

Two Faces of Death: Inside the Existential Mind

July 20, 2011

You're visiting a friend who lives on the 20th floor of an old, inner city, block of apartments. It's the middle of the night when you are suddenly awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of screams and the choking smell of smoke. You reach over to the nightstand and turn on the light. You are shocked to find the room filling fast with thick clouds of smoke. You run to the door and reach for the handle. You pull back in pain as the intense heat of the knob scalds you violently. Grabbing a blanket off the bed and using it as protection, you manage to turn the handle and open the door. Almost immediately, a huge wave of flame and smoke roars into the room, knocking you back and literally off your feet. There is no way to leave the room. It is getting very hard to breathe and the heat from the flames is almost unbearable. Panicked, you scramble to the only window in the room and try to open it. As you struggle, you realize the old window is virtually painted shut around all the edges. It doesn't budge. Your eyes are barely open now, filled with tears from the smoke. You try calling out for help, but the air to form the words is not there. You drop to the floor hoping to escape the rising smoke, but it is too late. The room is filled top to bottom with thick fumes and nearly entirely in flames. With your heart pounding, it suddenly hits you, as time seems to stand still, that you are literally moments away from dying. The inevitable unknown that was always waiting for you has finally arrived. Out of breath and weak, you shut your eyes and wait for the end.

Yipes. What an excruciating and terrifying way to go. If you're like me, you experienced a moment of panic reading that passage, but relax—you're okay. The above scenario is just an experimental manipulation, one meant to jump-start your existential mind.

Or one of your two existential minds—if an emerging theory is correct. Psychological scientists Laura Blackie and Philip Cozzolino of the University of Essex, UK, have been exploring the idea that we are all governed by two distinct existential systems, with distinct ways of processing the idea of death. Both have the power to change our attitudes and actions in important ways, but they work in very different—almost opposite—ways. One of these systems responds to the abstract concept of dying, so that even subtle everyday reminders of death and dying prime the mind to ward off existential terror. This system tends to bolster our already existing beliefs, both religious and cultural, as a way of affirming life. The second system is vivid, concrete, and highly personal; it is primed not by subtle and abstract thoughts, but by actually coming face to face with death. When this system is primed into action—as the above scenario is meant to do—our very personal sense of mortality can lead us to reexamine our priorities in life, to become more grateful, and grow in spiritual ways.

So, shoring up beliefs—or reexamining them. Which leads to a better life? The scientists ran an experiment to begin exploring this question. They recruited volunteers, ages 17 to 76, and primed them in different ways: Some answered open-ended questions about death, to remind them of their mortality in a general way, while others imagined they were trapped and dying in the burning apartment. Others, the controls, thought about going to the dentist—unpleasant but not life-threatening. Then they all read one of two “news” stories: Both were fake, but one said that blood donations were at “record lows,”

while the other said the opposite, that supplies were at “record highs.” Finally, they gave all the participants the opportunity to volunteer as blood donors.

The scientists wanted to see who became more altruistic, and the findings were an interesting mix. Those primed in an abstract way were more generous than the controls—but only when the need was high. This suggests that they were reaffirming the societal expectation that it is good to give to the needy—but with no sweeping personal epiphany. But those who were vividly primed by thoughts of their own death in flames were more generous even than those primed in a more subtle and abstract way. They were willing to give blood whether the need was high or low, suggesting a fundamental reexamination of values.

Why would this difference occur? One possibility, the scientists write in the on-line version of the journal *Psychological Science*, is that our abstract existential system has no tolerance for the gory details of death, indeed that abstract thoughts of death generate an aversion to bodily fluids, including blood. This aversion to blood is not strong enough to trump cultural expectation that we should help those in need—but it carefully metes out generosity to those truly in need. For those who have come close to perishing, blood is not something aversive, but the stuff of life.

Wray Herbert’s two blogs—“We’re Only Human” and “Full Frontal Psychology”—appear regularly in *Scientific American Mind* and *The Huffington Post*. His book, *On Second Thought*, will soon be out in paperback.