

Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality **Official Transcription**

Narration: "To have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die." (*Ernest Becker*).

Humankind has always been restless. Never satisfied with our physical limitations, we have always strived for more. With machines we conquer gravity and travel faster and farther than any other animal. We explore the heavens—the last great frontier—and we manipulate our own biology through medical science. In defiance of nature, we have manufactured the means to become rulers of the natural world. What is left to conquer... and are we satisfied? Since time immemorial we have battled our greatest limitation—one which seems to render our efforts to overcome and conquer... insignificant.

Every day we participate in a multitude of activities to distance ourselves from harm and death, but beneath the surface we are aware that these day-to-day strategies are doomed to fail. We will die eventually, and all of this will come to an end. Human beings find themselves in quite the predicament. We have the mental capacity to ponder the infinite; seemingly capable of anything, yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping, decaying body. We are godly yet creaturely.

Death is the end of the self. It is perhaps the ultimate mystery. We may never know what death really is and whether it marks the end of everything or, as many believe, the beginning of something else. Yet we do know that death is something to be avoided. What are we to do with death? And why do we fear it?

Merlyn Mowrey: If we don't even know what death is, then why should we fear it?

Irvin D. Yalom: The fear of death is absolutely ubiquitous; it's hardwired into us.

Merlyn Mowrey: For all the things that we don't know about what follows death, there are plenty of things we know about what precedes death to make it unwelcome and even seem like an evil interruption. And that is life itself.

Sam Keen: At the gut level, my feeling is "death is unacceptable." I did not sign that "contract." I looked at the "small print" and everything else—it's unacceptable. And that's just sort of a gut feeling in the sense that we love life. Death is a... death is an insult to our spirit. Added to that, of course, is the fear of the process of dying—which is different—of the indignity of it, of the loss of control, of the pain associated with it.

Irvin D. Yalom: Others will say what they fear is... is leaving everyone behind. Or they fear the sadness they will cause others.

Toni Riss: In August of 1999, my life was forever changed because I was given a diagnosis of Infiltrating Ductile Carcinoma, which is, as medical people know, a very common

form of breast cancer. I have gone into an advanced state of breast cancer with metastatic disease to the bone and I'm basically in the battle for my life right now. I don't know what tomorrow may bring. The average prognosis for a person with metastatic bone disease is two to three years. I'm now in year three, so according to medical statistics, I probably have only two years to live.

Tom Pyszczynski: We have capacities to think symbolically—to make one thing stand for another—which, of course, is the basis of language. We have the capacity to project ourselves in time and imagine things that have not yet happened. We have the capacity to think in terms of cause and effect. We have the capacity to reflect back on ourselves and look at ourselves from a perspective outside of ourselves. All of these capacities play a central role in the system through which humans regulate their behavior.

Sheldon Solomon: On the one hand, we have these minds that are capable of... of just really embracing the entire universe on all fronts, you know? We can think of the old days, we can think of five million years from now, we can think about what it would be like to be tap dancing on the Great Wall of China, while we stand here by the Golden Gate Bridge. So we can ponder our present circumstances in light of future possibilities and modify our behavior accordingly. All of that is tremendous and all of it is highly problematic because it renders us, as human beings, uniquely aware of the inevitability of our demise.

Dan Liechty: We then recognize that death happens to us, and I have to live with the knowledge that I will die. All organisms have a life instinct—an instinct to live. Our species has as much of that as any other species, but we also have the intelligence to know that we are doomed.

Merlyn Mowrey: Our survival presents a problem for us because we have the kind of consciousness that makes us aware, from a pretty early point in life, that our desire to live—to feed and live and survive—is ultimately going to fail.

Dan Liechty: That creates a cognitive problem for us. It creates a potentially enormous amount of anxiety that we have to do something with.

Sheldon Solomon: The explicit awareness that you're a breathing piece of defecating meat, destined to die and ultimately no more significant than, let's say, a lizard or a potato, is not especially uplifting.

Ron Leifer: Fear is a response to danger. Animals experience fear. But animals live in the present moment. When animals experience fear, they're experiencing a present danger, which is either a predator or a fire or some threat to their life. And the response to that is the "fight-flight" reaction; they either fight the predator or flee from the predator. We also experience fear when we are confronted by a present danger. We can anticipate future dangers and we can imagine future dangers. But the physiology is the same—the fight-flight reaction—because the body can't tell the difference between the past and the future. Anxiety is the anticipation or imagination of a future danger. So we're all anxious of the future because we all know we are going to die, we just don't know when.

Dan Liechty: We carry a burden of anxiety that no other species carries.

Archival film narration: “And one day, the heart just quits. Yes, he looked healthy.”

Narration: Since the beginning of recorded history, and likely long before that, the awareness of our own mortality has haunted us. We have gone to great lengths to forget, deny, and overcome death. From the ancient myth of Osiris to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, history is rich with tales of the afterlife and of men and women, kings and pharaohs rising from their graves and returning from the dead.

In 1839, archaeologists discovered, in a region that includes parts of modern day Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, one of the oldest known and most profound literary works. Inscribed on a series of tablets, which date back as early as 2000 B.C.E., we find *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; the story of an ancient Sumerian king who, inspired by the death of a close friend, embarks on a journey to find the secret of immortality.

A Chinese proverb instructs, "Treat death as life." In ancient China, Emperor Ching Shi Hwang-Di spent his life hoping to avoid death. He commissioned doctors to concoct potions and sent ships out to sea in search of islands where immortals supposedly lived. Fearful that his efforts might ultimately fail, he enlisted more than a half-million conscripts to build a magnificent underground tomb, surrounded by over seven-thousand life-size terracotta soldiers in military formation. Upon the emperor's death, living servants were also buried with him.

In every corner of the world, myths of immortality and the means to achieve it have been at the heart of people's most cherished beliefs. From magical elixirs to elaborate tombs furnished with spectacular treasures, there was no limit to humankind's imagination, and no possibility left unexplored.

So how are things different today? While many of these antiquated methods still exist in some form or another, our technologies are advancing exponentially by the year, yet our death anxiety is still as present as ever. In our efforts to combat death and the aging process, scientists have now developed the means to reverse certain aspects of aging, while others claim to be on the verge of solving the problem of death altogether.

Despite our technologies and desire for miracle cures, the reality of death has not changed. Infectious and parasitic disease will claim the lives of approximately 18 million people this year. Heart disease and other circulatory diseases will kill 16 million. Another 5 million will die in traffic accidents. In total, 54 million people alive this very moment will be dead in the next 12 months.

Merlyn Mowrey: Death anxiety pervades every bit of our human experience. In part, we respond to that anxiety by trying to feed ourselves in literal ways, and secure our safety

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