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Sheldon Solomon on Fear of Death

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David Edmonds: *Death: there's a joyful topic. Best avoided perhaps. Best not to talk about it. But maybe we're always thinking about death, sometimes in a subconscious way. Sheldon Solomon, with colleagues Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, has developed over many years a morbid fascination with death.*

Nigel Warburton: *Sheldon Solomon, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

Sheldon Solomon: Thank you so much for having me.

NW: *The topic we're going to focus on is fear of death. Let's just start by talking a little bit about how you became interested in the fear of death, as a psychologist.*

SS: Well, in part, I became interested because as a young child when I realised that I would someday die I found that a decidedly unwelcome realisation. So, I have a personal stake in these matters. And then, quite by accident, as a young professor, I ran into a book by a now-deceased cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker called *The Denial of Death*. And what Becker proposed is that humans are unique because we're the only creatures that know that we will someday die and that our death can occur at any time, that we can never control, and that we're basically animals - breathing pieces of defecating meat - no more significant than lizards or potatoes. And if that's all we thought about, according to Becker, we wouldn't be able to stand up in the morning. What he says is that the way that we manage death-anxiety is by embracing culturally constructed beliefs that give us a sense that we are valuable individuals in a meaningful universe. And, according to Becker, the fear of death underlies almost everything that we do but we're often quite unaware of it because it manifests itself in our need to preserve faith in our culturally constructed beliefs and, in a sense, that we're valuable individuals.

NW: *So you're saying that for Becker the fear of death is almost like a battery charging us with energy to do other things?*

SS: In fact, nicely done. He calls it the "main spring of human activity". Just like most of us are unaware of the internal dynamics of the engine that drives our car, we are equally unaware of what it is that impels us to do what we do every day.

NW: *Now, Becker was very influenced by psychoanalysis, I believe, and not an empirical psychologist like you. What seems to me distinctive about your approach is that you try to test some of the hypotheses that he put forward, and some more as well.*

SS: Yes, that's right. Becker won a Pulitzer Prize for his book but was literally ignored by academics. And when we first started talking about Becker's ideas it was not well-received: our first paper was rejected with a single sentence review: "I have no doubt that these ideas are of no interest to any psychologist - alive or dead." Eventually, colleagues just said *well you know, if you're to be taken seriously as academic psychologists well then you need to provide empirical support in the traditional scientific sense of the word.*

NW: *So, you have done that. Could you give an example of the kind of empirical work that you've done in this area?*

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SS: Certainly. It actually took us a while. At first, we were like - *wow, yes, how do we show this?* I mean, this is a bold claim: your beliefs about reality serve to deny death. What happened, frankly, is what often does in science and that's that we were the beneficiaries of a happy accident. We had a student who was in a death and dying class and in that class students were asked to write their own obituaries and to help them do that, they were given a little sheet with a couple of questions on it that were along the lines of: why don't you think about your thoughts and feelings associated with your own death. And when we saw that, we were like - *wow; well, let's see what would happen if we ask some people to think about themselves dying and other people to think about something unpleasant but not fatal.* And so, the very first study that we did in Tucson, Arizona was with municipal court judges. We had half of the judges think about themselves dying and the other half not. And then we asked them to set bonds - just an amount of money that an alleged criminal would have to post in order to not be imprisoned - and all we wanted to see was whether or not being reminded of death would alter the judges' evaluation of the case. And what we found astonished everybody, including the judges, because when not reminded of their mortality they set an average bond of \$50 US but when they were reminded of death, the average bond was nine times higher: \$455. When we asked the judges, *do you think that thinking about your own death, could that have possibly influenced your judgement?* They were mortified. They were like: *I will tear your heart out of your chest and show it to you while it's still beating before you die. There's no way that such a silly and superficially fleeting alteration in psychological conditions could have that profound an outcome.*

NW: *I mean, that is a dramatic difference isn't it? So what's your explanation?*

SS: Our explanation - very simply - is that judges embrace certain beliefs about what's right and wrong to the extent that - in this case the alleged crime was solicitation of prostitution - and to the extent that this is deemed morally dubious, that when we're reminded of our mortality what we do is to bolster confidence in our cultural worldview and that this should be reflected by being extraordinarily punitive towards the prostitute. But it does cut both ways. It's not only that death-reminders make us more unilaterally punitive. If that were the case, that wouldn't be all that interesting, because it also works the other way. After being reminded of mortality, people give a greater reward for someone who behaves in a heroic fashion. And I think that that's important. The general tenor of this research is that when people are reminded of death, it increases their affection for people who share their beliefs, while at the same time magnifying their hostility and disdain for folks who are different.

NW: *I know you've done some research as well on how thinking about your own death might actually affect the way you vote.*

SS: Yes we have and I also think that this is important and interesting research. Right after the terrible events on September 11 2001, we noticed that president George W. Bush's popularity went up considerably. The day before September 11th, he had one of the lowest approval ratings in the history of polling. And three weeks later, he was one of the most popular presidents ever amongst democrats as well as republicans. So, following Max Weber, the German sociologist who said that in terms of historical upheaval we tend to embrace what he called charismatic leaders - just larger-than-life figures - that often proclaim that they're divinely ordained to rid the world of evil, and in fact President Bush said that in the aftermath of September 11th. And so, we did a variety of experiments but I think the most potent one was five weeks before the 2004 presidential election when we asked registered voters in New Jersey who intended to vote in the election. We reminded half of them of their mortality, the other half of something unpleasant and then we just said *hey, secret ballot - who are you going to vote for in the election five weeks from now?* And what we found was astonishing. In the control condition, our respondents said that they intended to vote for Senator Kerry by a four to one margin. However, after being reminded of their mortality, a different group of participants said that they intended to vote for President Bush by an almost three to one margin. And once again when we talked to the participants

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afterwards and when we said *well, do you think that being reminded of your mortality may have influenced who you said you were going to vote for?* they all denied that that could even be possible. But the fact that they were randomly assigned to conditions suggests that that was precisely what had happened.

NW: *And are you talking about quite a large sample size here?*

SS: Well, in this case, that study had a decent sample size: forty or fifty participants. But we replicated that same phenomenon in more than ten different experiments all over the US. It is an important point to note that every one of the empirical findings that I have alluded to has been replicated not only by our own research teams but, more importantly, by independent researchers who are not connected to our laboratory group.

NW: *That is a very interesting issue because obviously there are many different potential causal factors at play and teasing out what precisely the causes were in any particular situation must be incredibly difficult.*

SS: Yes, I believe it is. Academic psychology, the social sciences, are in diapers metaphorically relative to the natural sciences. We're doing our best to use rigorous scientific methods in order to draw very firm causal conclusions about human affairs. But, you know, it's like shining a flashlight at the moon and saying then *oh, now I can see more*. And so, for the moment, we have to rely on several things. One is replicability; you know, if it just happens once it doesn't count. Cold fusion happened once in Utah - well, that doesn't matter. So, the findings have to be replicated. Secondly, whenever possible, we have to use different manipulations and so when we remind people of death sometimes we ask them questions *how do you feel about dying?* Sometimes we interview them outside, either in front of a funeral parlour or a hundred metres to either side. And I think most impressively, personally, is when people don't even know that death is on their minds. We flash the word death on a computer for twenty-eight milliseconds - so fast that you don't see anything. What we argue is that no single study is definitive and what we're trying to do is to triangulate on the so-called truth by repeated demonstrations, multiple manipulations of what we call mortality salience, and one more factor and that's to have as many control groups as possible because some people say, and they're right, *well how do you know it's death as opposed to other unpleasant events?* And so, what we've done is to compare being reminded of one's death with thirty or forty other unsavoury possibilities: think about being in a car accident and having your leg chopped off; think about going to the dentist and having a root canal and they've run out of anaesthetic; think about giving a speech in public and vomiting on the stage and being embarrassed and ostracised. And every time, so far, reminders of one's mortality produce qualitatively different effects, and I believe this is essential.

NW: *Do you think with your experiments on voting practices that you actually influenced the way people voted or was that a fairly ephemeral effect of the reminder?*

SS: I would guess that it is a fairly ephemeral effect, but it doesn't follow from that that the finding is inconsequential. So, for example, in the 2004 presidential election Senator Kerry was ahead in the polls four days before the election and then Osama Bin Laden released a tape threatening to drop some bombs all over the West. That's an even better manipulation of mortality salience than anything we could have done in the lab. And so, yes, our view is that these effects may be fleeting but it doesn't follow from that these findings are not of profound practical significance.

NW: *I can imagine people in advertising discovering this phenomenon, being very intrigued as to how they might be able to use this knowledge to affect what people buy.*

SS: Very good, and I think - I don't mean this cynically, although I think I do sort of - advertisers know what they are doing. It did not take long after we started doing our research for very clever researchers to see what happens when people are reminded of their mortality in terms of their consumer preferences and behaviour. And so, there's some fantastic studies that have shown that when Americans are reminded of their mortality

and you ask them about their fiscal aspirations, they say *yeah I want to be richer*. And when you ask them: *well, what kind of products would you like to buy?* They're like: *no, I don't want a can of Pringles and I don't want a cheap Chevy Metro; I want a Lexus and I want a Rolex*. What this does, at least in our mind, is to show that in part Americans, and I suspect people all over the western world where now we're just surrounded by materialism and conspicuous consumption, our argument is that that's driven in part because money has become a secular substitute for God. People think: *wow, if I just have enough money I'll be able to persist a little bit longer and ideally in perpetuity*.

NW: *Have you done experiments looking at the different kinds of attitudes people have to death, because some people are terrified of death and some people are quite glad that death will come as a relief? And I'd imagine they would act differently when reminded of their mortality.*

SS: Yes, I suspect that that's the case, but that's where we're now focusing our attention. What we started out to do was to just show that these death-reminders have potent effects on attitudes and behaviour and I think we've done that. And now the real work can commence which is the nuances: what are the personality variables that influence how vigorously and how defensively one will react? And we know some of those. We know that insecurely-attached and highly-neurotic people respond more defensively when they are reminded of death. But now, we're in the process, in part we're studying people who are terminally ill in hospice settings because we know that there has to be tremendous variation - that some people are more comfortable with the prospect of the inevitability of death than others. That's really what we want to get a handle on right now.

NW: *Some of these experiments that you've described are quite unexpected. I wonder where you actually got the idea for them from.*

SS: Yes, that's a great question. When you read science textbooks or psychology textbooks, you know it often appears as though we're sitting in our offices and it's just the result of a kind of a linear and rational thought process but the fact of the matter is that it's often quite accidental and some of our best ideas have been at restaurants or in the bowling alley. You know, once we were at a Mexican restaurant, dipping chips in hot salsa and then we saw the newspaper article about a cook who was arrested because he doused a policeman's eggs in hot sauce and we're like *wow that's great: let's use hot sauce as a measure of physical aggression*. And so, we did an experiment where we reminded people of their mortality and we gave them an opportunity to dole out any quantity of hot sauce that they'd like to someone who did not share their beliefs. And what we found is that they doubled the amount of hot sauce, and this is really quite remarkable. So, the answer to your question is that very often it's really only the boisterous and happy outcome of just us sitting around and bouncing ideas off each other.

NW: *Your experiments have mostly been done on Americans, so I wonder if there's a cultural factor at play here or whether this is some kind of universal that you've uncovered.*

SS: Yes, great question. Our claim, based on Ernest Becker, is that the fear of death is universal. That obviously begs, from an empirical perspective, the question of *well how do we know that?* So, two things: one is that what we call morality salience effects have now been obtained in more than twenty countries on five continents - even in non-western cultures. So, I do believe that this is important because it establishes that it's not an affectation of either modernity or western European civilisation. Having said that, though, like any psychological phenomenon, I think a lot more work needs to be done cross-culturally as well as developmentally across the lifespan.

NW: *There's almost a cliché about contemporary society - at least western society - we rarely see dead bodies, we don't mention death that much. Now, there's one reaction to that which is we ought to; we ought to have a*

memento mori to focus us on what's important. But some of what you've said suggests that maybe it's quite a dangerous thing to do to remind people of their own death.

SS: Good point. Our view is that what's dangerous are these fleeting reminders of death that get repressed and then manifest themselves in other ways - so like *I don't like people who look different than I do or I'm gonna vote for somebody who makes me feel comfortable or I want more money or I'm gonna drink or smoke more*. But that's very different than what a lot of the philosophers and theologians from time immemorial have done, when they have said, as Albert Camus did: "Come to terms with death. Thereafter anything is possible." So, my view is that it's not a good idea in the West to be a culture that really does try and brush death under the proverbial rug. We don't see dead people. All the old people in America I think are in Florida right now. We spend billions of dollars on cosmetics to avoid the appearance of growing old. I don't think that's a particularly healthy approach to death. So, even though it may seem quite counterintuitive, our argument is that if there's any credence to these ideas that what we ought to be doing, both individually and as a society, is to acknowledge that death-fears have a pervasive effect on human affairs and to just, metaphorically speaking, bring that out into the open - not so that we're perpetually preoccupied with our mortality but to spend enough time acknowledging the fact that we're transient creatures so that we can more deeply and fully appreciate the fact that we're alive.

NW: *Sheldon Solomon, thank you very much.*

SS: Thank you very much.

[ends]