

The Denial of Death

An Introduction

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The reader is encouraged to recall to mind Greg Bennick's (juggler, filmmaker, former singer of Trial) column in the last Inside Front on an Iron Maiden show he had just attended and his skillful, smooth transition to his then- recent reading of *The Denial of Death*, discussed below. The Iron Maiden anecdote made us laugh, and his eloquent discourse on death-driven anxiety sent us to the sofa, face down, to weep.¹

Since his reading of *The Denial of Death*. Greg has taken these ideas and run quite a ways in the last three years. It was my intention with the following Interview to follow the trajectory of Becker's ideas first germinating in Greg's head to his auspicious meeting with Patrick. Shen, who went on with Greg to make their film *Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality*, a documentary based around many of the ideas Becker discussed, to the completion of the triumvirate with the meeting of Professor Sheldon Solomon. It was with Prof. Solomon that the World Leaders Project was formed, in which Becker's ideas were given radically pragmatic shape and taken out into the world, literally to its leaders, to discuss and understand their consequences in our everyday lives.

I highly encourage anyone interested in the ideas to track down any of the books we discussed and especially to keep on the lookout for *Flight from Death*, Greg and Patrick's film (see the contact details at the end of the interview), The final edit is finally almost ready with Hollywood actor Gabriel Byrne (*End of Days*, *The Usual Suspects*) narrating. It's a beautifully conceived documentary, sharp, accessible and timely. I saw a rough cut at a showing of a slightly earlier edit (with a different narrator) in a lofty apartment in Manhattan last fall, with about forty-odd other : people crowding the room (there was a second showing later that night). The skillful presentation of Becker's ideas and examination of violence in our world intended for a widespread audience, without diluting their power, is an excellent example of what can be done by artists driven to create, even in the obscenely constrained and costly world of American film.

Some Recommended Reading:

The Denial of Death by Ernest Becker (The Free Press, New York) Becker's masterpiece is largely accessible, readable, thought-provoking, and even quite entertaining in places. However, he covers some ground that muddles his brilliant ideas; for example, his re-working of Freud's psychoanalytical language and ideas has value, I'm sure, from the point of view of the psychological community, but hinders the overall effect. His long chapter on the Scandinavian philosopher Kierkegaard, though interesting in its

¹ It is known, from inside sources, that Greg originally intended to write that Issues (#13) column on the sinister widespread rhyming of the words "fire" and "desire" in the last century's go at pop music. In this airing of our dirty laundry Greg was going to oust our own house band. Catharsis, for yes, their unashamed rhyming of these wry words and mercilessly compare this action to any number of pop acts from the past. And in 2003 the recent top ten hit "Your Body is a Wonderland" rhymes, you guessed it, these same menacing words! Greg, perhaps sensing the already condemning Al Barren "No Stars!" review of Catharsis's Passion LP, later in the same issue, tactfully dropped the fire/desire controversy to favor of waxing hilarious on his love of metal.

own right, has the same consequence. Still, don't let either of these put you off from tracking down this book and engaging with some of the more important ideas of our time.

Art and Artist by Otto Rank (Agathon Press, New York) Rank's illuminating book on the motivations and psychology of the artist and the "creative urge." This book, first published in 1932 in the US from the ex-communicated disciple of Freud, was the foundation for much of *The Denial of Death*. In fact I believe that at one point Becker states that he is simply trying to make accessible with his book some of these much-neglected ideas of Rank. If you enjoy the sections on the role of the artist in *The Denial of Death* you would do well to follow up with *Art and Artist*. Pius my edition has the bonus of a forward by Anai's Nin!

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl (Touchstone, New York, Etc.) The first half the book is made up of a narrative recounting his survival of a German concentration camp in World War II, in which his entire family perished save his sister. He originally wrote this part of the book just months after his release. It's an important account of how he managed to piece together some meaning amidst suffering and, even more chillingly, how the camp represented an intense pared down and focused study of industrial life. The second half of the book is the fleshing out of his ideas in the narrative in what he calls Logotherapy. Conceived 20 years later it is quite detailed and systematic in its approach. A good companion to *The Denial of Death*, especially for those looking for some more tangible answers to the problems raised in that book than Becker sought fit to present.

In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror by Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. This is an excellent recent book examining Becker's ideas in a modern context. All three of the authors (I believe) are interviewed in *Flight from Death*, especially in their scientific approach to Becker, and the validation of much of his ideas on death-anxiety through thorough social experiments.

I spoke with Greg by phone from his home in Seattle.

Sunrise reading, Trial tours, Filmmaking and Death Anxiety

What's so bad about the fear of death?

The terror of death. The terror of knowing that one day, from unforeseeable circumstances, you shall die. You shall perish from the Earth never to exist again. You inhabit a dying, decaying body — a machine processing matter — eating, digesting, shitting. Animals, bleeding, mating, suffering, dying. No — this is not the sum of your existence, you are a human! You are valuable, your life has meaning. You are in possession of a soul, of Reason. You can conceive not only of this world, but a cosmos — a new life, a better world. You, human being, are a duality, possessed of your withering dying body

with a finite number of seconds left before decaying to dust, and of a unique ability to imagine the world outside of that body, to imagine eternity, transcendence. What are the consequences of this duality? What is born of the tension between this tragically temporal descending and eternal longing?

In the early 1970's a cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker, attempted to tackle and understand this duality. In his monumental *Denial of Death* he examines the fear of death as the root cause of all of humankind's actions. However, Becker concluded this fear of our death is too much for most to bear on a daily basis, so we create *all* sorts of systems and means of drowning out the terror of reality. Becker understood this in terms of immortality-striving. Architecture, religion, ideologies, governments, works of art, social interactions, raising children, wars are all in some way manifestations of our need for permanence, our need to transcend the sad temporality of our existence. Becker even proposed the chaos of a menial job as the perfect "forgetting" of the unmanageable, true chaos of life². This fear of death is so encompassing in every movement of our lives that often it seems it isn't even there. Becker wrote, "even if the average man lives in a kind of obliviousness of anxiety, it is because he has erected a massive wall of preparations to hide the problem of life and death. His anality [his denial of all that is bodily] may protect him, but all throughout history it is the "normal, average men" who, like locusts, have laid waste to the world in order to forget themselves."

Humankind, as far as we know, is unique in its realization of its inevitable death and likewise unique in its reach beyond it. Everyday life is characterized by our attempts to manage the wild chaos of the world with a series of small fictions known as "self." We create a structure of limits and fabricate an order of who we "are" onto which we can function; a denial that simultaneously allows us to live and denies us so much of what might be possible in our lives. Otto Rank, a disciple of Freud, who later broke ranks with his school and was a central inspiration for *The Denial of Death*, wrote, citing Rousseau, "every human being is equally unfree, that is, we create out of freedom, a prison." Immortality-striving or our immortality projects, whether writing a book or buying a house, are a defiance of our finite existences, they serve on a psychological level to soothe our sundered being. Though it would seem correct to ask first if these immortality projects are positive or negative in nature, it is more critical to realize if we identify at all with what we are doing.

Understanding these basic concepts of our fear of life (its chaos) and fear of death (our end) creates a picture of the extremely fragile means humans use to navigate the world, for all around us are "competing" immortality projects on all levels, from the personal to the cultural. Anyone that differs to an extent from our own is a threat. If they worship a different god or they believe anarchism is intrinsically flawed and

² Editor's note: I can't restrain myself from pointing out that, if this is indeed Becker's primary explanation of why people work low-status manual labor jobs (I don't know for sure, as I haven't read him), he was suffering from an acute case of class-privilege-induced blindness.

doomed to failure and you think it's the salvation of mankind — one of you is wrong from a relative point of view. This is the crux of the matter, because this very conflict leads to violence: if I deride you, if I cannot convince you of my point of view, if I cannot in some way accommodate your view to mine, to render it harmless — then I must eliminate your point of view, lest my conception of self and my claim to the eternal be shattered. And so often our point of view is simply dictated from a position above and greedily received. Self-definition, which so many of us need in order to cope with life, is offered ready-made, with minimal effort on our part, from leaders — statesmen, priests, authorities on revolution, intellectuals. The lure of accepting these definitions, the surrender of believing oneself to be *presto* an American or a Marxist, with an incredible array of leaders and ideological frameworks and consumer goods to back it up — this denial of our own potential and denial of life, this pseudo-protection from the terrible reality of our existence — for this so many are prepared to do untold violence again and again.

Bruce: I want to start off by mentioning the story you told after the screening of your film in New York City of how *The Denial of Death* was put in your hands along with two other books, *Mans Search for Meaning*...

Greg: Yeah, that was by Victor Frankl and *Art and Artist* by Otto Rank...

B: Otto Rank, who Becker is so fond of...

G: Yeah, absolutely.

B: What I'm curious about is the process it took for you to finally read *The Denial of Death* and begin to make connections to other ideas in your life already present in the Hardcore Punk scene, the activist scene, and your own personal ideas, etc. How did all this match up with *The Denial of Death* and finally to the point where you are thinking: I need to make a film of this?

G: First and foremost, the film was originally the brainchild of Patrick Shen, who is from Los Angeles, which I'll tell the story of in a moment. But after reading *The Denial of Death* — and I quite clearly remember when I finished reading it — I was in the Trial van, on tour, packed in like a sardine in the back of the van somewhere near Reading, California, driving north to Seattle from San Francisco on the highway. I remember the Sun coming up and I had been reading by flashlight all night long — I read the last lines of the book as the Sun rose. It sounds quite poetic — the Sun has crested this hill, everyone is asleep in the van, I'm by myself reading — it's fantastic — it would have been perfect if I had been reading some Barbara Cartland love novel — but poetic regardless, I remember it clearly. But after reading the book I remember immediately starting to make connections to different areas of my life and to different things I was experiencing. One thing I was acutely aware of from the start

Becker through his writing and academic career constantly reminded readers not to turn him or his ideas into some sort of icon. He was always critical of himself in that regard and I took this to heart at the end of the book And I tried not to take everything he said that spoke truth to me and apply it to every aspect of my life. I definitely made some strong connections: the ways in which people strive in

our particular society to achieve wealth and fortune and examining those things from the perspective that they were possibly — and I say possibly, not to say Becker was absolutely right — representative of that person's desire to achieve immortality, that would allow them to live on past their physical body. That suddenly rang true to me. And so looking at world leaders, for example, and the positions of people in power and the dynamics between them and people who don't have power — these things came into sharper focus as seen through the lens of: these are the means people are using to achieve symbolic immortality.

B: Did you make immediately the connection to being an artist, in the terms that Becker lays out in the book?

G: Absolutely, and not to kill the book for anybody but at the end of the Denial of Death, Becker wraps up the book by speaking about crafting ourselves, our lives, or an object as art, making our lives as art and offering that, so to speak, to the world at large, or to the "life force" as he says. ("The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something — an object or ourselves — and drop it into the confusion, make an offering, so to speak, to the life force.") I connected immediately to that as an artist. For example, at the time we were touring on the Trial album, which had just been recorded and released, and I connected to the idea of creating something that was absolutely representative of my thoughts feelings, beliefs and ideals, along with those who were playing music with me as a collective and offering that to the life force. What did that mean to us? What was its significance and on how many different levels could I analyze that significance? One of the most profound ones was that playing in the band and playing shows and creating art was doing something for me on a psychological level and I had never thought of that before. And by psychological, I don't just mean, "Wow, that made me happy," rather it was soothing me, quite literally to be thinking, "I am contributing something that I feel has worth to this world. And in doing so that is making me feel good about my existence and my potential to be "remembered "That's such a superficial way to describe Becker — but something was going on.

B: I think Becker is interesting, too, in that he seems to waver a bit in his evaluation of the artist. For a while he says the ability to create is unmistakably valuable and "in this sense, objective creativity is the only answer that man has to the problem of life." But then he says essentially, well, you know, most people don't have any real talent for art and that's the problem. Too bad. Besides, the artist is trying to swallow the whole world, and I don't know if that is going to work. Becker seems to pull back ! and hesitate about creativity as a "solution.

G: I think Becker may have also realized that creativity doesn't necessarily mean that you create good things. Creativity leads you for example to do an interview which contributes to what hopefully will be an excellent magazine. But creativity can also mean "Wow, if we all have box cutters and we *will* get on the plane at the same time we might just be able to fly it into a building." I think Becker realized that striving for immortality isn't always necessarily a good thing. It leads to a lot of issues and

problems, terror and violence in the world. It also leads to, dare I say, interesting hardcore records being made!

To finish the answer to the initial question. What the connection was to the film was: Here we have Patrick Shen in Los Angeles. Patrick read *The Denial of Death* completely unassociated with the punk and hardcore music scene. He was blown away by what he read and thought “I need to make a film of this” — he was a filmmaker in LA. He wanted to make a film looking at the negative effects of striving for immortality. Of how it impacts human violence, how it leads to wanting to one-up one another, to destroy one another, be the victor, the one who survives — amid the field of corpses lying around us, to be that one who stands strong. He was working on this film and heard about the World Leaders Project, which we can get into in a bit, that I was undertaking with a professor friend of mine in New York, and wanted to do an interview with me for his film and when he called me and we started talking, I realized: Wait a minute, you’re doing a film about Becker? And when he heard about the World Leaders Project he said: Wait a minute, you’re going to meet face to face with world leaders just to talk about Becker? And so we just instantly hit it off. We decided to help each other out, so that’s how I got involved in the film, which was originally Patrick’s film, which over the course of the last 18 months got to the point where we were co-producing it, cowriting and working on it in equal shares. It came together because we realized there is much more to Becker than realizing that “Hey, we want to be famous because we recognize that being immortal would be a neat idea.” There is a dark underside to the work as well that we wanted to cover in the movie.

B: I don’t know if it’s going to become a standard question at the Q&A at the end of the film: “So this your immortality project, right?” When someone asks that, and some did at the New York screening as I recall, it presents us with this: Here is something we might consider a “positive” immortality project, not proclaiming to be “the truth”, despite all disclaimers, be it your film or Becker’s book we nonetheless react in such a way that we are saying to ourselves, well that’s not the truth, I know better.

G: That’s what’s interesting, and again while I say what I’m about to say, I would like you and your readers to keep in mind what I just got done saying: don’t apply Becker to every aspect of our lives, we would just go nuts — “Why am I buying the vegan chocolate candy bar, it must have something to do with immortality We could look at the person who ask the question: “Isn’t this your immortality project?” with that cocky air, we could look at that person asking that question as living their own immortality project, because in doing so they say, “Well, I obviously know more than you and when all these other idiots are dead and gone, including you, I’ll still be around due to my acute sense of thinking and amazing intellect.” We could look at this from a million different angles.

B: I find that such an interesting situation. Is that not how we interact in the world? Trying to achieve our immortality on some level through these petty exchanges throughout the day? Is there a real, valuable way we can communicate otherwise? I believe that there is, but how do we define that? That sharing, reciprocity?

G: I think people need to do this. One thing Becker seems to be saying is, that we're saying in our movie, is that this just isn't something that you get over, that we end, that we do away with. The 'this' being immortality striving and trying to be the one who last and lives longest. Becker's point was that the human animal lives in constant fear of death, at least on some subconscious level. Or rather the human animal is constantly aware of its own death. Keep in mind that we are always working against that or using that information to guide the course of our actions. Becker's suggestion is that these little warfares that go on throughout the day, from the little kid — he uses as an example the kid who says, "Mom, he got a bigger piece of candy than me" — to "You tried to kill my dad, Saddam Hussein, therefore you are next on my list, " *all* of these things can be traced back to death anxiety and that all of them are part and parcel of who we are as people. We are reacting based on the psychology of being a human being. These things are inescapable. I guess the point of Becker that we, as producers of the film *Flight from Death*, have tried to encapsulate in 90 minutes is that all these little pieces of warfare that go on throughout the day and *all* these huge wars that go on across the world are quite possibly inescapable, but an awareness of these things can help reduce the aggression and hopefully the pain that is associated with them. And again, that's somewhat up to the interpreter. Meaning that there are those who think that pain for a specific cause is quite a fantastic thing. I guess I am representing a majority who would suggest, as a general rule, that hurting or killing others is bad.

B: I believe that in our increasing awareness of these underlying motivations, the very first simple step of saying, "Hey, " *nudge nudge*, "there is this denial of death thing going on, " is so important before you make those larger connections. We're not all yet walking through our day thinking, "Hey, I exist in this duality of my creatureliness and my immortality-striving!"

G: One thing we wanted to do and one thing that we have argued throughout, and I'm not sure at which of the New York screenings this question was raised, the second one I think: "What good does this do in terms of the world at large? What good do these ideas actually have in changing the course of human behavior?" Our answer was, ultimately, just having these ideas on the table helps. Meaning that, granted, we are not going to get rid of the daily battles, we're not going to get rid of people beating the crap out of each other or treating each other unfairly. But realistically, having the thought on the table, just for discussions, out there for everyone to see. That quite possibly our actions are motivated by a subconscious, innate fear. That creates interesting conversation and I would argue absolutely allows for change of behaviors, or at least less violent and destructive ones. Up until now, with *Flight from Death*, I don't think these ideas have been popularized nearly as much as they could have been. Ernest Becker was suppressed throughout his entire career because of his relationship to Thomas Szasz and those who worked with Becker were ostracized from the psychology community for associating with Becker.

B: Who is Thomas Szasz?

G: Thomas Szasz at Syracuse University — and as I understand it, readers would do well to research on their own and correct me here, he was against the medicalization of psychology. And I think that what happened was that Szasz was arguing against going toward a space where drugs were prescribed for everything. Which of course means less profits for psychologists. If psychologist can prescribe fancy medication they can drive fancier cars. And get rich. Szasz I think, was saying we need to be looking at psychological problems from a psychological perspective, not medical perspective. And a psychological perspective that looks at the human animal on a social level — almost veering into anthropology. I know that for *Flight from Death*, we interviewed one of Szasz's and Beckers friends, a psychotherapist from NY and he told pretty much the same story, that Becker and Szasz were ostracized and continue to be frowned upon by the psychology community. And I guess that the end result of that is, that Becker puts out this book. *The Denial of Death*, which is no piece of trash, it won the Pulitzer Prize and how many people have even heard of the book? We've encountered a handfull, 20 or 30, who have come to us over the last year and said, "Oh guys, you're making a movie about this? Its a great book, I read it in college." But we've talked to thousands of people.

Stomach Cramps, Faith, and James Bond

B: Becker pokes fun at himself at the beginning of the book, writing that all the great ideas already have books about them. How dare I throw another book in there, another weighty tome no one will read?

G: Exactly.

B: He's obviously hopefull that that won't be the end of it.

G: Of course it's honorable of him to say. I'm writing this book, but don't give it a second glance, it's nothing. I'm sure that Becker knew however that this was going to be a colossal piece of work and a discussion piece for generations to come. His own immortality project. And it doesn't take anything away from the people who encounter these ideas as new and are incredible advancements on ideas they maybe have heard before.

B: In terms of the everyday results of these fears, near the end of the book Becker cites a haunting story told by Otto Rank of this woman who comes in with stomach cramps, with no apparent medical cause, to Otto Rank's office. Rank questions her: She lives with her married sister in this cute alpine village, has no great love, great passion, but has a "good" life. However she has a vague feeling that she is missing out on something. But things are good, you're happy, you spend the summer in country, Rank tells her. And then he suggests, Hey, let's not figure out what's causing those stomach cramps. Whatever revelation about those cramps we happen upon will probably make you more miserable. There is a certain amount of pain we must endure in order to live in this world. Maybe we shouldn't solve this one problem, maybe this is the price

you are paying to go about your life in this tolerable manner? That reminded me of a thing Becker wrote earlier in the book, where he wonders how these workers survive in chaotic restaurants or hectic factories or travel agencies in tourist season. Then he says the answer is obvious. The chaos resembles life, but the job is a manageable chaos. Rank I think was insisting on the same thing: your stomach cramps are a manageable pain — what we would uncover if we really stopped to consider the problem, the chaos of life or your undisclosed loss, might be too much.

The question that raises for me, especially in the context of our revolutionary project, our desire for change, is how much do we ask of people? How many of these stomach cramps do we really wish to cure? What would we unleash?

G: Meaning what would we unleash if all these things were gone?

B: What are we asking of people when we are asking them to give up their stomach cramps? Becker notes that if you are going to remind people of an unmediated joy, you must also remind them of the terrible despair that can accompany that joy. It makes me question the refrain of “Hey, everyone, there’s this great thing going over here! Quit your crappy day job — there is joy out there!” It’s not that simple, but I wonder what happens then.

G: It reminds me of what anyone in the course of my life has ever said to me when talking about ideas like Becker’s or the example of “Hey, consider quitting your job and pursuing your passion.” And that example is just an example, certainly not the key to your salvation. Using that idea, people rejoin with, “Well who’s going to sweep the streets, wash the dishes, scrape the elephant cage?” What else do we create when we create this “heaven” on earth? Becker hints at it throughout the book, when he’s talking about “whose heaven on earth?” One thing that’s come up when making this film, is that we’re saying people can strive to create a better, more beautiful world by being aware of their own immortality project. Doesn’t that simultaneously open the door for people to say, “Hey, you’re right, let’s all die for a cause and kill tons of people because what we’re trying to do with our belief system is the right thing to do and it’s going to create a beautiful world and a passionate world, and I don’t need to work anymore!”? Yeah, we potentially open up a huge can of worms, I don’t think there is such a thing as a perfect, an ideal world, where were *all* living passionately and beautiful. And that is sort of ominous and upsetting. To be honest I don’t think there is any example of a life that is completely passionate and without sadness and a heavy heart at times, or without tragedy or terror or horror.

I think that’s what keeps the human animal in balance and forward. I think it’s almost healthy in a way. The ultimate question for me becomes, How do we take all that, and instead of ending up on the floor, a quivering blob of protoplasm unable to function, or knife wielding maniac running through a shopping mall — how do we take that information and create an existence for ourselves that is nurturing, and that isn’t destructive toward other people, and is fun and enjoyable and gives something beautiful to human existence? Again it’s *all* a matter of interpretation.

B: There was some criticism at the Q&A that you were portraying religion in this terrible light in the film — that you just showed that all religions universally contribute to the denial of death and the seeking for immortality in this very fanatical, harmful, way, the repression of others. In the sense of everything having a positive and negative shadow, when you were making the film and examining religion and ideology, trying to understand this really negative affect that it has had, what was the positive shadow of religion? Becker seems to come to a lot of religious conclusions, despite the scientific rigor of his work. But connected to the film...

G: We had to be acutely aware of that the whole time. Neither Patrick or I connect strongly to any particular religion and in fact I have a strong critique of religion, on a personal level. But in making the film, we didn't necessarily want to define our film by our personal belief systems so much as we wanted to look at the larger picture. And the larger picture turned out to be: Let's look at religions critically, but let's not look at them critically exclusively. Let's look at them critically along with all other institutions that are similar, look at them all in the same light. Instead of saying, Religion is something to be really aware of because of it's contribution to violence, let's look at all these institutions that we engage in our culture and take a look at their contribution towards violence and their effect on human psychology on different levels. What do they all have to contribute? In doing that, we leveled the playing field. We made religion and capitalism and all the others that we covered, equal players in this world, in this social construction. And in terms of looking at religion in that regard, we were able to say, what religion does is it gives people a sense of self worth, of hope, faith in something greater than yourself, soothes that part of human beings that quite possibly fears that this abstract existence is really ridiculous and meaningless, which is almost too much for most people to bear. Religion soothes that part of the human psyche, but taken to another level, it causes people to react and do crazy things, to suppress other people. As Becker suggests in the book, and as we explore in the film, it causes people to want to beat the crap out of each other. Ultimately, and I'm drawing on the work of Sheldon Solomon, my partner in the World Leaders Project — if there's somebody of belief system A in a room and somebody of belief system B comes into a room, well, the two of them can't both be right. So who ultimately wins out? There has to be one that wins, because neither will except that they are both wrong. And that's the underside of religion. What we were doing in the film was saying, yeah, but that's also the underside of patriotism, of capitalism, of communism, of all of those things.

B: It seems that part of a possible solution to achieve a more desirable existence — and I don't know if there is a real solution — but Becker seems to conclude that faith plays a large part of it, something higher than yourself. He goes on to describe Kierkegaard's "knight of faith". I wonder if we must view this faith, whether in god, an idea, or a "life force", in terms of subservience to that idea, ourselves as part of a greater whole? I feel like Becker was understanding that ideal of faith in terms of subservience. Is faith necessarily a subservient action?

G: Becker, over the term of his life and the book, seems to be pretty atheistic. Becker at the age of forty nine was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and he died relatively quickly. On his deathbed, he was interviewed by Sam Keene, who was at the time working for “Psychology Today” magazine, and Keene is actually interviewed in our film as well, we met with him in California. To Sam Keene he says that he had returned to Judaism while he was dying. Patrick and I actually visited Becker’s grave in Massachusetts and there is a Star of David on it and the words on it were definitely indicative of a man who was born and who certainly died a Jew. I think that quite literally Becker might have gotten scared toward the end of his life. And said to himself, Wow, what if this academic approach I’ve taken is right, and all we have is this psychological construct of some type of future and that doesn’t offer much solace. I imagine that he saw some good in subjecting oneself to a higher power and went for it — and if it soothes the dying man in the painful throes of cancer, then that is a great thing. But I don’t think he necessarily said that we have to be subservient to it. I know that when Patrick and I were trying to draw a closing to our film, we looked at Einstein who said that science is going to drop you on the doorstep of religion at some point. And here’s a guy who examined every micron of the universe. He still found more and more questions, and less and less concrete answers. I think that Becker, along those same lines, realized that there are no definite answers, in terms of what do with our faith, as long as we continually remember our humanness, our immediate worldly existence and don’t just blindly step into that faith hoping that it’s going to take over and answer all our questions for us. Becker was pretty aware that you can be soothed by something larger that is out there. But always remember that you are a human as well and there are very human issues going on here.

B: It seems what Becker wanted to make room for in the world, next to faith, is the idea that there is mystery in the world, whether that mystery is in Judaism or an idea of a living Earth.

G: When he says we create out of art or our lives an object and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it to the life force, I don’t think he’s imagining the life force as some little deity with a beard running around in the clouds. I’ve interpreted it as the collective existence of living things and the collective experience of being alive, its awesomeness. We craft this interview and throw it out there and see what it does. And if it turns out that people read this interview and run out into the streets and kill each other, well, then we look at that and ask ourselves, “Why is this going on?” We might look at it throughout the lens of death anxiety and adapt our behaviors accordingly, to at least use that idea, that lens as a means of making the world a better place.

B: That quote from Becker that you just cited (offering our creation to life) reminds me so much of Nietzsche’s dancing star line from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: I say unto you, one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves. “The idea that, essentially, there is something to give to the world.

G: That idea that you talked of earlier, that it might be born of a state of chaos — I think that one of the most beautiful things about my life, and not my life as different from anybody else's, but my life because it's all I really know, is how much is fucking hurts to be me sometimes, and simultaneously how blissful it feels to be me sometimes. How sometimes those things are as intertwined as two people making love. How close the gutwrenching pain and the absolute bliss are intertwined. That's part of the deal: Once you pop out into the world, that's what you get, that simultaneous pain/bliss. Joseph Campbell said that life is like an opera — imagining the power and passion of an opera — except that the opera hurts and we are in it, neck deep. That's what we get for being living people. In the last couple of years and the more I work on the film, I find it more and more potent to think of my life in those terms. When I was working on the lyrics for the Trial records, that just came up constantly, all the journal entries, the heartbreak, coinciding and clashing and working in absolute symbiosis with all the joy, happiness, and triumph.

B: That seems to connect to Becker's idea of Heroism. Becker understood much in these terms. In the introduction I really like something he seemingly just drops in — "The urge to heroism is natural and to admit it is honest; for everyone to admit it would release such pent up force as to be devastating to societies as they are now." That idea reminded me of Raoul Vaneigem writing in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* how much sympathy he had for this man driving home from work and at each light he is imagining himself some sort of hero or another, James Bond, etc. This is going on all around you, people yearning for a sense of heroism and meaning, even if in such bland terms as James Bond. I wonder if we are standing on the brink of people granting that to themselves.

G: I would hope so.

B: I think Becker is convincing in arguing that so-called primitive societies were successful in structuring themselves in such a way that people could feel satisfied in that urge toward heroism and meaning. And hopefully in our activist and punk and all the greater cultures are also developing ways of interacting that can give people voice and space for those yearnings.

G: Or even non-punk and non-activist subcultures. I think that ultimately striving for the heroic doesn't dictate Vaneigem's example of imagining that they are James Bond. You don't have to be James Bond and having sex with Halle Berry to be a hero.

B: I think he was much more sympathetic to the basic urge toward heroism, rather than encouraging the idea that people should be James Bond. I think he wants us all running through the streets, that sort of thing, drunk on life.

G: Absolutely. Realistically, at the expense of offending Vaneigem or anybody who's read him and got really excited about it — I did for one — a fulfilled life doesn't necessarily entail living every passion. I would be satisfied if everybody on the planet Lived a little more passionately. I would be satisfied if individuals would just get a little more in touch with the things they want to do, a little more in touch with the psychology of what makes them tick and behave the way they do. I think that would

be a huge colossal improvement over the status quo. Even individual examples of that make me really excited. In terms of the punk-activist community, yeah, absolutely, the options are all there. What about in terms of other subcultures that are perhaps not as inundated with examples of passionate living and artistic expression? I would love to see people in those cultures say I can improve my life immensely by doing *this*. Whatever that thing might be. As Patrick and I were talking about who our audience is, we made the decision to get this into the hands of as many people as possible, because we, like you, saw that Becker was on to something. And while we shouldn't encase it in a solid gold ark, we feel people across the board could benefit from what he had to say and from reflecting on his ideas.

The World Leaders Project

B: The World Leaders Project (WLP), was that something that stemmed out from your reading of Becker? Or was that something that had been brewing and those ideas are what made it grow?

G: As someone who has looked upon the structure of politics as something a little bit weird, that hundreds of millions of people elect one little person to represent them — a little weird. I'm saying "just a little weird" so we don't have to go into what's the right system of politics, blah blah blah. A little strange. Just the idea that somebody else speaks for me, a little weird. When I started to read Becker I wondered, what is the death psychology of a leader? And what is the relationship to the follower? And what are they doing for each other? Not just the leader saying, "Followers you make me feel like a god." Rather, each of the followers saying, "Wow, it feels really good to be a follower. There are so many other followers and I don't need to stick my neck out, that guy over there is doing it for me. Because I elected him." What's that relationship about? I was listening to a lecture given by a guy named Sheldon Solomon, who ended up being a terrific, amazing friend of mine. Sheldon made reference in his lecture — this was during the whole Bush/Gore vote scandal and mayhem — that maybe we should let Bush and Gore know that their striving to get the most votes was a good example of their striving for immortality. He intended it as a joke in his lecture. I went up to him afterwards and said, "How about we write to Bush and Gore and how about we write to every other leader on the planet and suggest that we would love to give them insight into the nature of leaders and the nature of followers." And using that insight, that insight of death anxiety, that people often enjoy being leaders and followers, and how that might help diminish violence worldwide, being that the leaders are often the folks guiding policy over the majority. The World Leaders Project absolutely stemmed from reading Becker. From trying to apply something real-world. You know, and your readers know, we all know in the punk/hardcore music community that risk we run is just shouting, screaming, hitting guitars, and making sounds that fulfill the needs of the ears, eyes, and minds of those who expect those types of sounds, without making

anything happen. By happen I mean, and no pun intended, cathartic change, some feeling, action or change, real change. Not just people jumping around — which of course could be real change for some folks — but I wanted to take the ideas of Becker and take them out of an academic arena and say okay, let's put him in the political arena and let's not just put him in the ideological political arena, let's go talk to some folks. And have those folks be world leaders and meet them face to face. And hit them with these ideas and share these ideas with them and not just from the perspective of, "we have all the answers," but put them on the table and see what happens. Our meeting with the president of Guyana was unbelievable because he actually listened to us.

B: You and Sheldon had written him a letter — and Patrick...

G: Yeah, we wrote every leader in the world. Sheldon and I wrote the letter. And Sheldon, Patrick, and I wrote a document that described our ideas, that we sent out to *all* those who responded. Meeting with the president of Guyana was fantastic, because he listened. I think it would be naive to think that he would walk away from the meeting and went out and bought *Denial of Death* and went to flightfromdeath.com and watched our trailer for the movie and pre-ordered the DVD. That would be ridiculous. All I wanted for that meeting was to go in and say, here are a couple of books, here are some thoughts to think about. Tell us a little bit about Guyana, what goes on down here? How's life down here? What is existence like here? To be totally honest, living in Seattle I have no idea. And Patrick, he was filming the whole time, but living in LA, he had no idea and Sheldon living in New York had no idea. Tell us about Guyana and how can we help each other to create a better place? A place where suffering isn't as widespread. Again we are not going to get rid of suffering, but there is a lot of suffering and violence that don't need to be there. So how can we diminish violence in our two cultures by looking at it through the lens of Beckers ideas? Tremendous, to have that conversation was just fantastic.

B: And what did he say initially? Was he stumbling or what?

G: No, no. He agreed with us, looking over the document, human beings being motivated toward violence because the fear of death was quite possibly part of the problem. He added that racial relations and economic issues were at the heart of much of their violence. We talked a bit about his. By the end of the meeting though, it wasn't a situation where he where he smiled through his teeth and said have a nice day, goodbye, but actually invited us back and said that he himself would set up a speaking engagement for us at the University of Guyana. So Sheldon and I are going to go back and lecture something this year. We re in the midst of working out which dates, then we will get in touch with President Bharrat Jagdeo and make it happen again. It was awesome for me after preaching to the choir for years and years, to take the ideas in a very non-traditional way out into the world. And see what happens. Again, craft something and offer it to the world and see what comes of it.

B: That experience of taking yourself out of your familiar surroundings, what you saw there, then coming back to your home and Seattle and saying to yourself, what

next? Has it made you push for more or see how things that were done before might not have been working so well?

G: Push for more, absolutely, I would say since summer of 2002 I have been relentless in terms of wanting more and getting more. Getting more — I'm not talking about cars and diamond rings, I'm talking about seeing how far I can go in terms of creativity and developing ideas and talking them out of traditional, for me, realms and modes of thought. The World Leaders Project blew the doors wide open. I think just to have on the table those ideas, in the President of Guyana's hands, reminded me of all the times that after working on the Trial record for a year, recording the album and putting it out into the world — times where somebody would come up to me after a show and say, you know, my friend's brother is into your band and gave me your record and I never listened to hardcore and I don't really like the music but it made me think about this time in my life when... fill in the blank. Some experience in their life, whether their girlfriend was raped or their parents died in a car crash. Whatever made them happy or sad or terrified, that by some crazy method of that record getting to them, it changed their life. I thought to myself, it changed their life, and on some small level we have a great conversation. I thought to myself, with the WLP, okay, we hand these books to the president of Guyana, he goes on with his day and has 40 more meetings, let's say. He goes on with his year and has 40,000 more meetings. Well, what happens at the next CARICOM meeting, where Caribbean leaders talk about economics? What if, what IF he rubs elbows with some other leader that triggers something in his brain about something that we talked about and introduced him to and those two guys get into a conversation. Or what if by whatever freak incidence, the G8 leaders are getting together and the president of Guyana happens to be there and rubs elbows with George Bush or one of the other global political heavyweights, and they share ideas based on this conversation. You know, what IF. And to be totally honest, to see this have happened again and again and again with Trial I thought to myself, what's the difference between the president of Guyana and a punk rock girl in North Carolina? What's the difference? There's no difference in that they are people, experiencing life. Maybe in individual ways, but also in the same sorts of ways: They want to understand the world. And they want to understand their lives and make them better and they are going to encounter other people and work together to make those things happen. I thought to myself, this is brilliant! Again, I'm not saying that I'm the brilliant one, you would have to put that in Becker's hands for getting all those notes down. The brilliant thing is, this could really work. The effect that we desired in terms of bringing about some change and the lessening of violence was that this trickle down effect could happen on the scale of world leaders. You know what, if I am naive to think that, so be it. I was also naive to go out and waste my voice almost to the point of not ever being able to speak again in hopes that it would help people deal with rape or sexually transmitted diseases or the loss of a spouse through punk rock: and I saw that time and time again, a hundredfold. That's just one kind of channel, one ray of light opened to me, through the success of the WLP.

B: Your strategic plan with *Flight from Death*: is that something that is becoming intimately connected to the WLP?

G: Sheldon has just put out a brilliant book, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. What we would like to do is tour, Patrick, Sheldon and myself — and I mean tour. Ultimately, I would like to tour from colleges to the palaces of presidents and prime ministers, Sheldon speaking about his book on terror and Patrick and I showing the film and integrating all of that; since Sheldon, Patrick and I have become this WLP triumvirate, we would like to share these ideas all at the same time. Granted, when we get our next meeting with a world leader, whoever that might be, were not going to be in a situation most likely where we can show a 90 minute film, have them read a 100-plus page book, and talk about it. But at least we'll have those kinds of ideas in mind.

B: Where does the film stand now in production? Is the final edit done?

G: Near done, Patrick is working on it as we speak and we have spent this week that we are interested in having narrate the film. [A Hollywood actor, Gabriel Byrne, was brought on board for this task in March.] We have a whole list of folks we are pursuing. We are utilizing a number of contacts we have made in the last year to get screenings and to find a distributor. Between Patrick and myself, we have managed to arrange a few more screenings. This year we'll be in Edmonton, Alberta, at a conference called Culture and the State, which is going to be in May of 2003. We'll screen it in Seattle in March in conjunction with a lecture by Robert J. Lipton. We'll screen most likely in Houston as well. Also, in Michigan, there will be a weekend long series of events: Sheldon, then our film, then all of us talking collectively about Becker. We have gone that route in terms of trying to set up individual screenings, but also utilize the contacts we have made to set up distribution for, hopefully, national and international TV releases and movie theaters.

B: Is there going to be a DVD release?

G: Absolutely. We are going to finish this film. For frame of reference in case someone picks this zine or interview up in 2012, I'm talking about this film is done, March 1st 2003. When we secure *all* the money to do all the things we like in terms of packaging and extra things on the DVD, we'll do a release as soon as possible.

B: I'm really curious what else you have on the table? I can see how these things would dominate your life, but do you have any other projects?

G: Those are the main things I do. *Flight from Death* in the second half of 2002 took on an entirely new focus and dedication. In August, September, and October of 2002 Patrick and I were working so hard on that film I actually ended up in a doctor's office, I thought I was dying of a heart attack.

There was one stretch of 20 days where we slept between an hour and half and three hours a night to finish this thing. One day we worked quite literally 22 and half hours on our film. State of mania. Since we got the rough cut finished, since the NY and Seattle screenings, I was able to kick back a bit and focus on some other stuff. I am always of course doing juggling and entertaining stuff, which is my true

passion in life, I love it. I'm going to be doing some speaking dates on my own at some colleges on the East Coast. That's stuff I love, too, talking to audiences. And it's actually quite fun doing it without a band, there aren't nearly as many things to worry about. But I'm also neck deep in trying to help the Western Shoshone Nation with whatever I can, helping to resolve their land dispute with the US government. A dispute that has been going on for about 150 years or so now. I just got back from a trip, an interesting trip when you look at the clash of cultures through the lens of Becker. Native Americans and Euro-Americans are a great example to look at when belief systems and ideology clash. I was very fortunate to be able to drive a van load of Shoshone elders to Rapid City, SD for a meeting between them and Lakota tribal officials to form alliances on various political issues. The first time, as I understand it, that Lakota and Shoshone officials have met since the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. An awesome experience heightened by being inundated with all this immortality thinking and belief system clashes. I got to ponder first hand, Wow, what's the effect of a dominant invader? What do people do in response to it? What questions can we ask in terms of fear of death and the systems they create to maintain a sense of lasting permanence? Fascinating. Throwing fire machetes and bean bags around, helping the Shoshone, movies, and talking to world leaders. That pretty much keeps me happy.

I know I want as much out of every second of my life as I can possibly get. Because one of the things that reading Becker has done to me is to make me acutely aware of the fact that yeah, I'm going to die. Just a matter of time before I'm worm food. The past year has just made me intense in terms of wanting more and more and more out of life. Limitless passion — all the stuff just gives me a sense of being alive that in my own life is unprecedented.

For more information on the worldwide web:

www.flightfromdeath.com: watch the trailer, get production updates, find out where it's playing next!

www.wordsasweapons.com: Greg's site, where you can find out more about the Western Shoshone work he does, the World Leaders Project, and much more.

Or write to Greg Bennick c/o Inside Front.

The Ted K Archive

Bruce Burnside & Greg Bennick
The Denial of Death
An Introduction
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