

Death Becomes Us: The Mystery of Mortality and the Need for Meaning

Montana State University – Honors College
HONR 494-001
CRN 32895
Spring 2016

Instructor: Dr. Thomas Patrick Donovan
Schedule: Monday/Wednesday, 10:00 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.
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Purpose/Overview:

Does it matter that we are the only creatures that we know of who are aware of their own mortality? Does this awareness shape our beliefs and therefore our behaviors? Does consciousness of our eventual finitude impel us to create culture, symbolic meaning systems, and immortality schemas in order to compensate for and manage our fears? Is it possible that fear of death figures profoundly into human conflict, racial and ethnic tensions, the so-called “battle of the sexes” and contemporary “culture wars”? Might death anxiety undergird both our greatest triumphs and our most heartbreaking tragedies? As mythologist Joseph Campbell explains, the *first function of myth* in cultures across the planet is reconciliation of our awareness of mortality by anchoring human existence in meaningful belief systems as the crucial antidote against an insignificant life and meaningless death. To delve into these complex questions, our inquiry will necessarily involve an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing the fields of philosophy, theology, psychology, history, mythology, literature, sociology, and science.

Method:

This is a seminar, rather than a lecture. In the tradition and spirit that flows from Socrates, through Oxford and Cambridge, and right into our classroom, seminars find their uniqueness through student-generated inquiry and discussion. As faculty, I will provide the readings, prompts for papers, and general information. In this way, together, we will co-create a respectful, collegial, rigorous, and fearless atmosphere of depthful exploration wherein these timeless questions concerning human existence can be plumbed and examined. I invite you to commit wholeheartedly in making this seminar a rewarding experience for yourself and for all of your colleagues.

Course Objectives:

Within the structure of this course students will be asked:

- ✓ To critically explore the role of mortality anxiety in the creation of human culture and attendant meaning systems;
- ✓ To critically assess the impact of mortality on the meaningfulness/meaninglessness of human life;
- ✓ To investigate whether humans project death anxiety on other people, cultures, and the environment as a means of coping;
- ✓ To monitor and record any impact on their own beliefs as a result of seminar discussions/readings regarding mortality;
- ✓ To design an experiment testing the relationship between our fear of death and our core beliefs;
- ✓ To engage in collaborative inquiry in an atmosphere of co-created mutual respect.

Class Facilitation:

At least once during the semester (and perhaps more for really lucky souls), you and one of your colleagues will form a couplet that will prepare an initiating presentation (short, poetic, engaging and designed to spark dialogue), along with a handout to stimulate the discussion. Specifically, designated facilitators are required to:

- ✓ Guide/facilitate discussion with the aid of *at least* 10 questions (copied and distributed to colleagues during class);
- ✓ Optional, yet highly effective: Animate the discussion via the use of an exercise, “ice-breaker,” short video, music, poetry, or small-group activity that allows colleagues a different entry-point into the material.

ALL OTHER STUDENTS -- QQC: Bring a Question, a Quote, and a Comment on 3x5 cards to class and write your question on the board prior to seminar starting

Weekly Impressions – “The Thanatos Journal”

Here is an opportunity to process the thoughts and feelings that arise during the semester. If the premise of this course is true, that making mortality salient through class discussion and imagery stimulates a variety of psycho-emotional responses, then journaling in this way will enable all of us to digest and track how each reading and classroom discussion impacted us. This process will also provide inspiration for your experimental research and for your final paper.

Journals will be collected three times during the seminar (see syllabus for dates).

Position Papers:

Periodically, in-class position papers will be written (designated by “**Position Paper**” on the date of the class). I will provide the prompts.

Projects/Papers:

Project #1 (minimum 1000 words = 4 pages). Prompt: Describe the myths that make up your life, that inform your core values, the beliefs that guide you in making moral decisions, being a good citizen, and a good friend. Identify where these came from (family, religion, school, reading, life experiences, other). Particularly examine any of these myths that you are currently reevaluating or questioning; describe what this process feels like. **DUE: February 3**

Project #2 (minimum 1500 words = 6 pages). Design an experiment to test reactions to the stimulation of mortality salience inspired by Terror Management Theory research. This is a substantial research paper and will involve an oral presentation describing the experiment and what inspired you. **DUE: The Day of Your Scheduled Presentation. Presentations will take place on April 11 and April 13.**

Project #3 (Final Paper; minimum 2500 words = 10 pages). Prompt: TBD.
DUE: May 2 (Midnight)

IMPORTANT: When evaluating your papers, I will require that your writing:

- ✓ *Demonstrate a thorough understanding of our course readings.*
- ✓ *Be mistake-free mechanically (including length requirements).*
- ✓ *Not be a recycled paper from another course or plagiarized from other un-cited sources.*
- ✓ *Not be a book report.*
- ✓ *Display original, bold and innovative thinking about the topic*
- ✓ *Entertain opposing viewpoints in a dialectical fashion*
- ✓ *Be thoroughly edited and proofread.*
- ✓ *Exhibit sufficient academic rigor.*

Any deficiency in these criteria will result in a lower grade.

Grading:

Attendance/Class participation	20 points
Position Papers	15 points (5 points each)
Project #1	10 points
Research Paper/Presentation	20 points
Final Paper	25 points
Thanatos Journal	10 points
Point Total	100 points

(Grades will conform to University practice: letter grades with pluses and minuses.)

A 93 - 100	B- 80 - 82	D+ 67 - 69
A- 90 - 92	C+ 77 - 79	D 63 - 66
B+ 87 - 89	C 73 - 76	D- 60 - 62
B 83 - 86	C- 70 - 72	F 59 - 0

Texts (bold titles to be purchased; others in library reserves):

The Slavery of Death, Richard Beck ISBN: 9781620327777

The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker ISBN: 0684832402

Escape from Evil, Ernest Becker ISBN: 0209024501

Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Society, Nicholas Cave
ISBN: 9780307884916

Myths Americans Live By, Richard T. Hughes ISBN: 0252072200

Gilgamesh, Stephen Mitchell ISBN: 0743261690

The Worm at the Core, Sheldon Solomon, et. al ISBN: 9781400067473

Myths to Live By, Joseph Campbell (Reserves)

In Search of Human Nature, Mary E. Clark (Reserves)

Psychology and the Soul, Otto Rank (Reserves)

Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death, Irvin D. Yalom (Reserves)

~ Course Schedule ~

Week One: Jan. 11 (Classes begin Wednesday, 1/13)

Day 1 – Introductions and Syllabus Review

Readings: Mitchell, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 1-199.

Week Two: Jan. 18

Day 1 – No Class – ML King Holiday

Day 2 – Are We Really in Denial of Our Mortality?

Readings: Rank, *Psychology and the Soul*, pp. xi-23.

Film: *Flight from Death* (90 minutes)

Week Three: Jan. 25

Day 1 – Brains, Meaning, and Basic Survival

Readings: Clark, *In Search of Human Nature*, pp. 126-191 (Reserves); Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, pp. 3-43 (Reserves);.

Day 2 – Managing Death (Position Paper #1)

Readings: Solomon, *The Worm at the Core*, pp. vii-60; Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. xvii-37

Week Four: Feb. 1

Day 1 – Human Creativity as Anxiety Antidote

Readings: Solomon, *The Worm at the Core*, pp. 63-123.
****Give HANDOUT for next week's readings****

Day 2 – Psychology and Death

Handout: Bregman, “Three Psycho-Mythologies of Death”
Project #1 DUE

Week Five: Feb. 8

Day 1 – The Human Predicament

Readings: Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. xi-66.

Day 2 – The Human Predicament (Continued)

Readings: Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 67-124.
Thanatos Journal DUE

Week Six: Feb. 15

Day 1 – No Class – Presidents' Day

Day 2 – Meaning, Self-Esteem, and America's Creation Myths

Readings: Hughes, *Myths Americans Live By*, pp. ix-90

Week Seven: Feb. 22

Day 1 – America's Creation Myths (Continued)

Readings: Hughes, *Myths American's Live By*, pp. 91-152

Day 2 – Can Myths Change?

Readings: Hughes, *Myths American's Live By*, pp. 153-195

Week Eight: Feb. 29

Day 1 – Sin and Death: A Religious-Psychological Perspective

Readings: Beck, *The Slavery of Death*, pp. ix-55

Day 2 – “Timor Mortis” – Is there Salvation? (**Position Paper #2**)

Readings: Beck, *The Slavery of Death*, pp. 59-127

Thanatos Journal DUE

Week Nine: Mar. 7

Day 1 – Paths to Immortality

Video:

https://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_cave_the_4_stories_we_tell_ourselves_about_death

Readings: Cave, *Immortality*, pp. ix-137

Day 2 – Whither Soul?

Readings: Cave, *Immortality*, pp. 141-198

Week of March 14 – NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

Week 10: Mar. 21

Day 1 – Leaving a Trace

Readings: Cave, *Immortality*, pp. 201-250

Day 2 – Technology and Immortality

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STsTUEOqP-g>

Week 11: Mar. 28

Day 1 – When Denial Fails: A New Look at Psychoanalysis

Readings: Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 127-175

Day 2 – Neurotic Suffering and Death

Readings: Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 176-252

Thanatos Journal DUE

****Give HANDOUTS for next week’s readings****

Week 12: April 4**Day 1** – Case Study: Death Anxiety and Gender Wars?**Handout:** Landau, “The Siren Song: Terror Management and the Threat of Men’s Sexual Attraction to Women”**Day 2** – Case Study: Death Anxiety and Climate Change Denial? (**Position Paper #3**)**Handout:** Dickinson, “The People Paradox: Self-Esteem Striving, Immortality Ideologies, and Human Response to Climate Change.”**Week 13: April 11****Day 1** – Can We Prove It? (Part 1)**Oral Presentations of Research Experiment (7-10 minutes). Paper DUE****Day 2** – Can We Prove It? (Part 2)**Oral Presentation of Research Experiment (7-10 minutes). Paper DUE****Week 14: April 18****Day 1** – Death Infiltrates Society**Readings:** Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 38-145**Day 2** – Death Still Haunts**Readings:** Solomon, *The Worm at the Core*, pp. 127-209**Week 15: April 25****Day 1** – What Is to Be Done?**Readings:** Yalom, *Staring into the Sun*, pp. 115-147 (Reserves); Cave, *Immortality*, pp. 253-286; Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 255-285.**Day 2** – Living with Death**Readings:** Solomon, *The Worm at the Core*, pp. 210-225; Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 146-170.**Week 16: May 2-6 – FINALS WEEK – NO CLASS****FINAL PAPER DUE May 2 (by Midnight)**