are offering in your book is a depth psychology of culture that I find very persuasive, and as I wrote in my report to Mr. Braziller, your book cannot be too highly praised for its merits. At the same time we both feel that your manuscript could benefit from careful editing and we would like George Brantl, the editor of your previous books,<sup>52</sup> to read your manuscript and possibly to serve as your editor on the book. . . . Possibly we may come up with

some editorial suggestions that could prove helpful to you. On the other hand you may want your book to be published exactly as it now stands. My hope is that you will be patient with us and give us time to work things out to our common advantage. . . . I think your book is too important to be rushed into print without first undergoing thoughtful and painstaking editing.

Becker accepted Seaver's plan in a letter dated May 5, 1972, and shortly thereafter on May 11, 1972, Seaver replied to say, "I very much appreciate the good will expressed in your letter of the 5th, and have sent a copy of it along with the manuscript to George Brantl," adding, "I would ask you to be patient with us knowing that we want to do everything possible to please you."<sup>53</sup>

However, by May 14, 1972, Becker had determined his own course of action, and he wrote to Seaver, suggesting that the large manuscript be broken into two separate books.

I have been thinking about the ms. since you wrote, and it seems to me that I might have the key to what is wrong with it—would you please convey the following to George Bantl, to see if he agrees: I remember now that when I was writing it I was very concerned that I actually had two separate books, and the problem was to merge them into one, since they were so closely related and mutually reinforcing. One book was the *Natural Merger of Psychiatry and Religion* . . . The other book was on *Marxism and Psychoanalysis*.

Becker goes on to detail the different parts of the large manuscript that belong to each of these two separate books, and what additional material could be inserted to make each of the proposed two volumes stand on its own.

Unfortunately, by June 23, 1972, Seaver and Braziller had decided that the large manuscript presented too many difficulties and too great a risk for them to pursue it further. In a lengthy letter of that date to Becker, Seaver communicates this decision, going into considerable, critical detail about his and Braziller's sense that "one tends, because of the diversity of focus, to get a feeling of piecemealness, randomness," and continuing to elaborate some particulars to support their reaction. Seaver ends by saying, "Or you can simply dismiss all of the above as just so much rationalizing our rejection of the book and publish it with Free Press as it is." In a somewhat touching post-script, Seaver adds, "Ernest, I feel like a schoolboy telling his teacher what's what; you know so much more about your subject than I do."

In the meantime, Becker had been hard at work dividing the big manuscript into the two separate books that he outlined in his letter to Seaver of May 14, 1972. Following a letter of inquiry to Robert Wallace, Editor, The

Free Press (dated June 27, 1972) to which Wallace (on July 12, 1972) sends an encouraging response, saying that he “would indeed like to see both manuscripts,” Becker forwards both to Wallace in July 1972.<sup>54</sup> He then takes a much-needed summer break with his family.

When work resumes, and the fall term of 1972 is in full swing, Wallace writes another encouraging note to Becker (dated September 26, 1972), in which he indicates that he has just spoken to their reviewer and that the reviewer “is very favorably impressed with the improvements over your earlier work.” On October 12, 1972, Wallace forwards the now completed review to Becker and states, “There is no question that we will make a publishing offer, but I would like to have your reactions to the reviewer’s suggestions before we proceed.”

Interestingly, the reviewer’s remarks are quite hard-hitting and far from entirely positive. The reviewer begins by stating her or his overall support for publishing the two volumes:

In a day when most of the production of the academy is directed to minutiae of concern only to the writer and a small coterie of fellow experts two such serious and large-scale studies as these are a welcome change. . . . Even more to his credit he has, at least in my opinion, shown real wisdom in the conclusions that he has reached. . . . For these reasons I think the books are definitely publishable.

However, the reviewer continues,

Having said all that I must also admit to serious misgivings. Becker has all the failings of a man who habitually writes too much. The book has gotten out of hand so that he has had to make two books out of what is really only one. The writing is often sloppy and repetitious and frequently breaks down into a degree of informality that only the most indulgent reader could tolerate. It is the book, to use one of his own key terms, of a very narcissistic man. It also has some of the virtues of a man who writes too much—occasionally he writes really well. He can be original and quite moving. . . . The book would be far better if he would spend five years on it rather than the relatively few months it probably took him, but this kind of person doesn’t work that way. Instead he will write five books in the next five years, none of which will really be first rate, but all of which will be interesting.

The reviewer then adds, “The first book (NATURAL MERGER) is much the best and the most original” and eventually concludes by saying, “It is a serious and important but far from perfect piece of work.”

Becker responds in a letter to Wallace dated October 19, 1972:

I am grateful for your sending on the full report of your reader; he is obviously a top-flight man and his penetrating assessment of the whole body of my work is so close to home it is embarrassing. I have been pondering his specific suggestions, and this has made me twist and turn and sweat. . . . I agree that MERGER is the more original and better book, and that MARXISM has several shortcomings. . . . So let us go ahead and publish MERGER with the inclusion of Chap. 4 from the MARXISM book, "The Spell [of Persons]." . . . Then, in the following months or year, I could take what is left of the Marxism book, and really work it over . . . As for his misgivings about the titles, this would be easy to change, and I think he is largely correct . . . perhaps you would have some suggestions. . . . If you agree with my suggestions, I will have to send you a new copy of the "Spell" chapter, touched-up and edited, to fit it into the MERGER book.

Following a telephone conversation with Wallace in which Becker's suggestions are accepted and elaborated in a way that is satisfactory to both men, Becker sends Wallace the new materials for the MERGER book on November 1, 1972, together with a note detailing the materials that also contains a series of suggestions for a new title—*Death, Glory, and Madness: The Post-Freudian Convergence on the Limits of Human Nature; The Escape From Death: The Dilemma of Terror and Transcendance (sic) After Freud; The Escape From Death: Terror and the Search for Glory After Freud; The Escape From Death and the Hunger for Glory: The Outcome of Psychology and Religion After Freud; and The Escape From Death and the Hunger for Glory: An Essay on the Natural Limits of Human Nature*. Wallace responds on November 3, 1972, saying that he has "put through the contract request for MERGER," which he has decided "to call LIVING IN TERROR OF DYING for a working title," and adding that he is "really enthusiastic about the book's prospects. Given the timeliness of the subject, it should have a more general audience than just academics and college courses."

Soon thereafter, on November 16, 1972, Wallace's secretary, Rachel Matos, sends two copies of the contract to Becker who signs and returns them immediately. By the time that the manuscript is copyedited in January and February 1973, Becker has been diagnosed with cancer and had his first operations. Nonetheless, he is able to process the copyediting tasks assigned to him in a timely manner. However, his illness does extend the galley-proofing stage through April to June 1972. By August, prepublication reviews of what now is titled *The Denial of Death* have been obtained. One, by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, described the soon-to-be-book as

one of those rare masterpieces that will stimulate your thoughts, your intellectual curiosity, and last, but not least, your soul, or shall I say spirit. I . . . found myself

reading all night hoping that Becker would live a long life and continue creating further and more, at the same time thinking that he might have already achieved his masterpiece . . .”

On September 19, 1973, Jeff Byers of The Free Press, through his secretary, Ellen Hebblethwaite, wrote to Ernest to say, “We are submitting your name for the Pulitzer Prize nominations this fall.” Finally, on December 19, 1973, *Denial of Death* was made available to the reading public, having already been selected by the Library of Human Behavior as a significant work, and being displayed on the back cover of the November-December issue of *Society*.

## Illness and Death

On November 15, 1972, Becker responded to a letter from Gilbert Murillo, a previous student from California, in a way that indicates his state of mind as *Denial of Death* is about to be published and his illness is about to be diagnosed:

I have been sort of out of touch with everyone these days, bending over my own shoemaker’s last—trying to make sense of the world, mostly for myself. My work is drifting further away from the Enlightenment I fear; and since I am not an activist, this cuts me off from everything meaningful to say or do in these times. I feel more and more like a Dominican monk in the citadel of university-monastery—but perhaps this is the fate of the intellectual. . . . Free Press will bring out, sometime next year, my newest scribblings, expressing a quite somber picture of the world, I fear—but it is honest. There are no facile solutions, as you well know; so we may as well face up to the facts of the human condition: God knows, men of the soil, outcasts, and others always have.

Around this same time, Becker had encountered one of his Shaughnessy neighbors, a Dr. R. J. Hancock, who asked him how he was feeling and suggested that he make an appointment for a thorough checkup. Hancock was shocked by Becker’s appearance and was not surprised when his examination determined that Becker was very ill. According to Shirley Kort (interview, April 29, 2011), Hancock later expressed frustration “that any man whose cancer was that far advanced had not noticed it or done anything about it” (confirmed by Marie Becker-Pos, personal communication, December 27, 2011). Becker was admitted to Vancouver General Hospital in December of 1972. Hancock later (in a letter to SFU’s senior administrators dated June 4, 1973, forwarded by Becker to Jean Jordon, secretary in the PSA Department



on June 6, 1973, SFU Archives) described Becker's condition when he was first admitted to hospital in December, 1972: "He was extremely ill, both from the point of view of his general state due to toxicity and biochemical imbalance, and also due to his advanced and serious abdominal problem regarding bowel obstruction." Hancock's letter continues to say that Becker "subsequently underwent two major abdominal operations several weeks apart" and "required a prolonged convalescence" after these surgeries. As it transpired, Becker was still not strong enough by May 1973 to return to work at SFU, but Hancock assumed that he "should be ready to resume full duties as of September 1973." On June 6, 1973, in a memo addressed to Jean Jordan and attached to Hancock's letter of June 4, 1973 (SFU Archives), Becker declares, "I finished the whole fall term before I became ill. As you will see from the letter I shall be fit (God willing!) to return to work as of this coming fall semester (trimester)."

However, on September 21, 1973, two days after Becker has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by The Free Press, Hancock wrote directly to Jean Jordan (SFU Archives) to say that Becker "now has further problems, rectal and abdominal and is at present admitted to the Vancouver General Hospital. We are carrying on investigations and he will be having treatment either by surgery or from the B.C. Cancer Institute." Hancock adds, "He will be off work for some time, probably at least several months" and "He certainly is in no condition to resume his duties at present."

During his illness and between his operations, Becker maintained an active correspondence with professional colleagues, old friends, and ex-students and increasingly, as *The Denial of Death* proved to be a popular work of nonfiction, with a growing fan base. Among the professional correspondents were Herbert Blumer, Gerald Berreman, and Aaron Cicurel, all sociologists in Southern California to whom Becker turned in the early spring of 1973, when he thought his cancer might be beaten, to inquire about the possibilities of spending a forthcoming sabbatical year in that area.<sup>55</sup> Despite warm letters of encouragement and support from all three Californians, none was able to offer Becker the possibility of a visiting post for the 1974-1975 academic year, mentioning budgetary restrictions and previous commitments to other visiting scholars. Blumer offered to assist Becker in any way he could, indicating a willingness to write letters of reference when asked to do so. Other professional correspondents who expressed their support during Becker's illness included Irving Horowitz, Paul Roazen, Virginia Robinson, David Sprintzen, Lee Thayer, Thomas Szasz, and Seymour Sarason, all of whom expressed shock at the news of Becker's illness and extended their best wishes to Becker and his family.

It was, however, several of Becker's old friends who corresponded regularly and movingly with him throughout 1973 and the early part of 1974. Bob DeFremery wrote to Becker several times during this period, in ways intended to reassure and challenge Becker concerning Becker's life and manner of living. In a letter dated March 18, 1974, DeFremery (EBP, Columbia University) writes,

I have in mind a statement you once made about the effect your teaching once had on the leaders of the FSM [Free Speech Movement, which was critical to the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1960s] at Berkeley. You said they abandoned political agitation and went into a life of scholarship. In the eyes of some this would seem a very minor accomplishment in the great scheme of things. But in the eyes of others—and I count myself among them—it was an extraordinary accomplishment because it was the kind of thing the world needed more than anything else. Scholarship and serious study instead of political action! Obviously over the span of hundreds of years it will be the scholarship that will have the effect! I haven't a doubt in the world that the effect you had on them is going to be transmitted in time to their students—and so on in ever-widening circles. And this tired old world sure does need it. You were the right man at the right time. And I'm sure that each of those fellows is enormously aware of the debt that he, personally, owes you. But I don't think of that. I think more in terms of the debt that succeeding generations will owe you . . . a debt which—as the saying goes—will never be repaid, as is in keeping with the best tradition of international finance.

On April 18, 1973, DeFremery writes again to express his hope that “you are well, well, well on the road to recovery though I can not help but side with Ingmar Bergman that God is most silent indeed. Restated: You are well again. We need you.” However, when it is clear that Becker's cancer is likely to be terminal, an increasingly desperate DeFremery, on October 29, 1973 (EBP, Columbia University), turns to prescriptions for coming to terms with life and death:

Could it be that you lack enough “loving feelings” for the world and everything and everyone in it? Love, accompanied as it is with compassion, humility, and a sense of being at peace in the world—is also necessary for the proper functioning of our glands that produce disease fighting chemicals. And it seems to me, Ernest, that you could very well be starving yourself in this respect. You care so much about the warped lives you see around you that you hate and despise those institutions that you think are responsible in any way. This makes you withdraw from society—an extremely bad thing for a person who has so much love to express. . . . Am I not right, Ernest, that you allowed yourself to become embittered? Have you gotten over that completely? If not, go to work on that now and see if it

doesn't help. Think loving thoughts of every person with whom you come in contact . . . You're too wonderful a guy to not share the good feelings you are capable of with everyone you see. This crazy world badly needs more love as well as more understanding. You are one of the very few men who can help provide both.

In a final letter, dated February 21, 1974 (EBP, Columbia University), DeFremery asks,

How are you coming along with the "love everybody" crusade? I can just see you lying in bed poking fun at some cute nurse that's doing whatever she is supposed to be doing. . . . I bet you're going to have material for another book whenever you get out of there. . . . I continue to be optimistic for the long run [meaning future generations].

Letters from other old friends, including Phil DeFemery, Calvin Harlan, Bill Newman, Jack Scott, Ester Blanc, and Roy Waldman, display, despite their varying contents, a similar pattern of initial shock at the news of Becker's serious illness, elation at the prospects that he might survive, and deep sadness when this hope proves ill founded. Several of these letters also congratulate Becker on the popular success of *The Denial of Death* and on the birth of his youngest child, Max, who was born at Vancouver General Hospital during the time that Becker was being treated there. It also is clear that these friendships extend to Marie and the children, who often are included in greetings, exchanges of domestic news and activities, and good wishes.

The irony of his deathbed success certainly did not escape Becker himself. By the fall of 1973, he knew the truth about his situation:

You remember I had a bout with cancer and two operations last January. Well, I seemed to be recovering and got back into the swing of things only to learn in September that the operations had not extirpated the cancer. Now the doctors tell me it has gotten the upper hand and spread, and the prognosis is very bleak. I don't know how much time I have left, but the worst thing is that I cannot write or teach due to weakness and the effect of the powerful drugs they are treating me with (including radiation). All this makes me very sad because I feel that my best work is yet to come, and things are falling together so well; there are so many things I want to clarify and develop. But, as Freud said, one doesn't complain about one's fate. (EBP, Columbia University)

Nonetheless, given previous concerns and lamentations concerning the reception of his work, Becker is gratified to receive, in the early months of 1974, several positive reviews of his newly published book, invitations to write and

lecture on its contents and related matters, a spate of fan mail, and letters from publishers concerning possible future projects. On February 19, 1974, Robert Wallace, Becker's editor at The Free Press, writes to ask him how he is "adjusting to your role as a celebrity" and if he would be willing to update "*The Revolution in Psychiatry* as a Free Press paperback" (EBP, Columbia University).

In the opening exchanges in his well-known deathbed interview with Sam Keen<sup>56</sup> of *Psychology Today*, Becker says,

You are catching me *in extremis*. This is a test of everything I've written about death. And I've got a chance to show how one dies. The attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts his death. (p. 71)

Toward the end of this same interview, Becker puts into words the full irony of his final situation:

It's funny I have been working for 15 years with an obsessiveness to develop these ideas, dropping one book after another into the void and carrying on with some kind of confidence that the stuff was good. And just now, these last years, people are starting to take an interest in my work. Sitting here talking to you like this makes me very wistful that I won't be around to see these things. It is the creature who wants more experience, another 10 years, another five, another four, another three. I think, gee, all these things going on and I won't be a part of it. I am not saying I won't see them, that there aren't other dimensions in existence but at least I will be out of this game and it makes me feel very wistful. (Keen, 1974 p. 80)

A less well-known deathbed conversation took place between Becker and Karl Peter, Becker's close colleague in SFU's Political Science, Anthropology and Sociology Department, in December 1973. Peter described part of their conversation on that occasion in remarks given at a memorial service held at SFU following Becker's death:

He looked at me and said, "You know of course" . . . I said, "I haven't talked to the doctor," and he said, "You don't need to talk to the doctor. I'm telling you, this is final, this is it, I am not going to leave this hospital any more. . . . I said, "What are you going to do." He said, "There is only one thing I can do. I can die in dignity, and that is what I am going to do" . . . I came home and I looked at his book [*The Denial of Death*] again. It became clear to me that what Ernest was doing was writing a final chapter of his book. He wrote it while living it. . . . the chapter that he was able to compose and to live once he was down, naked, stripped of his health; there was nothing left but his personality and his intellect, and he lived that chapter—a chapter of the acceptance of death. Of course, this chapter will never

be written unless it goes on to exist in your memory and my memory—the crowning experience of this man and intellect—Ernest Becker. (SFU Archives)

On March 6, 1974, Ernest Becker died.

## Afterword

The SFU memorial service for Ernest Becker was held under the Rotunda Dome at the entrance to SFU on Thursday, March 14, at 12:30 p.m. In tribute to Professor Becker, the University flags were at half-mast on that Thursday. He later was buried next to his parents in the Becker family plot in Springfield, Massachusetts. A year later, the second of the two books that emerged out of Becker's "big manuscript," his magnum opus, was published under the title, *Escape From Evil*, by The Free Press, having been edited and put together by Marie Becker (at the request of Robert Wallace, Becker's editor at The Free Press) from manuscript pages Ernest had left in the desk at their home from which he wrote.

Today, when one enters Ernest Becker's name on the search feature of the SFU (where Becker was a full professor with tenure) website, nothing remotely resembling a memorial to him or his time at SFU appears. When you enter his name in the Syracuse University (where Becker received his Ph.D. and taught briefly) website, a brief memorial to Becker appears that reads as follows.

Dr. Ernest Becker graduated with a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Syracuse University in 1960. Dr. Becker's work attracted national attention after the publication of *The Denial of Death* (1973), which won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, and the posthumously published companion volume *Escape from Evil* (1975). In those works, he explored the universality of the fear of death using arguments from biology, psychoanalytic theory and existential philosophy. While Becker's academic career may have suffered as a result of his intellectual courage and interdisciplinary approach his work continues to influence educational and theoretical work examining the impact of fear of death in individual and social behavior, inspiring a psychological theory of motivation known as terror management theory that has been supported by extensive empirical research.

However, even this rather tepid recognition violates what Ronald Leifer (1997) appropriately recognized as Becker's most fundamental methodological percept:

The source of evil lies in the selfish strivings and ambitions of egos and nations. Confirmation of this fact does not require experimental research. . . . It requires only

the effort and the willingness to recognize the evidence of the ordinary life that the stubbornly aggressive, self-serving desires of individuals and states are the primary causes of self-induced human suffering. Becker's most precious legacy to us is his encouragement to ask fundamental questions, ultimate questions. Unless there is free and open inquiry into these questions we will never know the difference between truth and fiction. Individuals and nations are very vulnerable to mistaking for truth their self-generated fictions which are basically myths and ideologies which justify the aggressive enactment of their immortality projects. (p. 6)

Becker's time at SFU was a professional and existential struggle in which he finally succeeded in creating a crowning literary accomplishment with the *Denial of Death*. In comparison with his previous books, *Denial* presented a darker, more pessimistic portrait of the human condition that he had labored so diligently to describe in the hope that such a description might enable human beings to come to grips with their tenuous existence on this planet, in ways that would allow them to comport themselves individually and collectively with genuine understanding and dignity and to refrain from falling into the mayhem of self and other destruction.<sup>57</sup> As the achievement of this goal came into view, Becker's final personal test was to face with courage and resignation his own demise, one that may have been precipitated by the rigorous work schedule necessitated by his own "drivenness" to divulge the nature of persons and their circumstances to himself and future generations. In the end, what he managed may not have been enough for him, but he died knowing that he was on his way to doing what he felt he must do.<sup>58</sup>

[T]he most important thing is to know that beyond the absurdity of one's own life, beyond the human viewpoint . . . there is the fact of the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos that are using us for purposes we don't know. (Becker, as quoted in Keen, 1974, p. 78)<sup>59,60</sup>

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## Notes

1. At this writing, when one enters Ernest Becker's name on the search feature of SFU's website, nothing remotely resembling a memorial to him or his time at SFU appears.
2. Letters, memoranda, and announcements cited in this first paragraph all reside in the SFU Archives.
3. Becker (1973).
4. Becker (1971a).
5. Becker (1975).
6. In 1971, Becker also published *The Lost Science of Man*, a volume that consists of two historical essays (one on the life and work of Albion Small, who founded the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago in 1892, which is a compact, critical history of Small and the intellectual origins of disciplinary sociology; the other titled, "A Critical History of Anthropology"). Both of these essays may be viewed as dotting the "i"s on historical arguments advanced in Becker's earlier, detailed historical work, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*, published in 1968. The initial draft of the essay on Small actually had been written during Becker's time at Berkeley, in response to an invitation from the University of Chicago Press to contribute a book to a series on the history of sociology, but it was not published at that time.
7. I am indebted to the remarks of an anonymous reviewer of the original manuscript for this article and to Marie Becker-Pos for clarifying the dual aspects of Becker's incorporation of Rank's ideas into his own thought. Unlike Freud's self-destructive embrace of a suicidal drive to death, Rank articulated the most life-affirming and creative aspects of human existence through his conception of the creative urge, a human drive more powerful than the sexual urge or the death drive. In fact, Becker (1973, pp. 97-105) came to regard Freud's death instinct as a fiction, a fallacious explanation that confused the human protest against death (an essential part of the human condition) with a built-in drive toward it. Becker's critical reading of Freud was supplemented and transformed through his careful consideration of Rank's (especially in Rank's book, *Art and Artist*), more optimistic, spiritual road map to human creativity. This was a perspective that allowed greater possibility for shedding irrational fears and social conformity. Art and creativity afford glimpses of the unspeakable awesomeness of existence, a miracle beyond that of any religion.

8. For the general contours of Becker's life before SFU, I am indebted to earlier biographical work on Becker by a colleague and close friend from his days at SUNY–Syracuse, Ronald Leifer (1997); to information gained from the Ernest Becker Papers in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library Collections at Columbia University; to records kept by the Ernest Becker Foundation in Seattle, Washington; and to information kindly provided by Marie Becker-Pos in a series of interviews and conversations, and in response to an earlier draft of the material included here.
9. According to Marie Becker-Pos (telephone interview, June 15, 2011), Ernest later described his family as uninterested in the arts, music, literature, or intellectual life in general and incapable of understanding his academic success, even shocked by it, to the point that they thought it would ruin his life. Marie also described Ernest's adult reaction to his early family experiences as one of acting to "correct them" later in his life, giving the example of Ernest insisting that they have a dog immediately after they were married, so as "to correct for what he thought was missing in his childhood."
10. It is quite likely that the young Becker did not reveal his true age when entering the U.S. Army. As to the longer term effects of his experiences in the Army, Becker seldom spoke about this part of his life, but there can be little doubt that his army life influenced his intellectual interests and work.
11. For much of his time in Paris, Becker maintained an active correspondence with his good friend, Phil Singer, the medical anthropologist, in which they discussed their reactions to life in the diplomatic corps (Singer was attached to the U.S. Embassy in London), their interest in art, and some of their personal experiences. This correspondence is available in the Archives of the Ernest Becker Foundation in Seattle, Washington. During this time, Becker and Singer initiated a business venture in the buying and selling of contemporary European paintings, which they later dissolved in a manner that Becker thought inequitable and led to a deterioration in their relationship.
12. Haring and Becker kept up a lively correspondence for several years following their work together at Syracuse, in which Haring good-naturedly offered critical comments on Becker's subsequent books, to which Becker responded equally affably. (These letters reside in the Ernest Becker Papers in Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library Collections.)
13. Becker (1961)
14. Becker (1962).
15. Becker (1964).
16. Leifer was a senior medical student at SUNY–Syracuse who subsequently set up a psychiatric practice in Ithaca, New York, and has written a number of biographical essays about Becker and Szasz.
17. Hoffman also was a senior medical student at SUNY–Syracuse who later became one of the first openly gay psychiatrists in the United States and an active participant in the 1970s debates concerning the status of homosexuality as a medical condition in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association.



18. Silva was an Oxford Scholar at Syracuse University doing a PhD in English, who, on returning to Sri Lanka, became Minister of Agriculture.
19. Waldman was a student of Becker at SUNY–Syracuse, who also became a psychiatrist, moving back and forth between the United States and Israel.
20. Bates was a young protestant chaplain at Syracuse University who responded to an invitation from Becker (contained in an article in the Winter 1965 issue of a new publication called *Noetics*) in which Becker issued an invitation to social scientists, philosophers, and theologians to work collaboratively to frame a new science and understanding of humanity. Bates subsequently published a correspondence he conducted with Becker from the summer of 1965 to 1970, a period of time that saw Becker move from Syracuse to Berkeley, San Francisco, and eventually to Vancouver (Bates, 1977).
21. According to Leifer (1997), the purpose of this self-financed sabbatical was “to sit at the seat of western civilization and reflect upon its history and destiny” (p. 4). However, Marie Becker-Pos recalls it as a much-needed period of rest and recuperation. Whatever the motive, the work drafted by Becker during this time eventually appeared as *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* and is a careful, extensive, and critical reflection on the history of Western thought, especially as it pertains to the enduring and necessary tension between self and society.
22. Later, in a letter to Dean Stephen Bailey of Syracuse University’s Maxwell Graduate School, responding to an invitation from Bailey to participate in a prestigious lecture series organized by Syracuse University on “The Nature of the Social Man,” Becker refused the invitation, saying,

I find it somewhat ironic that I should be invited there because my reputation “precedes” me—actually in the case of Syracuse, it follows me, since I taught and worked there as “creatively” as I do now. It was Dean Piskor, I was told, who turned back a regular faculty position for me, with the words “not him.” No reason was ever given for this administrative fiat, . . . So, I had to leave a university that I wanted to be at, a whole host of friends, and a home that I took a \$5,000 loss on. The whole thing was humiliating . . . Had I been lecturing at Syracuse, I would have lectured at your symposium gladly and even without fee; now, no fee will bring me back. (Letter to Dean Bailey, April 17, 1967; original in EBP, Columbia University)

23. It is important to recognize that concerns about academic freedom animated Becker’s antiauthoritarian sentiments because he was not in other ways a “sixties radical.” Indeed, as his letters of the time show, he was highly suspicious of what he regarded as the lifestyle excesses that typified much of the youth movements during this period. Although he objected to the war in Vietnam and supported the Civil Rights Movement, his demeanor was consistently professorial and intellectual.
24. In Bates (1977).

25. Scott completed his undergraduate work at Syracuse University. At Berkeley, Jack and his wife Micki became close friends of the Beckers, and Ernest convinced Scott, who was uncertain of his future, to pursue a doctoral degree in Berkeley's Department of Higher Education. With this background, Scott became a well-known advocate and leader of what *Sports Illustrated* magazine, in several articles it published about Scott between 1970 and 2000, called "the progressive movement in athletics." In a brief stint as Athletic Director for Oberlin College from 1972 to 1974, Scott presided over what has become known as "the Oberlin Experiment," in which he hired African American head coaches for men's football, basketball, and track. He also promoted women's athletics and nonauthoritarian coaching methods. His later involvement with the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) occurred when, back in Berkeley after resigning from Oberlin under pressure from alumni and faculty, Scott began to research a book on the SLA, and ended up harboring SLA members Patty Hurst and Bill and Emily Harris, while they were being sought by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.
26. When walking the streets of San Francisco with Marie, Ernest was drawn to a music store window. He made a spur-of-the-moment decision to purchase a classical guitar, and signed up for lessons from one of the store's teachers, Phil DeFremery. Not only did Phil (a professional musician and teacher) become Becker's guitar teacher, but he, his wife Sharon (a professional singer of opera and classical songs), and his father Bob (a businessman familiar with Becker's books) all became lifelong friends of Ernest and Marie.
27. Becker (1967).
28. Some years later, Becker was to acknowledge his appreciation and respect for his Berkeley students in a dedication to some of them in the front pages of his book, *The Lost Science of Man* (1971): "To those Berkeley students of Sociology 290, Spring Semester, 1966, whose sharp dialogue is reflected in this book, and who have transcended it by their heroic personal commitment to the issues of human freedom and dignity in our time." Becker also kept up a regular correspondence for the rest of his life with several of the students he met at Berkeley.
29. Becker (1968).
30. Becker (1969).
31. In accepting Harper's offer of a position, Becker stated what apparently was his only major reservation in a letter to Harper dated March 28, 1969 (EBP, Columbia University): "Off the record, the only misgiving I have is the same one we discussed over the phone, namely, that it is not yet a tenured offer, but will be made so at a meeting to be held in the near future." Within a year of arriving at SFU, Becker was tenured.
32. Johnston (2005).
33. The ensuing round of judicial and quasi-judicial proceedings and hearings continued well into the 1970s, with the Canadian Association of University Teachers not lifting until 1977 its censure of SFU over what it regarded as the University's violation of the rights and freedoms of some of the dismissed PSA faculty.

34. On February 21, 1974, a few days before Becker's death, President Strand sent a letter to him, explaining that SFU's Board of Governors had approved the reorganization of the PSA Department into two separate, new departments (Sociology and Anthropology, and Political Science), and saying, "You are a member of the Sociology and Anthropology Department," "effective February 19, 1974" (SFU Archives).
35. The information about Becker's courses given here and at various points throughout the rest of this article is extracted from a file in EBP, Columbia University, that contains outlines and notes for most of Becker's courses, offered at SFU, Berkeley, and SFSC.
36. Brigitte Kappell is a retired Vancouver area teacher, who, as an undergraduate student in SFU's Professional Development Program in 1970, took Education 201 from Ernest Becker.
37. The information about Becker's community and university service detailed here is drawn from Becker's personal file, now located in the SFU Archives.
38. The information included here about Becker's relationships with Fritz Perls and Sol Kort comes from conversations with Beverley and Shirley Kort (April 29, 2011) and Marie Becker-Pos (December 27, 2011) and from letters between Becker and Kort located in the EBP, Columbia University; and the SFU Archives.
39. Kort was not the only admirer of Becker's *The Structure of Evil*, a history of Western social thought concerning the nature of man, culminating in an articulation of his own thoughts concerning a unified science of the person and the future development of the human community. Others included Paul Arthur Schilpp (editor of *The Library of Living Philosophers*) and Abraham Maslow, the latter of whom, on June 13, 1968, sent a letter to Becker's SFSC address in which Maslow expressed being "very much impressed. It is a major work, most important and for all scholars to study" and congratulated Becker on "a fine job." Maslow went on to say, "I was saddened by the fact that you are unacquainted with the literature of humanistic psychology," but then quickly added,

Then I looked through your bibliography and realized that I had not read a good 90% of it. That took me down quite a bit and made me determined to study your book carefully and to follow which ever of the bibliographical leads seemed most useful to me. (The EBP, Columbia University)

40. From an interview with Shirley and Beverley Kort, April 29, 2011. For a time after his arrival in Vancouver, Perls actually lived in the home of Shirley's mother as a house guest.
41. Becker (1993).
42. Sprintzen and Rosenberg (1971).
43. In the fall of 1979, Warren, a U.S. draft dodger and now a student of Heribert Adam, applied to SFU for, and was granted, access to Becker's personal files so that he could pursue research on Becker for his graduate degree. Marie Becker readily gave her approval in a letter (dated November 27, 1979) to SFU's Vice

President Jock Munro, as she was fond of Warren, who had been good enough to assist her and the Becker children after Ernest's death. Unfortunately, the work proposed by Warren does not seem to have been completed (SFU Archives; interviews with Heribert Adam, May 18, 2011, and Marie Becker-Pos, June 15, 2011). Nonetheless, Warren serves as another example of how devoted Becker's students were to him and his ideas.

44. O'Brien was Becker's one and only PhD graduate. The title of O'Brien's thesis was "The Humanist Perspective, in Social Science: The Case of Erich Fromm." Other members of O'Brien's supervisory committee were Karl Peter, Heribert Adam, and Jerald Zaslove. The external examiner was John Schaar from the UC Santa Cruz. The defense was held on April 7, 1972 (SFU Archives).
45. In a telephone conversation dated October 3, 2012, Marie Becker-Pos recalled this woman as a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp who had become obsessed with Ernest and his work. She and Ernest had invited her to their home for dinner and conversation, but it became clear that this was not a friendship in the making.
46. Kort (1972).
47. That his SFU colleagues might be divided in their attitudes toward Becker was predicted in a letter of support for Becker's initial appointment at SFU (addressed to Robert Harper, Head of the BSC at SFU) written by Gerald Berreman, a former colleague of Becker in the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley: "Professor Becker is an intellectual, an individualist, and a brilliant teacher. Some people don't like him; others like him very much. I am in the latter category. I very much wish he were in my own department" (letter dated January 21, 1969, SFU Archives).
48. The information provided in this section, unless otherwise specified, is from interviews, e-mail exchanges, and conversations with Marie Becker-Pos during 2011 and 2012.
49. This portrait of family life is pieced together from remarks by Marie Becker-Pos (June 15 and December 27, 2011; October 3, 2012) and Shirley Kort (April 29, 2011).
50. During his young adulthood, Becker described himself as an atheist. However, with the births of his children and with the unfolding of his own philosophical anthropology, he became a committed, if unconventional, theist, but one who felt no need to practice traditional Jewish or other holidays and observances, although on rare occasions he would go with Marie to the synagogue on Oak Street near their Vancouver home. He was interested in ritual but was not a ritualist (e.g., the trappings of the Catholic Church fascinated him but did not tempt his observance; Marie Becker-Pos, personal communication). In a letter to J. A. DellaGrotte (December 29, 1970, EBP, Columbia University), Becker describes himself:

as simply an Old Testament breast-beater, vollo tout! Also, I am several years older than you. If Jung is correct that we psychologically begin to prepare for our death a few decades before it happens, then I am simply in tune with my

own biological cycle—a fact that you could only applaud. In a more devilish vein, I like to imagine that being free of any Catholic or WASP repression in the first place gives me some authority for renouncing the body with authority, if you know what I mean. As the Hindus say of Christ: “Oh, dat chap? Ve know him!”

As for the children, Ernest and Marie wanted to give them a spiritual sense and knowledge of religious practices and beliefs (about which Becker was quite expert). To this end, and despite Ernest’s initial reservations, they initially enrolled their children in the Vancouver Talmud Torah. However, this proved a short-lived experiment, and the children spent most of their early schooling at the local elementary school near their home. At the time of his death, Marie thought that Ernest “seemed to be moving toward a new kind of religious spirituality” (conversation, December 27, 2011), but she also believed that his religious beliefs remained very much a work in progress (conversation, October 5, 2012).

51. Rolfing is a therapy system developed by Ida Pauline Rolf that manually manipulates the fascia (connective tissues) of the body to loosen them and allow more effective movements of the muscles and body. Its benefits are debatable.
52. George Brazillier, Inc., had previously published Becker’s *Beyond Alienation* and *The Lost Science of Man*.
53. Unless stated otherwise, all letters referred to subsequently can be found in EBP in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library Collections, Columbia University.
54. Becker had published the majority of his previous books with The Free Press (with the exceptions of *Beyond Alienation* and *The Lost Science of Man*, both of which had been published by George Brazillier).
55. Becker had been granted a sabbatical by SFU for the 1973-1974 year, which because of his illness had been postponed to the 1974-1975 year. Approval of the postponed sabbatical was communicated to Becker in a memorandum dated March 29, 1973, from Assistant Academic Vice President Ian Mugridge (SFU Archives).
56. Keen (1974).
57. Even as he lay dying, the joyful, playful side of Becker was never overshadowed by the darker side. His goal was more life, not death, even as he accepted his own demise.
58. In this article, I have kept descriptions of Becker’s work and the nature of his intellectual contribution to a minimum, so as to focus on his professional life during his years at SFU. Readers interested in a more detailed treatment of his writings and scholarly legacy might like to see Martin (2012).
59. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the use of this deathbed remark of Becker.
60. Another reviewer of the original manuscript of this biographical essay suggested adding the following two-sentence coda:

In death and in life, Becker echoed Otto Rank's heartbreaking, beautiful plea to all humanity: the "volitional affirmation of the obligatory." Let us learn, at long last, to say Yes to the Must by willingly accepting the obligation of death as deeply and freely as we accept the gift of life.

I think this would have been most fitting, so I include the suggested material here.

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### Author Biography



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