

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Sheldon Solomon:** We are marinating in death anxiety if we're overwhelmed by reminders of death. If our cultural worldview is no longer convincing, if we're lacking in self-esteem, that instigates a host of defensive reactions to restore psychological equanimity, what we would today refer to as mindfulness. All gratitude, humility, those defenses dissolve as a result of these kinds of interventions.

[00:00:39] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm pleased to be joined by social psychologist Sheldon Solomon to discuss terror management theory, which he co-developed alongside Jeff Greenberg and Tom Budzinski. Sheldon is a professor of psychology at Skidmore College where he studies how the uniquely human awareness of death affects our behavior at both the individual and collective levels.

[00:01:04] Sheldon is also the co-author of *In the Wake of 9/11, the Psychology of Terror*, as well as the *Worm at the Core* on the role of death in life. In this long and off requested episode, Sheldon and I dive deep into his decades long work, establishing how human awareness and the associated fear of death affects everything we do from our daily behaviors, from our desire for money to our religious beliefs and our choice of politicians.

[00:01:39] And after speaking with Sheldon, it's clear to me that something akin to terror management is a central piece to understanding our human predicament. And as such, this episode is a must watch among our catalog, in addition to the fact that he's just a colorful, super articulate, interesting human being.

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[00:01:59] If you are joined this podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more of the system science underpinning the human predicament, and where my team and I increasingly will share written content and post special announcements related to The Great Simplification. You can find the link to subscribe in the show description.

[00:02:19] With that, please welcome Sheldon Solomon. This is a must watch. Sheldon Solomon, welcome to the program. Thank you, Nate. Great to be here. You probably don't know this, but believe it or not, you were one of the most requested guests that, our viewers have asked me to highlight, so I'm glad that we had this opportunity to meet in person.

[00:02:40] Me too. Thank you. What I've been trying to unpack here on this show is, our current human predicament and how we got here, and you have developed a theory with some colleagues over the years called Terror Management Theory. And maybe we just start there. What is it and how did you get, interested in developing it?

[00:03:04] Developed

[00:03:05] **Sheldon Solomon:** Terror management theory. in collaboration with my grad school buddies, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Budzinski. we were young professors in the early 1980s, experimental social psychologist by trade, and we bumped into books by someone we had never heard of. A guy named Ernest Becker, who was a recently deceased culture.

[00:03:29] Cultural anthropologist and in books like The Birth and Death of Meaning, the Denial of Death Escape from Evil Becker's effort was an interdisciplinary attempt. To delineate the motivational underpinnings of human behavior, English translation. You know, why do we do what we do? Here's my classic comic book summary.

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[00:03:57] So, Becker just starts with the relatively non-controversial Darwinian assumption that humans are like all living things, and that we're biologically predisposed, to preserve ourselves, both to survive, as well as to continue reproducing over time. but then Becker following Darwin points out that there's a lot of different ways to adapt to our surroundings.

[00:04:27] Billions of years, different forms of life have accomplished this in different fashions. you know, the turtle's got a shell, the eagle can fly and has great eyesight. And that raises the question of, well, what do we got going for us here? Becker points out that we do got some physical stuff, upright, bipedalism, you know, we got the thumbs that we can work with stereoscopic, binocular vision.

[00:04:54] And yet, on the other hand, we are relatively pathetic. We're not all that big. We're not all that fast. We're not strong. Our teeth aren't sharp, our senses aren't great. And so that raises the question, why are we here? And Becker says, we're here for. Two reasons. One is, that, we're uber social creatures.

[00:05:18] As I tell my students at Skidmore, none of you would be alive past lunch if we had to survive on our own, just based on our own capacities. But thankfully, we have the capacity to collaborate with each other at our best to construct a host of institutions that then facilitate our collective survival.

[00:05:40] Right. That's great. And then Becker points out, let's not be arrogantly narcissistic about this, but we're also pretty smart. we've got the big four brain that enables us to think abstractly and symbolically to the point where we can imagine stuff that. It doesn't even exist. And then have the audacity in the manual dexterity to transform our dreams into reality again.

[00:06:07] All awesome. That helps us explain why we've been so successful all over the planet, but Becker than shifts from Darwin to Ki guard, the Danish

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existential philosopher. 'cause Kierkegaard said in the 1840s, we're so smart that we actually know that we're here today. We would call that self-awareness or self-consciousness.

[00:06:30] And Kierkegaard's point is that we take self-awareness for granted. 'cause that's our default, cognitive construction. You wake up in the morning and you're like, I woke up. you are walking to work and you're like, wow, here I am walking to work. Or even more than that. Here I am walking to work thinking about that.

[00:06:50] I'm walking to work in a little book called Fear and tro Kiir Kegar said, look. If you're smart enough to know that you're here, rose bushes are here, they don't know it. Raccoons are here, but they don't know it. We're here and we know it. And he argued that engenders two uniquely human emotions that he called awe and dread respectively.

[00:07:14] Real quick, he's just like, it's awesome to be alive and to know it. If you get to choose between being a person and a potted plant, I would hope that most of us would choose. Personhood, not because we've accomplished anything in particular, just the spontaneous joy and exuberance that is manifested by the basic fact that we're here and appreciating being alive, but plants don't feel dreaded.

[00:07:42] There you go. And that's exactly it, because Ki guard turns right around and, he just points out, that unless you're a child or mentally impaired, to know that you're here. Also entails the collateral recognition that like all living things, our lives are a finite duration and we too will someday die.

[00:08:06] Alright? So that's existential need to the groin, number one. But then he keeps going and he says, not only will we all die, but we can die at any time for reasons that we can never anticipate or control, you know, to be silly. For all we

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know there's a comet that's made its way through the atmosphere and it's coming right down on the top of this building to vaporize us.

[00:08:29] Before I finish this sentence, I'm not gonna look up. Me neither. There you go. Yeah. And then finally, and then Becker just adds one more existential crisis. So you're gonna die. It can happen at any time and we're embodied animals breathing pieces of defecating meat that are no more significant than lizards or potatoes and.

[00:08:54] What Becker argues is that if that's all you thought about, I'm gonna die, I could die today, of a talking sausage, that we would literally be debilitated with existential terror. We wouldn't be able to stand up in the morning, with a degree of psychological equanimity. We'd be twitching blobs of biological protoplasm, covering under our beds, groping face sedatives the size of sport utility vehicles.

[00:09:24] That's Woody Allen. But, Becker then goes on to say that the way that human beings. Manage this potentially overwhelming existential terror is through the construction and maintenance of what he calls cultural worldviews. Not that we're aware that any of this has happened. So he defines culture, as a humanly constructed set of beliefs that we share with folks around us that helps reduce death anxiety, by giving us a sense that life has meaning and, we have value.

[00:10:00] So when he talks about meaning, he's like, yo, every culture has an account of the origin of the universe. Every culture has a prescription for how we ought behave while we're here, every culture offers some hope of immortality, either literally or symbolically. And, that without that, we would be in a continuous state of psychological despair or disillusionment.

[00:10:28] But then he says, well, thinking that life has meaning is a good start. Necessary but not sufficient. Because we also need to believe that we are

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valuable contributors to the meaningful universe to which we subscribe. And here's where sociology 101 comes in. We all inhabit social roles in our culture.

[00:10:51] If you're a nurse, you're supposed to save lives. If you're a soldier, you're supposed to. And, you know, banker take money, so on and so forth. and if we meet or exceed the standards of value associated with our roles, then we perceive ourselves, as significant. People in a meaningful world, and Becker calls that self-esteem.

[00:11:15] I'll tell you in a minute what we did. But, what Becker says and what we converted into terror management theory is that, you know, like all creatures, we wanna survive, but we're smart enough to know that basic biological imperative is doomed to fail. That creates potential existential terror that we manage by subscribing to cultural worldviews.

[00:11:43] And whether we're aware of it or not, we highly motivated and mostly we're not aware of this to main, to maintain confidence in our beliefs as well as faith in our value in the context of them. And then finally, what Becker proposed, was that. If those basic mechanisms are threatened, if we're overwhelmed by reminders of death, if our cultural worldview is no longer compelling or convincing, if we're lacking in self-esteem, that instigates, a host of defensive reactions, to restore psychological equanimity.

[00:12:28] So. That's Becker, and actually that's Terror Management Theory. Also, Becker wrote like 10 or 12 books, and we found them so provocative that we reduced them to my last paragraph, in order to have a theory that would allow us to derive hypothesis that we could empirically assess again, English translation.

[00:12:52] Becker won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, the Denial of Death, but he couldn't even really get a job. Scholars at the time, just said, that's interesting, but highly speculative, philosophical blathering for which there's no empirical

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evidence. Moreover. It's not possible to have any evidence because Becker was claiming following Freud that all of this is happening unconsciously.

[00:13:22] And so that's where Tom and Jeff and I come in, we're young, experimental psychologists. We went around when we read Becker talking to other folks and they all just walked out of the room. They said, that's nonsense. You need proof. And so that's what we've been doing for the last 40 years or so. First with each other, and then with our students, and now with scholars in a variety of disciplines around the world.

[00:13:50] And that's to generate a body of empirical evidence that will enable us, to determine at least from a traditional scientific vantage point, the, validity of his core claim, about the fundamental role of death in life.

[00:14:08] **Nate Hagens:** I have so many questions. Me too. Before we dive into TMT Terry Management Theory, have you ever heard of a guy named Ajit Var?

[00:14:19] He's a neuroscientist. Absolutely. So how does that dovetail? So his theory, as I understand it, he's a friend of mine, is a mort, a mortality over reality, theory that. At some point in our evolutionary history, humans saw another human die and made the interpolation, oh my God, I'm gonna die at some point.

[00:14:41] And that set in motion, this suppression of understanding reality and this denial impulse. And from that came a long list of homo sapiens conquering the world in, some ways. what are your thoughts on that and how does that relate to your thinking?

[00:14:57] **Sheldon Solomon:** Well, it relates to it in a magnificent fashion.

[00:15:00] we're not friends, but we go way back. The book denial that he wrote with his deceased Yes. Colleague Brower. Right. is actually based on our work.

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Okay. The first chapter of the book, their book, cites a connection. between, his ideas and our ideas, I wrote to him when I think he had something in science talking about this, and I was like, this is brilliant because you're providing with expert knowledge, a sophisticated evolutionary account of how the uniquely human awareness of death has literally altered the course of our evolutionary history and the planets and the planet.

[00:15:49] And I like their point. I think it's rather magnificent when they claim that if we did not. Come up with, and when I say that, I don't mean consciously, but their point is that consciousness at its best is magnificently adaptive. You know, it allows us to review the past, anticipate the future, think about a variety of possible ways to do things, all of that good.

[00:16:19] But the unintentional byproduct of our vast intelligence via consciousness is the awareness of mortality. And their point is that consciousness could not have evolved without the simultaneous development of mechanisms that allow us to function day to day and moment to moment, without death being on our mind.

[00:16:44] And that's why they call the book denial.

[00:16:46] **Nate Hagens:** So how do other animals like impalas or elk, do they have awe and dread and do they have terror management?

[00:16:55] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. See, good question. In fact, really good question because, 40 or 45 years ago when I first bumped into. Becker's work? Oh, most folks would say that we're uniquely self-aware.

[00:17:13] we're uniquely, concerned, about mortality. I'm not sure that's the case these days. I think recent work in animal cognition suggests a much wider range of states of awareness. there's evidence that creatures like elephants and other,

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well, not other primates and primates, they go through extraordinary grief when they lose significant others.

[00:17:47] But there's two points that folks argue that I find compelling, that, I'm gonna go with for the moment. Yeah. One is that I think creatures are very much aware. Of death when it's immediately impending. You know, the Impala, you know, in the jaws of a Hungry Lion probably realizes. That things will not

[00:18:17] **Nate Hagens:** end all that well.

[00:18:19] But the impalas around it then soon go after eating grass Absolutely. A few minutes later.

[00:18:24] **Sheldon Solomon:** That's correct. They're impervious to the implications, for themselves. And then the other big thing is, and this is a Becker point that has been buttressed by clinical evidence, and that is that as far as we can tell, only humans are poignantly and profoundly aware of death, their own death, from a really early age, as young as two years of age.

[00:18:54] and are concerned about that. even in situations where the likelihood of them dying. I is almost zero. So there's kind of a famous study, I think it was done in the 1940s or fifties, where they asked, Mothers of like five or 6-year-old kids, they're like, Hey, what would bother your kid more being sick and dying or doing poorly on a spelling test?

[00:19:27] And the moms would say, Hey, they don't know what dying is and they're not worried about that, but spelling alright. But then they asked the 5-year-old kids, and they were like, fuck spelling, I'm more concerned about remaining alive. And so I think that's the major distinction is that our, profound sense of self-awareness, you know, mingled with our time, traveling capacities to anticipate the future in light of what we're now seeing.

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[00:20:01] That gets back to the var point. We're seeing what happens to other people and, inferring that might someday happen to us. Yeah, I do think that, that's really different. And then there's another philosopher whose name I can't remember, of course, who just points out that no other creature.

[00:20:23] Spends a considerable amount of their waking moments and in the entire history of the species, not dying. You know, we're the only ones that bury the dead and create monuments to recognize them in perpetuity. We're the only form of life that, since antiquity has been roaming around on the planet, looking for the Fountain of youth, looking for the magic fruit that.

[00:20:53] Keep us here forever. And, so in that sense, we're the only natural entity, incapable, at least at this moment of viewing death, as the inevitable conclusion to being alive, which as Darwin points out, should not be seen as a tragic catastrophe, so much as each of us having, we get to carry the baton around the track of life for a lap, but then we gotta pass it on.

[00:21:28] **Nate Hagens:** You mentioned earlier that we attach somehow to a cultural worldview that kind of, throttles down the negative emotional reactions of this. Why couldn't we do that as individuals without the cultural worldview in, human history? Why couldn't individual humans come up with their own psychological response to the fear of death?

[00:21:49] Yeah, this as a compliment,

[00:21:52] **Sheldon Solomon:** like, awesome question. to be silly, you know, we'd be chugging rum out of a coconut with our Nobel Prize if we could answer it, right? But to, be more precise to a certain extent. We all do develop idiosyncratic conceptions of the world around us, but most of us, just the word conscious means to know with, you know, Khan with, and I think chu means to know or something, but the fact of the matter is, heider and Becker points out.

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[00:22:27] none of us are aware of the moment. In which we're born and in heider's language, we're tossed into our cultural surroundings. Actually, we fall into our cultural surroundings where we're immediately embedded in and in engaged with, our culturally constructed conception of reality. So, you know, we're learning about the Judeo-Christian tradition.

[00:22:58] We're learning about Christmas, but then everything that we see around us, the Christmas trees, the Bibles, so we've got this vision of reality, the cultural worldview that is fortified by our surroundings, which are constructed in ways that. Compliment that. And so by the time we realize that we're here, we are already to a certain extent, culturally constructed meat puppets thinking that the way that we're told the world is the way that it actually is.

[00:23:38] But thereafter, Becker and others claim, each of us does have personal experiences that usually end up with our own take on the culture that we've been

[00:23:51] **Nate Hagens:** socialized in. So how does this, explain how TMT manifests historically, maybe in, pre agricultural times, on the paleolithic in medieval history, and then today, how did that manifest in a person's life?

[00:24:13] Yeah.

[00:24:16] **Sheldon Solomon:** The Becker point is that, and I think he uses this, he says, or his guy, Otto Rock, says, history is a succession of immortality ideologies. That if we step back and, we look at the cultural big bang, you know, at, the time when homo sapien sapiens originated, you know, it's the same time, that ceremonial burials, jewelry and art developed.

[00:24:52] and the claim is that when you have these ancient burials, where bodies have beads that would've taken thousands of hours. To produce what the Becker types argue is that you wouldn't spend so much time, preparing a body for

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that kind of burial, if you didn't have some sense that there was something happening next.

[00:25:22] Right. But by the time there's writing, right, the epic of Gilgamesh, which is the basis, for Western civilization, the Judeo, the yeah. Monotheistic religions. The Gilgamesh dude, basically spent his life wandering around, trying not to die. And so then the next point is that since there's been human records across all societies, you got the Chinese trying not to die with the emperors burying themselves, surrounded by, all the terracotta soldiers.

[00:25:58] We got the Egyptians, in the. Pyramids set up with little canoes to paddle into the afterlife.

[00:26:07] **Nate Hagens:** And here we are fast forward and we're cutting our heads off and freezing them, and expecting to live in the universe in Mars and beyond.

[00:26:15] **Sheldon Solomon:** There you go. And, and, of course, the Richard Technological oligarchs, they're not waiting to freeze.

[00:26:24] they're trying to transfer themselves away from our, bodies, you know, up to the Google Cloud or something along these lines. And so we are no different than the Chinese folks thousands of years ago, or Ponce de Leon, looking for the, trees to keep us young.

[00:26:49] **Nate Hagens:** Yes. So what does this, imply for.

[00:26:55] Culture. Does terror management theory apply only to individuals, or does culture also perceive death, like the death of economic growth or the death of, modernity? Is there a cultural awareness overlaid on top of your theory? Potentially?

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[00:27:14] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. I, think again, that's rather brilliant that what we've got, you know, is a dialectical interaction between the individual and the culture, the cultural level.

[00:27:28] yeah, all cultures, according to Gaia, Oswald Spangler, who wrote a book called The Decline of the West, he was like a Nietzsche, guy, and he's like, look, all cultures. Essentially serve to help us transcend death. But all cultures also have their own historical cycle. they are formed at some point and then they have a, magic stretch, ideally a long one, where a, lot of the people, the majority of the people in the culture subscribe to that conception of reality.

[00:28:10] And it provides a sense of meaning and value for enough of the constituents. And that's the stable time when life is good. Alright. But then when stuff starts to break down, maybe because of a historical event, maybe because of, a disruption, that's political or economic, yeah. The culture becomes very much aware.

[00:28:38] Of it being endangered. And I think that's where we're finding ourselves now. Nietzsche said in the gay science, God is dead. and then I tell my students, read the rest of the paragraph because he goes on to say, Christianity has become unbelievable. He's not being cynical. He's just like, wait a minute.

[00:28:58] We got the theory of evolution. We got the industrial revolution. we've got modernity where we can see that we're not the only culture in the world. We're not the sole repository of wisdom. And Nietzsche said, the shit's gonna hit the fan. It's gonna take hundreds of years to step back and regroup.

[00:29:21] It's probably gonna be ugly. But his optimistic conclusion is sometimes out of the smoldering heap of the rubble of cultural disintegration comes radical transformation that is better for all of us.

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[00:29:39] **Nate Hagens:** So does tear management theory and the broader, discourse that you're teaching and have been studying, does it explain.

[00:29:48] Religion. I forgot who said it, but the difference between an atheist and a Christian is a Christian, doesn't believe in 2,999 gods and an atheist just goes one further. But if there are 3000 cultural stories of a supreme being. It almost argues that as religion is, a cultural response to recognition of death because it keeps, at least conceptually, psychologically in our endocrine cascade and our homo hormones, it keeps life alive and suppresses that feeling ab.

[00:30:26] **Sheldon Solomon:** Absolutely. I think this is important, a few things. One is that, By the way, I'm not a scholar, I'm a dishwasher who read a few books, but my understanding is that the original Latin word for religion means to bind. and a dead French sociologist Emil Durkheim, he said, look, there was religion before there were gods.

[00:30:54] It wa it was existential apprehensions that we weren't quite aware of yet that kind of drew us together. And that at our best religion provides a common means of connecting with our fellow humans. That offers us a sense of encouragement. And I'm emphasizing the courage, and understanding that there are things that stand under us that give us, kind of a foundation for psychological equanimity.

[00:31:28] So that's one point that I think is important, and that is, religion is central to human affairs. It has been here longer than just being a means of death, transcendence, or denial. But that's clearly the case today. And I say that on empirical grounds because, our research, the way that we study Becker's ideas, is to, remind people.

[00:32:01] That they're gonna die. And sometimes we do that in the lab. We just give 'em a piece of paper and say, write down your thoughts and feelings about

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dying in control conditions. We ask people to write down their thoughts and feelings about something unpleasant but not fatal. You know, you're in a car accident and you lost a leg, need a, root canal, but there's no anesthetic.

[00:32:25] You failed to test. so that's what we do. Sometimes we remind people they're gonna die. Other times we go outside of the web, we stop some people in front of a funeral parlor and other people a hundred meters to either side. And our thought is, if you're in front of a funeral parlor, death is on your mind, even if you don't know it.

[00:32:45] Alright. And then back to the lab. We bring people in, we have 'em read stuff on a computer screen and while they're, doing that, we flash the word death for 28 milliseconds. It's so fast that you don't even know that death is on your mind. Well anyway, when we do that, religious. People are, become more religious, they become more confident in the existence of God and in the efficacy of prayer, right?

[00:33:17] And then there's another paradigm, where we piss on people's beliefs. And so, in an experiment, we didn't do this one, but if you show Christian fundamentalists, passages in the Bible that are logically inconsistent, that makes unconscious death thoughts come more readily to mind. And so it's on those grounds that we would argue that religion serves a death denying function.

[00:33:49] But let's be clear that doesn't mean that's all it does. Alright, but one more thing and that is that atheism is a religion also, with all due disrespect. To Sure. The people, that claim that the religious people are deluded, but they have an undistorted conception of reality. that just happens not to be the case.

[00:34:13] When you remind an atheist that they're gonna die, they become more convinced that there's no such thing as God. I, but even more, there's a, oh, I can't remember where the guy is now, or even his name, but, did an experiment. no

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atheists in the foxholes. when atheists are reminded that they're gonna die, they, they don't believe in God.

[00:34:41] They say, but if you measure religiosity. Unconsciously, they actually become more connected to things like supernatural and heaven. So even atheists, we would argue they're not seeing the world as it is. They have just embraced the cultural construction of reality that assumes that there is no deity. And my point is that, atheism I is just a superficial unsubstantial.

[00:35:14] And without being fortified by a lot of other ethical and, psychodynamic principles, is a really thin rule to obtain and maintain a, sense of self-esteem and psychological security more broadly defined.

[00:35:33] **Nate Hagens:** You know, I just am grateful that somehow I've arrived at this job. This is my job to meet fascinating people like you and talk about this, like the tapestry of who we are as a species and what we're doing in the world.

[00:35:47] It's just fascinating. So the mutual friend we have, Dr. Sarah Wolf, was telling me about some terms that are underneath the body of work, mortality. Salience. Yeah. And, mortality prime, yeah. Priming. So, I know you're a psychologist, not a neuroscientist, but when we get a mortality prime, first of all, define what that is, and second of all, like what physiologically happens to us.

[00:36:13] Yeah.

[00:36:13] **Sheldon Solomon:** Awesome. Okay. So mortality prime or mortality salience. That's just the piece of jargon that we use for when we remind people that they're gonna die. And our experiments were, we're social psychologists studying attitudes and behavior. And so at that level, what we think we have demonstrated rather convincingly is that when you're reminded that you're gonna die, you clinging more tenaciously, to your cultural worldview.

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[00:36:45] You make efforts to enhance your own self-esteem and to, and you also fortify your relationships with significant others. Alright, but now back to your question though, and that is, what are the neuro anatomical biochemical underpinnings of mortality salience, in my estimation, the most interesting and important work based on terror management theory?

[00:37:16] Today is not by us. You know, we're on the cusp of retirement. I'll see you next time in Florida on the shuffleboard court. but anyway, there's these Israeli neuroscientists who have demonstrated very convincingly, that death reminders have a unique, and common neural pathway that. Any kind of intervention that serves, to make us better able to manage existential anxieties, without, having, malignant effects thereafter, they modify, that neural pathway.

[00:38:03] We are now looking at the level of single neural responses to death reminders and, finding that it is very peculiar and unique to death.

[00:38:18] **Nate Hagens:** So you, said there were three things. The cultural, we, link and lean into the cultural worldview, the, into the culture. And then the, we boost self-esteem.

[00:38:28] Yep. And then, loved ones. Yeah. Loved ones. But the culture, the cultural worldview, there's not just one, right? Yes. There's, so we, link to the one that we self-identify with. Absolutely. So it's like heading a turbo boost. like you, said earlier.

[00:38:43] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah, absolutely. And this is critically important as we move forward because it does suggest.

[00:38:50] That if we want to think about modifications of human attitudes and behavior in light of Becker and terror management theory, that one way to proceed is to modify our humanly constructive cultural worldviews. So, just to

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give some examples, we did an early experiment where we just wanted to see if people who, describe themselves as conservative or liberal, will they respond differently to death reminders.

[00:39:29] So anyway, the word liberal means tolerant and open-minded. and conservative means to preserve what currently exists. people who identify as conservative, this is not a pejorative judgment, it's just a. Declaration of fact, they're not all that concerned about disparaging people who are different than themselves.

[00:39:53] But anyway, sure enough, we, we reminded conservative and liberal participants that they're gonna die. and then we asked them to make judgements of other individuals that varied in similarity to them. And what we found is that conservatives reminded of death. They liked conservatives more, and liberals, less liberals reminded that they're gonna die, liked everybody more.

[00:40:20] Right, because it's tolerant and open-minded. That's profound. It is profound. But the only thing that's profoundly disconcerting is that political orientation is largely a genetic inheritance. And so if you're identical twins separated at birth, you know, one's reared in Germany during World War II and the other whatever in Hawaii, if one twin is liberal, the other is also likely to be, it's not a hundred percent.

[00:40:49] But, so my point with regard to that is that, we're not gonna be able to just tweak somebody's. Political orientation. This is just to show that if you've got a different worldview, when you're reminded you're gonna die, you're gonna go in different

[00:41:05] **Nate Hagens:** directions. That has huge implications because you add that onto the algorithms and the polarization and the social media and, it's when we get mortality prime, which we get every day in the news today.

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[00:41:21] It's like a turbo boost putting us towards our tribe and against the other tribe. Yeah. No, brilliant. I

[00:41:28] **Sheldon Solomon:** really like, how you put that, to, you know, and again, to be silly, but you just said it, we are marinating, in death anxiety, both conscious A and unconscious. We've got the climate, melting before our eyes, or rather just changing in a radically

[00:41:50] **Nate Hagens:** uncertain way.

[00:41:52] But when it's changing in a radical way, especially a young person can imagine Yes, in our mind the melting in their lifetime or whatever else they imagine. That's right. So we got

[00:42:03] **Sheldon Solomon:** that. We got, we're in the aftermath of the pandemic that, that with the likelihood of another one, we're in the middle of global.

[00:42:12] Economic instability. the degree of armed conflict is rather high. And, I think this is particularly relevant for environmental issues, even if it doesn't seem that way. we're in the midst of a transformation around the world from democracy to fascism. It has happened before. It's happening now, but your theory explains why maybe precisely so.

[00:42:43] And so we can go back and talk about all these things. Let's start with the fascism maybe, because I can't think of anything more pressing right now and it's not a political argument. you know, we can have that discussion, another time. But, you know, we just had. President Trump, I don't know if it was yesterday or the day before, you know, declaring, climate change to be a con.

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[00:43:14] And it turns out, is it Eve Darien Smith? Do you know a book called Global Burning? it was written a year or two ago, and it's by, an environmental scientist in California. And her point is that fascism and environmental catastrophe go together. The countries that are doing the best. To adapt to environmental circumstances are functional democracies.

[00:43:43] and the ones that have no concern whatsoever, for managing the climate are, fascists. Now, let's remember Mussolini defined fascism. he said, let's call it corporatism because what it really is, it's when immoral, and corrupt politicians combined with immoral and corrupt business people whose sole goal is to maximize what is a fundamentally meaningless abstraction.

[00:44:21] And that's money. Not that it doesn't have enormous power. Yeah, That is what is burning the planet. Right? So back to term management theory. Becker said in his book, the Denial of Death, there's an entire chapter about Hitler. And Hitler was elected, in the 1930s without Russian interference, after saying that he was gonna make Germany great again.

[00:44:46] and Becker follows a dead sociologist Max Weber, and it was Weber who coined the term charismatic leader. and he said, in times of historical crisis, we tend, and when I say we, I mean all of us humans. Humans, we tend to be more prone to mindless adherence, to ideological demagogues who often declare that they're divinely ordained to rid the world of evil.

[00:45:16] And, Becker just adds to that, that's because of death anxiety. Alright. How do we know that it's true? Well, that's where the experiments come in. I was in Manhattan on September 11th, 2001 when the World Trade Center, went down and that's when George W. Bush was president. And, the day before September 11th, he had the lowest approval rating in the history of American politics.

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[00:45:49] Three weeks later, after he said, we are gonna rid the world of evil. That he thought God had chosen him to lead the country during this difficult time. He had the highest approval rating of any American president, even among Democrats. So we're like, well, maybe Bush all of a sudden became an effective president or.

[00:46:14] Maybe Americans saturated with death, anxiety, were groping, for a psychological lifeboat in the form of a charismatic leader, right? Sure enough, we did dozens of studies, in control conditions, when we asked people to think about stuff, but, not dying. They didn't like George W. Bush and they didn't like his policies in Iraq.

[00:46:42] and they liked John Kerry, who was running for president in 2004, a lot more than Bush. But if we reminded them, they were gonna die first. They like Bush a whole lot more than Kerry. Alright, fast forward to 2015 when Donald Trump comes down the escalator declaring only I can fix it. And declaring that we've gotta get rid of the Negro, this horde, that is invading our country.

[00:47:17] Part of fascism I is, you've gotta have a designated enemy that you define as the all-encompassing repository of evil. So anyway, we did the same thing. he's running against Hillary Clinton. We do an experiment. Sure enough, our participants like Clinton more than Trump in a benign psychological condition.

[00:47:41] but they like Trump a lot more when death is on their minds. One more set of studies, just while I'm remembering it, and, that is that when Trump is doing his campaigning, it's almost always demonizing immigrants or terrorists or, or mosques or Islam. So. We did other studies where we just showed that if you remind Americans, or if you ask them to think about a mosque being built in their neighborhood, that makes death thoughts come more readily to mind.

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[00:48:23] If you ask Americans to think about immigrants coming to their town, that makes death come more readily to mind. If you ask Americans to think about terrorists, that makes death come more readily to mind, and that in turn increases support for Donald Trump. And so as Steve Bannon, his, you know, advisor and confidant points out that politics in our world, unfortunately has nothing to do with facts, reason, debate between individuals that's respectful based on the reconciliation of differences.

[00:49:04] It's all about. Keeping fear and anger. We gotta keep people engaged and enraged, and that's precisely what we're seeing every day. It's not an accident that every day the average American is barraged with emotionally charged disinformation in order to maintain a constant state of existential distress.

[00:49:32] **Nate Hagens:** I now have so many questions, so you could argue, well, people do argue, if you look at the stats, we are alive, when the average human and the average is definitely different than the median.

[00:49:46] Yep. is among the materially wealthiest in history. Yeah. But at the same time. We're, because of technology and because of the state of the world, we probably have more mortality primes in our daily life than people did during mid the dark ages or in ancestral hunter gatherer times. Right. That has huge implications.

[00:50:11] Yeah.

[00:50:11] **Sheldon Solomon:** Again, really important and very huge. And one more point, and this is awesome that I think's worth slipping in because it matters, and that's to be sure that. While we talk about, you know, the psychology of death, anxiety, that's important. You mentioned earlier, Nate, that we gotta look at it simultaneously from a cultural as well as an individual perspective.

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[00:50:40] And there's a guy named Peter Turin. Have you ever heard of that? He's been on my show. He is gonna be on again and times. Yeah. Alright. And I wish that I could intersect with him because I'll introduce you. Yeah. Because I believe that. Our work explains on the ground level

[00:50:56] **Nate Hagens:** better. Yeah. You both had come on, a round table.

[00:50:58] Let's

[00:50:58] **Sheldon Solomon:** do it. The result of his, because his point is we need to understand the structural factors that create the psychological conditions that we now find ourselves in. And, his argument he wrote in like, I don't know, he would know better, but around 2010, he's like, America's gonna collapse right around now.

[00:51:19] And it was just based on an equation. He's not a, political dude, he's just arguing, that income inequality and what he calls elite production is, the single most, important thing that we need to think about when societies are queing over because he points out that. There's always been really rich people and not rich people, but looking at a large body of evidence that I'm sure he talked about.

[00:51:55] He shows that if the rich are getting richer, but the poor are also benefiting, you know, the rising tide lifts all boats that societies can be very stable and, quite peaceful, but when problems arise, it is when the rich gets super rich and the poor either stay the same or get poorer. He calls that a miser and, he's like, yeah, people are miserable, but I don't mean just psychologically.

[00:52:28] He says they get shorter and, their lifespan gets shorter, and this is exactly what's happening to uneducated white. Men, in the United States, they're tinier and they're living less. Really? Yep. And they're also angry and depressed. And, it is under these conditions where we hit a psychological fork in the road.

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[00:52:52] Remember, the Great Depression was the result of massive income inequality. But we went with FDR and the New Deal. It didn't have to go that way. Republicans have always loved fascists. They loved Hitler. Hitler had a picture of Henry Ford in his office. Charles Lindbergh flew to Germany and thought the Nazis were great.

[00:53:18] and, but that's not what happened. FDR came to office. The New Deal. As Churchill describes, it was essentially a decision made by the government in co collaboration with the rich to redistribute materials in the form of progressive taxation and a social safety net. And that created the American dream, at least for white people.

[00:53:45] Right? We had about 40 years, where everyone was getting better. Well, that changed right around the time when Reagan was elected president. rips the solar panels off the White House. He's like, what good is the moon if you can't buy or sell it? And so back to the point, and that is that we are now in like a hundred years ago, income inequality is increasing, in an almost surreal way where like.

[00:54:21] Top 10 richest people on earth own half the planet. And so a lot of the misery that the, a lot of average people in western industrial societies are experiencing is the result of this structural oppression, that conservatives in power. Go to great lengths to try to deny that's what the whole anti woke thing is about.

[00:54:51] because woke is basically the realization that some of our individual misery is the result of structural factors that, are contribut. Two are being stressed and distressed. When we think about, well, how are we going to use these ideas to enhance the wellbeing of ourselves and humanity in general?

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[00:55:17] I think we have to think about it simultaneously. What do we have to do at the structural level and what do we have to do psychodynamically as individuals.

[00:55:26] **Nate Hagens:** Let me ask you this, is there a built-in expiration date in human history for periods of progressive ideals? Because once you reach a point, like right now, there was a PEW study a few weeks ago that showed the highest disparity in history.

[00:55:47] 78% of con conservatives think the country's on a right direction. 0% of liberals thought that the head in the right direction, so that 0%. Presumably is getting more mortality primes every day with their news feeds. Yeah. Or, their wider boundary awareness of, the world. And that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because some percentage of that population peels off and changes their values and priorities.

[00:56:19] So is there like a, time fuse, cyclically in history underpinning this terror management concept? Well, if we're gonna follow church,

[00:56:30] **Sheldon Solomon:** and then the answer would be yes. Okay. He's like, history is cyclical. Societies originate back to spangler. They have their stable moments and then they have the disintegration.

[00:56:42] I love how you just put it, because basically. We're all spinning down into the existential toilet, but in different directions. So we've got, the woke progressives becoming increasingly disenchanted, dissatisfied. Deceased put a hyphen between dis and ease. I said I wasn't gonna be political, but I can't help it.

[00:57:08] Their distress and dis-ease is because they actually see what's happening. But at the same time, we've got the Republican universe. Accelerated by contemporary media technology. What's happening in the United States is the

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same thing as what Hitler did in terms of propaganda. Same thing, that Putin did, in Russia, but those guys did it before social media, which has really lobotomized us in significant ways because we no longer as a society, have access to the same information.

[00:57:59] Right. So we've got one group seeing a certain depiction of reality, and then we've got another group. very few Americans, read newspapers. In fact, sadly, very few Americans read and most of them get their news, from these media platforms. And, here, there is a political asymmetry because conservative media platforms, according to the, like Annenberg School of Communication in USC, you know, Fox News is like 80.

[00:58:34] Percent, lies or misinformation? not so for the progressive end of things, they're about 20% of distortion. But back to your original point, yeah. We're each kind of just getting increasingly agitated, as the death reminders keep swirling around us.

[00:58:57] **Nate Hagens:** So across all platforms, this podcast has around a quarter million followers and boy they get mortality primes watching this show.

[00:59:06] So I'm wondering if that has an impact on the generally pro-social listeners and viewers of this program.

[00:59:13] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah, I think it does. The good news, even though it might not be, overtly pleasant, is people who subscribe to Prosocial Pro Environmental. Worldviews become even more committed to those principles when death is on their minds.

[00:59:31] That's Sarah. It's the turbo boost. Yeah. There you go. And that's where Sarah and her colleagues, they're trying to leverage these ideas into ways to bring out the best in us. So That's right. That's a good point.

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[00:59:43] **Nate Hagens:** So, does awareness of terror management theory affect an individual's physiological response to terror management theory?

[00:59:53] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. we've been wondering about that and hoping that some of the younger folks will, take that up as an empirical question.

[01:00:04] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[01:00:05] **Sheldon Solomon:** Because. You know, it's, to frame that question a little more broadly, you know, it's like, well, all right. Does the awareness of these ideas, could this put us psychodynamically in a position to be able to manage them better?

[01:00:26] And our hope is yes. you know, what our research shows is that Yeah. When death is on our minds, when we're really not aware of it, it's really, non-conscious death reminders, that, that inspire us to stick to our culture and, strive to increase self-esteem and so on and so forth. But there's a counterpoint and, that is that maybe these ideas can break us out of that cycle.

[01:01:05] you know, Kaus, Albert Kaus said, come to terms with death. Thereafter, anything is possible. You know, you have Socrates saying to philosophize is to learn how to die. And our hope I is that the term management theory ideas broadly defined can get folks to just metaphorically, if not literally step back and contemplate.

[01:01:36] More deeply, all of the world's religions and philosophy talk about what we would today refer to as mindfulness, a as a way to overcome these automatic defensive reactions in the service of death. Acceptance rather than denial.

[01:01:56] **Nate Hagens:** Have you done studies on that? Because a lot of the people I've had on the show are psychologists and I've been working with, friends

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and going to seminars on meditation and self-care and equanimity and spaciousness, and people that have those practices, I would speculate, are more immune to the.

[01:02:20] Mortality primes in front of a cemetery. And so if we have a cultural renaissance into these sort of practices, it makes us, it's almost like producing antibodies against this human, instinctual drive. Yeah. You got it

[01:02:36] **Sheldon Solomon:** Nate? you know, my first inclination, you know, 'cause I'm like a guy and I grew up in New Jersey and we're like experimentalists and my wife is a yoga instructor, my daughter, and they would talk about those things and I'd be like, you know, that's just like Woodstock like nonsense with Birkenstock clad people saying Here's what we should do.

[01:03:07] But the great news is that younger researchers, both in the term management theory area and in positive psychology, have demonstrated that's the case. and so for example, mindfulness and meditation eliminate defensive reactions to death. Reminders, so does awe, humility and gratitude, and that's like the tripod of the foundation, of Aristotle's conception, of flourishing.

[01:03:43] You know, awe is just the sense that the world is so big and vast, that it will always exceed our capacity to fully comprehend it. And while that could be perplexing, if not devastating, it turns out that under certain conditions, awe. Is awesome. in part because it gives us a sense of humility, which I always have to define for Americans because they see that as self-deprecation.

[01:04:15] humility is just the awareness that we are inconsequential specs of carbon based. Dust born a time in a time and place, not of our choosing here for a brief amount of time after which we move on. That also can be psychologically debilitating except people that have a sense of connection. With other people and the world around us on humility, bring out the best in us.

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[01:04:49] I, like the notion of cosmic connection. The Otto Rock dude said, look, if you're conscious, you're the temporal representative of the primal cosmic force. I don't even know what that means, except he goes on to say, look, we're all alive. That means that we're directly descended from the first living thing that makes us related and connect that related to connected with everything that's ever been alive is alive, or we'll be alive.

[01:05:19] And so this feeling of awe and humility in the context of cosmic connection also facilitates gratitude. And this is my point to Americans is like, yo, if you slept in a bed last night and had a meal today, there's a lot to be grateful for, no need for specialized training or you know, particularly sophisticated practice.

[01:05:47] How about just the awareness, that we are part of a world that has been kind and gracious to us. Alright, so that's like awesome. All of those things, all gratitude, humility, they reduce or eliminate defensive reactions to death reminders. But here's the big news. The neuro anatomical people that I told you about in Israel, they have shown that tweaks the neurons.

[01:06:17] So basically the pattern of brain activity that occurs when death is on our mind that is in a defensive state, those defenses melt or dissolve as a result of these kinds of interventions. And one more thing, psychedelics and don't want to go hippie days. but Timothy Leary set us back 50 years by moving hallucinogens into the hippie world, because Stanislaw Groff in the 1950s saw psychedelics as a gateway, to, existential maturity.

[01:06:58] And sure enough, even a single psychedelic experience from people that are not drug users and have never done it before has an enduring effect. The same as all gratitude and humility, and it operates on the same neural pathway. I find this very exciting, that there now appears to be convergent evidence at all levels.

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[01:07:24] Attitudinal, behavioral, physiological, suggesting that the way that we manage death anxiety will ultimately determine, you know, whether we're gonna bring the best or the worst out of us.

[01:07:39] **Nate Hagens:** That's so fascinating. Is there a, time decay element in the mortality prime? Like you did the cemetery example Yeah.

[01:07:47] Or you flashed the 28 milliseconds death, but if you don't do that for six hours, are people back to their baseline and if they get it every single day on CNN or Fox News or whatever, what do you have to say about that?

[01:08:00] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah, nothing yet except it's an extraordinarily important question, without sounding defensive.

[01:08:07] when I talk about our work, I, say, look, we spent 40 years basically just trying to establish that death matters. And in epistemological terms, do you know the Kon guy, the structure of scientific revolutions? Yeah. Yeah. You know, again, I don't wanna sound pompous, but I think what we did is what Kon would call a paradigm shift, because our work demonstrated that you can study existential matters experimentally.

[01:08:43] But Koon's point is, you know, maybe that inflates your head a bit, but the real work he called normal science. And that's after you've established something. Now go do the real work, which is to figure out all of the parameters in the context of your basic point. So we've demonstrated that death reminders have an effect.

[01:09:09] Now the next step is how long, how much under what circumstances? And as I say to my young students, yeah, now you need three PhDs to do this stuff. You know, you need one in, neuroscience, you need another in existential

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psychology and a third one, in experimental methods. But luckily that doesn't have to happen.

[01:09:36] But we need larger teams of interdisciplinary scientists, willing to engage at these levels. That's why my connection with Sarah over the decades has been so interesting and I hope prosperous. So

[01:09:52] **Nate Hagens:** what,

[01:09:52] else is, from a research curiosity perspective, like how could this be applied to the betterment of humanity in the biosphere, applying tear management theory in an interdisciplinary way?

[01:10:08] What other important research questions, even if there's speculative and, out there, are, you rolling around in, your mind?

[01:10:19] **Sheldon Solomon:** Really fine question. most of them are the ones that you've already rolled out. Like I, I'm finding, the kind of mindfulness, awe, humility and gratitude to be very important.

[01:10:40] There's another, group of folks, they, have a word. I think their term is experiential appreciation. And again, I hate that we have to use jargon to get ideas out there, but they're like, okay, I get it. We spend a lot of our time as sentient humans groping for a sense of meaning, but they're like, I don't know if, you have kids and you watch what they're up to.

[01:11:18] They're not in any pursuit of existential depictions of reality. We have a 3-year-old granddaughter that we see every week and, she's just at her best. You know, when nothing bad is happening, just completely and exuberant, engaged with whatever she happens to be doing. And so these guys have done studies with adults showing that there are some people who are just generally pleased.

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[01:11:56] With whatever they're doing. Yeah. Like, that's my goal. It's like, you know, I used to think that terror management theory has helped me come to terms with my anxieties. I've been disinclined to die since I was eight. my grandmother died that day. I'm sitting there mourning or loss, and I'm like, oh, wait a minute.

[01:12:17] That means my mom's gonna get old someday. And I was like, oh, And then I was like, oh, wait a minute. That means I'm gonna get. Someday. Well, anyway, I buried that one under the psychological bushes for a couple of decades till we found Becker. And then we've been doing this term management stuff for 40 years.

[01:12:37] And people ask me, well, has this helped you come to terms with death? And I used to say yes. And then I'm like, wait a minute. no. In fact, this has been a 40 year intellectual distraction, by devoting my attention to the production of scientific papers. In order to establish the merits of these ideas, I have successfully avoided, for the most part, the really direct confrontation with mortality that I've only recently, well, let's say since the pandemic ha have, come to a hope.

[01:13:16] Better approximate and my thought along those lines is, yeah, well, I'm proud of the work that we've done and I like it if somebody said, oh, we read your book, and we thought that was cool. But I also like it when it's a beautiful day and I get a face full of fresh air when I'm walking a dog around the block and, my goal.

[01:13:40] Is for those to be equally rewarding,

[01:13:45] **Nate Hagens:** existentially

[01:13:46] **Sheldon Solomon:** and

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[01:13:46] **Nate Hagens:** experientially. Let me ask you this, you mentioned your granddaughter, so you mentioned that terror management theory, when we get a mortality prime, it's like pushing a turbo boost to be more tribal. Yeah. And all that. But what about for people that have children and grandchildren that, that get a mortality prime?

[01:14:05] Is it a double mort? double, absolutely. Turbo boost because they're not only, they're thinking about their loved ones. Yes.

[01:14:11] **Sheldon Solomon:** Double up on that. Excellent. There's studies by, other researchers. yeah. You remind, young adults that they're gonna die and you ask them, how many kids do you want Death reminders.

[01:14:28] They say they want more kids. They want 'em earlier.

[01:14:32] **Nate Hagens:** If you have, if you're primed by a death reminder, you want more kids than one 'em earlier. More kids earlier. But that's not what's we're seeing though, because yeah, that's not

[01:14:39] **Sheldon Solomon:** what we're seeing now. So I have to correct this 'cause this was back in the day.

[01:14:43] Okay. Yeah. More kids earlier and more likely to name them after yourself. If not your name, a name starting with the same letter as your name. And so that suggests that part of the impetus for biological reproduction, is a symbolic immortality. But that has changed, I would say since the beginning of this millennium, where death reminders now have the opposite effect again, at least for people who are seeing the world as it is now.

[01:15:18] I don't know if there's any research, but you just gave me an idea for a great experiment because as you know, folks in the United States who subscribe,

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to the, right wing ideology, I bet if you remind them of death, they'll say they wanna have more kids, because that's what they're being encouraged to do.

[01:15:39] Whereas I think people on the progressive end of things will say they wanna

[01:15:43] **Nate Hagens:** have less kids. Whoa. I kind of believe that. I mean, I did too. Do the study, Sheldon.

[01:15:49] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. And when I do, you're the co-author because No.

[01:15:52] **Nate Hagens:** The idea is what matters. I think that's important. So can you speculate if in a hypothetical world, people exercised and meditated and did yoga and spent time in nature and understood reality and had what, bill Plotkin says, reached ecological adulthood and they were aware of reality and they're, what, mark Gaffney would say they were post tragic.

[01:16:22] Yeah. And therefore the terror management theory, which is this species wide homo sapiens phenomenon from the dawn of our species, or at least once we recognized they died, I'm gonna die. Yeah. if we. We're in that space, all of humanity. What can you speculate as an expert psychologist on this, what would be the behavioral, individual and collective responses to that state?

[01:16:49] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. My hope would be that it would bring out the best in all of us. Again, what some folks point out is we're a very young species. You know, we're still in diapers, metaphorically,

[01:17:02] **Nate Hagens:** the average mammal lives about a million years. So we're 30% through Yeah. If we're the average.

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[01:17:08] **Sheldon Solomon:** and what that means is that, there's at least a possibility.

[01:17:13] We're not saying there's gonna be a radical change in human nature, but. The work so far, which suggests that there are these psychological states that, allow us to be transformed from efforts to deny death, to accept death, do alter our basic stance towards life and each other. And yeah, the hope would be, that there would be consequential benefits and that it would happen simultaneously at the individual as well as the social level.

[01:17:55] And my view is I don't see any one solution. I think we gotta go bottom up and top down at the same time.

[01:18:02] **Nate Hagens:** So you, mentioned, the overlap with Peter Turin's work and you mentioned kind of the strong man political, I'm afraid of death, so I want someone to, manage it. But there are there other behavioral aspects that emanate from this?

[01:18:19] For instance, we live in a consumerist culture and when we're stressed, we order something on Amazon to be delivered. Yeah. Are there other aspects of, being primed by mortality salience?

[01:18:32] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. you know, again, on the negative end of things, when death is on our mind, 'cause we do live in a consumer culture.

[01:18:41] God is dead, but Cassius King, you know, everything in nature. Is, perishable, and therefore there's a limit to how much of it we want. It's like a John Locke point. He's like, Hey, you might like apples, but after your 10th one, you're like, I've had enough. You might like pizza, but I've had enough, you know, anything.

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[01:19:10] beer, sex, there's finite limits, but money as an abstraction. We have an insatiable

[01:19:19] **Nate Hagens:** desire for, in my presentations and, lectures, I call money the most intense, super normal stimuli of all.

[01:19:27] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yes. Could not agree more. I think it is. A linchpin if we don't attend to the fact that money is a primary means of psychological security.

[01:19:43] We have an insatiable desire for it and that, the unbridled pursuit of it will guarantee that the planet will dissolve. So I also see that, yeah. As, one of our biggest problems, and again, we know it from evidence, when people are reminded that they're gonna die, they say they need more money to feel well to do.

[01:20:08] they spend more money on stuff that wait,

[01:20:12] **Nate Hagens:** when you're primed with you're gonna die or any indirect cue that we get in the media. Yep. It triggers, a desire for more money slash power slash security and comfort and all that.

[01:20:25] **Sheldon Solomon:** Absolutely. You say you want more money, you say you wanna buy more stuff, not a toaster, a Rolex or a Porsche.

[01:20:33] You are willing to destroy natural environments in order to increase profits when we're reminded of death and just asked to draw a picture of money. We draw it bigger as this money looms larger on our minds. Right? Here's the, unbelievable one. They, the Polish psychologist working with my buddy Tom, they did a really simple study.

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[01:21:00] They gave some people some money and they said, here, take this and count it. They gave other people some pieces of paper and they said, here, take this and count it. Alright. Then you don't get to keep anything. They're like, gimme the money back, gimme the paper back. And then they measured death, anxiety.

[01:21:19] Just having money in our hands reduces death anxiety, and I think this is. Really important. So when death is on our minds, we become even more, in terms of our insatiable desires, for money and stuff. And so here we are, in, a world, where unfortunately we really are, you know, we're surrounded by death reminders that are making us even more mindless devotees to the acquisition of stuff.

[01:22:06] And, that may not end well. that's, I think an important consideration.

[01:22:13] **Nate Hagens:** This is super fascinating. I'm shocked. That it's taken this long for us to meet and talk. Me too. But this all, no,

[01:22:24] **Sheldon Solomon:** this cuts both ways because, this another Becker, Ernest Becker point that I do think is important. So he's, writing the book The Denial of Death in the 1970s.

[01:22:35] And he's like, you know what everyone's saying I gotta find more truth. And he's like, no, I think we have a lot of truth. but we need to connect it. We've got all of these different disciplines in their own silo. And if we were able to step back and collaborate and coordinate, what he argued is that we will find an intimate connection, between these most prominent ideas.

[01:23:07] And then, and only then will we be able to do something about it. I, do, without sounding all too political, I do like the argument that it's not like somebody's sitting in a chair someplace saying, let's keep things the way they are,

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but there is a natural structural tendency to wanna maintain institutions in their current form.

[01:23:29] Yeah. And the best way to do that is the intellectual isolation and differences in academic disciplines that keep. These kinds of conversations from happening.

[01:23:40] **Nate Hagens:** So in a moment, I'm gonna ask you, for advice to the listeners on how to deal with their own mortality and, get to this, post tragic aware of TMT, but in a benign way.

[01:23:55] But first, let me ask you, as an expert on this, what would be some broad arc recommendations at the cultural and institutional level to better, I don't know, suppress or, muzzle or, modulate this very human, like almost by the definition of who we are as humans. This is part and parcel of how we got here.

[01:24:22] Absolutely. So, how do we incorporate this in, a cultural evolution sort of way?

[01:24:28] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. Again, brilliant question. Alright. One way that I think is important to proceed is to.

[01:24:40] For lack of a better word, work on modifying existing cultural worldview to render them more, pro-social and, psychologically enhancing. so for example, my buddy Tom and, some of his colleagues have done an amazing study where they do what's called a common humanity prime. they just tell people, Hey, you know what, people have more in common than we are different.

[01:25:18] And that has the advantage of being true, as you know, right? we are a really homogeneous species genetically, right? Every human's derived from a small clump in southeastern Africa, or at least that was the, Hypothesis at one

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point. whether that's true or not, it is the case that, you know, an African in Africa and a European in Norway, they're still more genetically close than two monkeys sitting next to each other on a hill.

[01:25:53] Yeah. Yeah. And so it turns out that in an experiment, when you remind people of our common humanity and then they're reminded of death, they no longer hate people because they happen to be different.

[01:26:08] **Nate Hagens:** If, we proceed a mortality prime with a pro-social prime, it's a little bit of an antidote. Absolutely.

[01:26:15] **Sheldon Solomon:** What? What? That's awesome. Yeah. That is awesome. And this does not require, that we just dispose of existing worldviews. In other words, I say this to, you know, again, the folks that I teach, I'm like, all right, well, who's read the story of Genesis, you know, in the Bible? And, it used to be everyone were to raise their hand.

[01:26:41] Now, if I get a few, but no, no matter, but. You read the story of, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If you subscribe to the Judeo-Christian tradition, we all are common humanity. In other words, the, to incorporate that notion into existing world views is quite feasible. Similarly, one conception, of the Judeo-Christian tradition is, kind of narcissistically anthropocentric.

[01:27:16] In other words, we're created in God's image. God made all of the things, for us to dominate, right? He's like, you have dominion over all that swims, all that crawls, all that flies. and that's not a particularly great worldview, for improving the world that we live in. I like Bob Marley, if you know what life is worth, you will live years here on Earth.

[01:27:42] but there are also aspects of Christianity I like. sir Francis, or no, Francis Assisi, the, not sir, but what was, he wasn't the pope, but anyway, he was a Saint

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Monk or, yeah, monk. The monk, yeah, monk. But, he argued that we're not the, dominant entity in the world, rather we're the stewards. Of the world.

[01:28:06] God has put us here not to dominate everyone and everything around us, but to curate. And those, I think are shifts that if they could be peacefully executed, could move us in a direction where enough of us subscribe to worldviews, where death anxiety would make us do better things.

[01:28:31] **Nate Hagens:** Not only not do worse things, but to actually do better things.

[01:28:34] Those are two different statements. That's correct. Because,

[01:28:38] **Sheldon Solomon:** there are studies that show, that when we're reminded of death, we become more generous when we're asked to, donate to charity, for example. So this is a, I think a. On those grounds. I think that's one important direction is to think about the cultivation of worldviews, that are more

[01:29:04] **Nate Hagens:** sustainable.

[01:29:06] So let me digress just a little bit. Yeah. Sheldon, before I flew here yesterday. I recorded what I call, frankly, which is every Friday, most Fridays, I have my opinion on something in the world. And I integrated the last two podcast guests. We had an expert on psychopathy and then the human origins of, surplus and everything.

[01:29:27] And so I had this concept that the median human is actually much better, much more pro-social than the mean, because the mean, which is the average Yes. Is influenced by 1% psychopaths. Yeah. Like clinical psychopaths. And this isn't a modern thing. This has been That's correct. True time. And so it, it

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actually was a depressing podcast, but it made me quite hopeful because this is not who we are.

[01:29:59] We are being primed and pulled by this economic system. And so the upshot is. What's at stake is we are biologically correctly defined as apex predators. As an aggregate species. Yeah. But as individuals, not necessarily. And what's at stake now is we could be an apex custodian. Yeah.

[01:30:27] **Sheldon Solomon:** Lovely. I don't, I second that and I, think you are right on.

[01:30:34] there's work that suggests, as you pointed out, the psychopaths are a tiny slither of humanity and they are the ones most likely to become ideological demagogues. That take over societies and ruin them. The point being that these, kinds of psychopaths, it is their death anxiety that's driving them.

[01:31:04] But what that suggests is that if there is a way to dislodge to the, to defund. Disempower the people that are in those positions, right? If we can replace, Genghis Khan, with Mahatma Gandhi or Putin with Jesus, or fill in the blank, then we are in a position I would hope to radically alter the direction of humanity.

[01:31:37] **Nate Hagens:** But here's the rub, right? Because we're in group outgroup Yeah. And other evolutionary, restraints that we tend to blame on an individual. But what you're saying is a demagogue in a leadership position. You mentioned some political figures. Yep. We tend to blame them, but your story, your research suggests that those are the natural, outcome of our own individual aggregate human behavior.

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[01:32:07] They're like, it's, almost given our current. Non ecological adulthood maturity as a species, electing those and letting those people navigate to the top is kind of the default path.

[01:32:21] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yes, it is

[01:32:21] **Nate Hagens:** for now.

[01:32:22] **Sheldon Solomon:** No, that's correct. I, you got it. It's a comorbid dependency, between, different death denying entities, but yes, I You got it.

[01:32:35] That what we're seeing is not an aberration. It is a pattern of explicable phenomenon that I don't think can be explained without recourse to these ideas, but just to be sure that we understand each other. This is not to say that death anxiety explains. Everything. What it is to suggest is that if we don't consider it at all, we'll understand nothing.

[01:33:05] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Yeah. So do you have any more at the cultural level, speculation or advice? directionally,

[01:33:13] **Sheldon Solomon:** yeah. I mean, I, again, maybe it sounds corny, but you know the braiding Sweetgrass book? Yeah.

[01:33:19] **Nate Hagens:** Robin Wall Kimer. It's a

[01:33:20] **Sheldon Solomon:** great book. You know, here she is a Native American and a PhD biologist talking about, the possibility that we shift towards cultures of compassion a and gratitude and that.

[01:33:38] We step back from what is quite unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that's the linear sense of time where progress is inevitable. You

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know, that's what keeps us, frenetically on the hamster wheel of life rather than cultures that see the world as cycling and recycling and valuing people.

[01:34:08] Not so much for what they have, but rather what they give Similarly, is it, David Grabber? Do you know his. Yeah, I said the dawn of everything. I can't remember the other guy that he wrote that book.

[01:34:21] **Nate Hagens:** David Gro.

[01:34:21] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. Really awesome book because they provide historical examples. So, you know, we can have these talks and, a lot of my more conservative, entrepreneurial friends just say, look, that, that's, nonsense.

[01:34:39] You might be able to do that, in a small town, but there's no way that you can have a complex civilization that's hierarchically structured that can operate in that fashion. But the dawn of everything provides examples of societies. Where they seem to be thriving. They're mostly matriarchal in nature, but historically there have been worlds, whereas Mary Poppins put it enough, is as good as a feast.

[01:35:15] and where the procurement of self-esteem, is not based on being better than those around you or having more than everybody, but rather just the joy of connection and, communion. And so I do think there's a lot of things we can learn.

[01:35:36] **Nate Hagens:** What about at the individual level? What, advice do you have to the viewers of this show that are interested in coming to terms with their own mortality, partially for their own, wellbeing, but partially as a contribution to a more pro-social future?

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[01:35:52] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah. Well, back to the. Kao come to terms with death thereafter, anything is possible. And so at the risk of being annoying, it's like do something for some of us that might literally mean throw your phone in the toilet and take a walk outside with both of your eyes in the same direction. And see a tree for the first time, that's not mediated by the screen.

[01:36:27] So there's a lot of evidence that just movement in nature is one way. We talked about psychedelics, we talked about mindfulness. There's another movement that has to do with just, again, get away. I think the phone has damaged us to an amazing degree. When I see people at a restaurant, you know, four people at a restaurant, each looking at their phones, and then I'm eating with them and they're like texting and I'm like, who are you texting?

[01:37:01] I'm texting the person sitting across from me and I'm like, this. Is why we are in a disassociated, disconnected stupor. So there's some research that suggests that, just informal social acknowledgement. You know how sometimes you're like walking down the street and you see somebody and you know your eyes meet and you do that little I know, you know, we know that turns out to be psychologically uplifting almost as much as, therapy.

[01:37:34] And so here's another direction. Again, it sounds silly, but it's like reestablish connections with fellow human beings. The youth in the aftermath of the pandemic, have been bunkered with their faces in their phones, and we've gotta get out and restore our connection to humanity. We've got to, reengage with ceremonial rituals, not the superficial and senseless ones that most of us, have suffered through in, my world.

[01:38:10] but to remember that for most of human history, the best of us are in social. And communal settings. I think all of those things. And then back to the, the awe, humility and gratitude. there's other folks, my daughter, is a therapist

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and, she's big on the role of art, music and dance that, maybe we're overthinking these things.

[01:38:41] Maybe let's watch the little kids. And remember that there was a time, in our lives where just to be physically engaged, with ourselves in the world around us, that had many existential benefits. So that'd be one thing I would tell folks is, Hey, there are things that we can and should do. Another thing that I think is important.

[01:39:11] Is to note that we are indeed, at a crossroads in terms of where we're at, as a species. But this is not the first time, you know, so I, talk about these things and I'm like, wow. I get depressed as I hear myself saying it. I'm like, oh, wow. I gotta stop talking and run behind the grocery store and just start guzzling woolite or whatever.

[01:39:41] But then I'm like, but wait a minute. We've had existential crises before. you know, the, in the middle ages, the plague, that killed like half of the people in Europe. Evidently. Yeah, but as long as we didn't understand why it was happening, there was nothing we can do to fix it. We thought it was because of evil spirits, but people kept dying.

[01:40:06] But then we figured out that it was because, of germs or bacteria, and that led to the development of modern medicine. And so by the same token, if we're able as, individuals and as a group to step back. And look at how malignant manifestations of death anxiety, bring out the worst in us. You know?

[01:40:35] Then maybe we can avoid Robert J. Lifton and a psycho historian. He died a week or two ago, but he's like, look, we may have the ignominious distinction of being the first form of life to be responsible for our own extinction. Yeah. But then again, maybe not, you know, back to the Nietzsche thing, things may get.

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[01:40:56] Pretty bad. Alright, but back to Albert Kamo at the end of the plague. He said, in times of pestilence we learned that there is more to admire in mankind than to despise. And that's what gives me hope and, what I say to the youth, yeah, things are bad and they have been bad in the past, and we have made our way out of it successfully.

[01:41:24] I don't think we're being overly delusional by abandoning, that kind of motivated optimism. let's do something.

[01:41:36] **Nate Hagens:** What do you care most about in the world, Sheldon?

[01:41:39] **Sheldon Solomon:** You know, when I think about that, what I usually say is just I care. I think that. It persists a bit longer in some recognizable form, whether it's with humans or not, rather than just being polluted to the point where it's a Petri dish of, yeah, toxic pathology.

[01:42:14] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. I'm pretty much with you there. Yeah. If you had a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to you or your reputation or anything, what is one thing you would do to change human and planetary futures for the better?

[01:42:27] **Sheldon Solomon:** Right now, it would be, I've already mentioned this, it would be to defund and disempower the five or six people running earth that are in positions of power that if inhabited by less destructive people might make things

[01:42:49] **Nate Hagens:** better.

[01:42:50] If we don't address the terror management theory Yeah, underpinning the population, they will be replaced by equal.

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[01:42:58] **Sheldon Solomon:** Yeah, you're absolutely right. So, okay, so now I gotta back up and talk outta two sides of my face, and that would be to argue that, you know what? I do think we've gotta get rid of some of these psychopathic demagogues running Earth, but it's also incumbent upon us as individuals to become more existentially mature, such that we can be competent citizens, in a functional democracy.

[01:43:29] you know, if, there is clear evidence that educated and literate people are generally in terms of their attitudes and how they vote and behave, they're in favor. Of more pro-social egalitarian approaches to life. They're big fans of democracy. They understand that the primary value of education, that's why Thomas Jefferson started the University of Virginia.

[01:43:58] He knew that for democracy to work, you needed literate, individuals capable, of you know, respectful disagreement. So that would be my plea 10 years ago. And actually it remains the same today because the best way, to depose, at least in America. For the moment, folks that are directing us in unfortunate ways, would be through elections.

[01:44:30] And so that's my thing to the skim more students, where I work is, you should really read what the founding father said about democracy. The average American can't name the three branches of government or recognizes the necessity of the separation of powers in a functional democracy. So I think that would be good.

[01:44:57] So I'm clamoring for educated people devoted. To democracy who are existentially mature enough by virtue of how they manage death, anxiety. And maybe I'm being Disney like, but my hope is that if there were enough people in that psychological quadrant, that there'd be a lot of spontaneous and coordinated efforts to move us in good directions.

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[01:45:27] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for your time and wisdom and lifetime of research on this topic, which I am fascinated by. We'll have you back to be continued, my friend. Yeah. Thank you, sir. If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform. You can also visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes from today's conversation.

[01:45:54] And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett, Leslie Balu, Brady Hyen, and Lizzie Ciani.

[01:46:15] I.