

CHAPTER 4

LITTLE MURDERS: CULTURAL ANIMALS IN AN EXISTENTIAL AGE

Sheldon Solomon and Mark J. Landau

The greatest recent event—that “God is dead,” that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least whose eyes—the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, “older” . . . how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1887/1974, p. 279)

According to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971; 1973; 1975) and the terror management theory (TMT) he inspired (see chapter 2, this volume), humans cope with their mortality by maintaining the sense that they are significant members of a meaningful universe, and thus eligible for immortality—either literally through the heavens and afterlives central to most religions, or symbolically through noteworthy achievements, amassing great fortunes, having children, or being part of a great tribe or nation.

Difficulties arise, however, when personal predilections, social dictates, or historical conditions (or some combination of these factors) make it difficult or impossible to live up to prevailing standards or confidently subscribe to one's cultural worldview. People then employ a variety of coping strategies to blunt existential terror, including psychic numbing; adopting countercultural worldviews and lifestyles; deifying romantic relationships; exaggerated defense of mainstream religious and secular values; and reducing their conception of the world and themselves to exceedingly narrow dimensions.

Becker relied heavily on popular culture—especially novels, plays, and films—to develop and support his ideas. He frequently declared that Jules Feiffer's cartoons, essays, plays, and screenplays afforded the most penetrating and insightful literary depictions of how human beings grapple with universal existential concerns, and how such efforts to transcend death go awry in times of historical upheaval. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1971 film *Little Murders*,¹ written by Feiffer based on his play of the same name and directed by Alan Arkin. The film is a sardonic depiction of the psychological and behavioral fallout from the disintegration of the post-World War II "American Dream" in the 1960s.

Feiffer described *Little Murders* as a "post-assassination play," in the aftermath of President John F. Kennedy's death.² However, he also insisted that JFK's November 22, 1963 slaying was just the iconic exclamation point of an "era of gratuitous violence," the accumulated effect of a host of "little murders." In this chapter we analyze *Little Murders* from a Beckerian perspective. Becker showed that personality—the characteristic ways in which a person makes meaningful sense of the world and strives for a sense of lasting personal value—is given motivational force from an underlying need to buffer mortality concerns. He also catalogued in rich detail the common styles of thinking, feeling, and acting by which people maintain confident perceptions that they are valued contributors to a meaningful cultural drama. The overall effect of these achievements is that the reader cannot help but realize that we are all neurotic (to varying degrees) in the sense that we filter our conception of reality through the lens of our cultural worldview, and we organize our lifestyle around a limited range of culturally prescribed roles.

Little Murders achieves the same humbling effect. Its characters portray various forms of self-imposed obliviousness: people shutting off experience and desperately clinging to a narrow, inflexible range of perception and action. And yet we see that this is not a failure of adjustment but just the opposite: it is a necessary adjustment to their situation—a refusal to face up fully to the types of creatures that they are—that enables them

to function with equanimity. Although the film's characters represent extreme, ideal-typical portrayals of neurotic personality styles, they hold up a mirror to our own efforts to sustain meaning and positive self-views in our daily lives.

We unpack these claims by dwelling on convergences between Becker's catalogue of terror management strategies and the characters of *Little Murders*. In both works, moreover, we will see that although neurosis is normal, it is far from harmless. It can fuel antisocial behavior and undermine the person's self-determination and optimal psychological functioning. Yet, both the film and Becker's corpus offer a glimpse at a more authentic—or at least innocuous—strategy for managing terror, which we consider later on. But first a synopsis of the film.

Little Murders

The film opens with Patsy Newquist (Marcia Todd), a self-assured 27-year-old interior decorator waking up in her apartment on a typical day—rife with petty crimes, cacophonous street noise, unsolicited phone calls from a former lover and an obscene breather, power blackouts, and unsolved homicides. Watching an apparently defenseless and unresisting man being pummeled by thugs, after unsuccessfully trying to contact the police, Patsy takes to the streets to repel and disperse the goons—while the victim, Alfred Chamberlain (Elliot Gould), an emotionally detached, self-described pessimistic, apathetic, family-hating photographer who takes pictures of dog shit for a living, saunters away humming and fondling his cameras without bothering to defend or thank her.

Patsy confronts, castigates, and is subsequently attracted to the hopelessly hapless Alfred. Confident she can infuse him with her cheerful and optimistic conception of life, Patsy brings Alfred to dinner to meet the family: her father Carol (Vincent Gardenia), a cantankerous Archie Bunker-like lower middle-class bigot; her mother Marjorie (Elizabeth Wilson), a somnambulist Harriet-like (i.e., *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*) housewife; and Kenny (John Korkes), Patsy's younger, effeminate, histrionic, aimless graduate student brother. Hilarious antics ensue, including Marjorie flirting with Alfred, Carol and Kenny trading insults (about Carol's name and his physical weakness), Carol's redneck agitation at Alfred's militant apathy, Marjorie's mortification by Alfred's reference to his excremental images—all punctuated by power blackouts and phone calls from the breather, and then punctured by Marjorie's postdinner revelation that Patsy's older "dead brother Steve" had been "shot down in his tracks on the corner of Ninety-seventh Street and Amsterdam Avenue."

Back on the street, Patsy cajoles Alfred into agreeing to marry her, and calls the Newquists to convey the good news. Patsy's parents are delighted until Alfred grabs the phone and tells Mrs. Newquist to be sure to tell the minister not to mention God in the ceremony. Carol is outraged: "I'm going to have him arrested." Nevertheless, Carol helps Alfred and Patsy try to find someone to marry them without using God in the ceremony, brokering an unsuccessful audience with the stereotypically Jewish Judge Stern who delivers a withering antiatheistic diatribe.

Alfred and Patsy are ultimately married at the First Existential Church of Ethical Culture (after a call from the breather to a pay phone at the church), by Reverend Dupas in a profoundly funny (and yet extremely serious) service starting with the statement that: "There is so much sham about this business of marriage." All in attendance, except for Alfred, are mortified throughout (like the audience at the premier of "Springtime for Hitler" in Mel Brook's *The Producers*). Pandemonium then ensues at the end of the ceremony, when the Reverend insults Carol by proclaiming that he'd never heard of a male with that name; that he would not mention God in the ceremony despite taking a bribe Carol had given him earlier to do so; and making a public and very unsolicited reference to Kenny's homosexuality.

Back at the newlyweds' apartment, the breather calls again. Alfred is in fine spirits, but Patsy—demoralized for the first time—insists that Alfred go visit his parents in Chicago with a tape recorder and some questions to figure out why he is the way he is, instead of the way Patsy needs him to be. From their turgid academic psychobabble in response to questions about Alfred's childhood, it is clear that their parental indifference fostered his emotional detachment and stimulated his self-imposed exile from Chicago after high school.

Home in New York, Alfred plays the recording of his conversation with his parents for Patsy, and goes on to describe an experience he had after college as an antiwar protestor with an FBI informant that also contributed to his pessimistic and detached worldview. Alfred then reveals to Patsy that he is ready to change; to start to see the glass as half full rather than half empty; to start to feel; and to start to fight—and that his first real feeling was worship for her. Patsy is obviously pleased by this revelation, and embraces Alfred passionately—until a sniper's bullet from across the street shatters the window of their apartment, killing her instantly.

Bloodied and traumatized, Alfred rides the subway, barely noticed by the car full of passengers, back to the Newquists' house. An all-out siege mentality results; multiple locks are installed on the doors and steel panels on the windows for protection. Marjorie wanders around the house in

a dissociated state mumbling about the good old days, and returns from shopping with a bullet hole in her bag and tales of people getting shot in the other side of the building. Kenny hides in Patsy's closet. Alfred is in a catatonic stupor. Carol shaves and feeds Alfred in between visits to the local police station doling out bribes to detectives to solve his children's murders (even the breather calls to express his regrets).

Lieutenant Practice (Alan Arkin), a ranting, paranoid police detective, drops by to report he has made no progress solving Steve's murder (he cannot even remember that it was Patsy who just died), that the hundreds of unsolved murders in the city must be part of a vast conspiracy to undermine faith in law enforcement personnel, and inferring that the Newquists are implicated in this nefarious plot. This is the last proverbial straw for Carol, who pleads for his freedom in a bombastic tirade—clamoring for video cameras on every street corner, thrashing anyone who breaks the law (even minor offenses like cursing), lobotomizing poor people, and arming all decent citizens.

Carol's anguish moves Alfred to go for a walk and take some (nonfecal) pictures in Central Park. Alfred returns with a rifle that Carol helps him and Kenny load. Carol, Kenny, and Alfred then take turns shooting people on the street, including Lieutenant Practice. Inspired and invigorated by their murderous outburst, the men swagger back to the dining room joking, cursing, and throwing food at each other (*Planet of the Apes* meets *Animal House*). The film ends with Marjorie's serene observation at the dinner table that "It's so nice to have my family laughing again. You know, for a while I was really worried."

Cultural Animals in an Existential Age

"Patsy's dead brother Steve" is one of the major characters in *Little Murders*, although he never actually appears in the film. Steve is "perfect" by cultural standards. At the Newquist house, his bedroom is maintained as a virtual museum attesting to his youthful accomplishments. Marjorie beams with pride when Alfred admires Steve's picture in his baseball uniform, hyperbolically boasting that "He only pitched no-hitters." And she is no less effusive in praise of his heroic military service, bombing Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, Steve had "not an enemy in the world" and "a brilliant future in electronics" when he was murdered in an apparently random act of violence.

Steve's murder precipitated the shattering of the Newquists' faith in the American Dream, which was already on the psychological ropes after numerous economic, political, and religious blows in the 1960s that

undermined its credibility, including: the “white flight” to the suburbs; widespread corruption, poverty, and violence in the cities; rampant racism; wholesale disenchantment with traditional religion; controversial (in part because unsuccessful) military interventions in Korea and Vietnam—highlighted by the assassination of JFK on November 22, 1963 (the “Greatest Generation’s” September 11, 2001). The idea of America as a divinely ordained, historically unprecedented “city upon a hill,” “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” where peace and prosperity reign and bad things do not happen to good people (certainly not to war heroes who only pitch no-hitters), which had served as a long-standing bastion of psychological equanimity, had (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) “become unbelievable.”

Comfortably Numb: Tranquilization by the Trivial³

One way to manage the waves of existential terror unleashed by cultural disintegration is to resort to what Kierkegaard labeled as “philistinism.” Becker called this “normal neurosis,” which he defined as figuring “out how to live safely within the probabilities of a given set of social rules” and maintain a “low level of personal intensity” in order to “avoid being pulled off balance by experience” (Becker, 1973, p. 81). In *Little Murders*, normal neurosis is exemplified by Patsy’s and Alfred’s parents in scenes at the Newquist and Chamberlain households.

Marjorie Newquist takes psychological refuge in her role as mother and housewife, nostalgically longing for the “good old days” of flower-filled family picnics in the country with her parents, and poring over childhood pictures of her children. She spends her days at home, rarely venturing outside except to shop (and getting shot at when she does!), keeping Steve’s and Patsy’s bedrooms the same as when they were young, summoning the family to dinner with the spirited exhortation “Come and get it.” As she explained to Alfred: “I always said that to my children at mealtime. I’ve always found it a charming family tradition. I always say ‘Come and get it’ to my children. I dream of the day when I can hear Patsy say ‘Come and get it’ to her children.” Like the average individual, Marjorie adheres unreflectively to the dictates of her cultural worldview and the (gendered) social role assigned to her within its confines.

Carol, even before the kids’ murders, is struggling to acquire and maintain a modicum of self-regard as a vertically-challenged lower middle class American man shackled with a name generally associated with females (which he is repeatedly reminded of throughout the film). Like most Americans, he self-medicates via smoking, drinking, and watching television to blunt self-awareness and minimize self-recrimination for

his shortcomings. After a few drinks, a pack of cigarettes, and watching the nightly news punctuated with commercial banalities (“Fly Eastern. Number One to the Sun”), Carol blames the pacifists and the poor for any lingering psychological discomfort and personal dissatisfaction (“We have to have lobotomies for anyone who earns less than \$10,000 a year. I don’t like it, but it’s an emergency.”)

The Newquists are a fine caricature of urban “white trash” familiar to most Americans: uneducated, uncouth, uncultured, and uninteresting. In contrast, the Chamberlains are a pointed reminder that culture and refinement are no assurance of psychological depth, and can also serve to keep people “comfortably numb.” Alfred’s parents serve as highbrow examples of philistines tranquilized by the trivial. They are obviously well-educated and thoroughly steeped in contemporary art, film, music, and photography. Moreover, they are clearly well-versed in contemporary psychoanalytic thought, without any seeming awareness that such ideas might actually apply to them as people or parents.

When Alfred comes to visit them at their home in Chicago, the Chamberlains, while unmistakably pleased to see him, behave as if he was a casual acquaintance who they saw on a regular basis, inviting him to go to an art gallery or a movie. When Alfred insists on asking them questions about his childhood, they respond to each query with alternating snippets of psychobabble that have nothing to do with him personally (and indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain address each other rather than Alfred directly):

Question: “Was I a happy or unhappy child?”

Answer: “What is one to say? Well, every child has anxiety. I mean, we’re just not willing to accept anxiety anymore. Freud... I think it was Freud... dates all anxiety back to the birth trauma. Rank too.”

Question: “Was I breast-fed or bottle-fed?”

Answer: “Sullivan. Sullivan writes about the significance of powerlessness. It’s years since I’ve looked at Sullivan. Doesn’t Sullivan also have something to say... it could be Adler, but I think it’s Sullivan... the dynamism of apathy?”

Question: “Was I difficult to toilet train?”

Answer: “Uh, Klein. Klein speaks of the coupling of early Oedipus wishes... with the fear of castration. The child’s desire to possess the mother’s feces.”

No wonder Alfred left home right after high school and became a self-described “apathist!”

Countercultural Worldviews and Lifestyles

Another means of managing existential terror is to embrace alternative cultural worldviews and lifestyles, as Kenny does in the film. As the youngest child in the family—with an overbearing father, a “perfect” older brother, and a brash and robust older sister—the cultural and psychodynamic odds were against him from the outset given his unimposing physical size and effeminate disposition. He always fell short (literally and figuratively) in his father’s eyes, compared unfavorably on all dimensions with Steve, and lost every childhood wrestling match with Patsy. Consequently, in an era of sexism, homophobia, and the predominance of traditionally masculine identity definitions, Kenny could not obtain self-esteem by viewing himself as a typical American, although he understood that he would have fared better had he not been burdened with a Y chromosome: “I should have been a girl. Girls have it easy. They’re better at studying. They’re not forced to play ball. They don’t have to have a job. I really could’ve handled it.”

So Kenny abandons the American Dream. He settles instead for an ineffectual lifestyle. He passes his days lounging around the apartment in his pajamas and reading soft-core pornographic fantasy novels (“Lesbians of Venus”). We gather that he is in graduate school to become a filmmaker, but we never see him take steps toward achieving that goal. When members of the household encounter challenging circumstances, he swiftly takes sanctuary in Patsy’s closet (perhaps a metaphor for his sexual orientation). Like many people, who, due to their genetic predispositions or personal preferences, are alienated from the cultural mainstream, Kenny abandons any hope of living up to the mainstream prescriptions for valued conduct.

The Romantic Solution

Patsy could, however, do quite well acquiring a sense of meaning and value as a denizen of mainstream culture given her vocational success as an interior decorator. Nevertheless, she relied on what Ernest Becker, following Otto Rank (1931/1961), designated as “The Romantic Solution” to address her existential concerns, by investing the bulk of her psychological energies in her current “significant other.” Such relationships often consist of a seemingly self-assured individual who is idolized by a seemingly self-deprecating subordinate other. Karen Horney (1950) dubbed such an arrangement morbid dependency, because each person in this kind of interaction is overly dependent on the other. The subordinate

individual (more or less) happily relinquishes her or his autonomy to draw strength from the other, whom they place on a psychological pedestal. The elevated individual in turn welcomes (indeed, often insists on) being worshipped because his or her veneer of self-confidence can only be sustained by constant external affirmation.

Moreover, such relationships are inherently unfair to both participants, and are ultimately unstable and unsustainable. It is unfair for the “superior” partner to claim constant adulation from the “subordinate,” and to divest she or he of their individuality—because the deified “loves being loved” more than he or she loves the actual partner in the relationship. And it is equally unfair for the “subordinate” to place the other on a psychological pedestal (even if they aspire to that lofty perch) and deify him or her. Treating a person like a god is asking too much of any mere mortal; and, indeed, because he or she is mortal—and hence fallible and subject to (as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it) “the accidents of the weary kingdom of time” such as sickness, aging, and death—the deified partner cannot possibly live up to such unrealistic and unattainable expectations. Consequently, although these kinds of relationships often appear auspicious initially, tensions generally arise shortly thereafter (often surrounding disagreements about the need for overt declarations of love and commitment; when Patsy tells Alfred “I think I’m falling in love with you,” his response is “I don’t know what love is!”), followed by a painful protracted decline and final dissolution. Ensuing relationships then tend to adhere to the same pattern.

This is a fairly accurate account of Patsy’s love-life in *Little Murders*. Before Alfred, there was Lester, Howard, Roger, as well as a musician, a stockbroker, and a Jewish novelist—each a psychic cripple in need of a romantic savior. As Patsy put it, “they want a woman they can collapse without shame in front of.” All of them adore her: “Alfred, do you have any idea how many people in this town worship me?” All of them, that is, except Alfred, who resists Patsy’s ardent efforts to transform him into a more compliant admirer: “I love the man I wanted to mold you into. . . . You’ve got to let me mold you. Please let me mold you!” Patsy is equally insistent that Alfred relinquish his overriding pessimism and share her more optimistic view of life.⁴

God and Country: Law and Order

Another typical response when “the rumble of panic underneath everything” (as William James put it) creeps closer to consciousness is to “double down” and bolster one’s faith in core religious and/or secular

principles. *Judge Stern* (Lou Jacobi) plays a short but important role in the film, presenting an impassioned (and hilarious) defense of God and religion as a means to diminish existential anguish.⁵ When Alfred and Patsy come to the Judge in hope that he will marry them without mentioning God in the ceremony (i.e., a civil ceremony), the Judge pelts them with an agitated tirade about his early life in a tenement house in lower Manhattan where Jews, blacks, and Italians lived together, sharing bathrooms, poverty and persecution. He relays in painstaking detail his childhood work history, making the poor waifs in Charles Dickens' novels seem like card-carrying union members with full pensions by comparison. He credits God for his subsequent ascension to the judiciary, and for keeping his elderly mother safe in her retirement home in Florida. Finally, he admonishes Alfred and Patsy for being "glib about God" as Alfred leads the charge from the courtroom when it becomes quite evident that there will be no civil marriage without God in that particular courtroom.

Belief in an omnipotent God—keeping an eye on things in this life, and more importantly, serving as gatekeeper for admission to the afterlife—is the ultimate antidote for death anxiety. And this is especially true under difficult social and economic conditions. When times are tough on earth, confident trust in a better life beyond the grave is the only thing that makes it possible to get up in the morning to, in Judge Stern's words, "face another day of hopelessness and despair." However (as Nietzsche predicted), it is difficult to maintain faith in traditional religious worldviews in modern, industrial, religiously heterogeneous communities.

This was certainly the case for Carol Newquist, who after Steve's death, strives desperately to preserve his faith in law and order in a civil society. He goes to the police station regularly to check on the status of the case, leaving small "tips" (i.e. bribes) to keep the wheels of justice turning. He admits to Alfred prior to the wedding that mentioning God in the ceremony has little to do with his theological views: "I don't say I believe in God. The question is wide open. But with me it's not a matter of belief in God. It's a matter of belief in institutions. I'm a great believer in institutions."

Lieutenant Practice is also a great believer in law and order, especially order. Like Carol, Practice frantically attempts to make sense of the senseless, to find order amidst the chaos. Discombobulated by three hundred and forty-five unsolved homicides in six months, the Lieutenant declares (at the Newquists' home while being shot at occasionally): "Sooner or later there's a pattern. Sooner or later everything falls into

place. I believe that. If I didn't believe that... I wouldn't wanna wake up tomorrow morning and see the sunrise." Then with exquisite pretzel-logic he proceeds:

A subtle pattern begins to emerge. What is this pattern? What is it that each of these three hundred and forty-five homicides have in common? They have in common three things: a) that they have nothing in common; b) that they have no motive; c) that, consequently, they remain unsolved.... When a case does not gel it is often not because we lack the necessary facts, but because we have observed our facts incorrectly.... Following normal routine we looked for a cause. And we could find no cause. Had we looked for effect we would have had our answer that much sooner. What is the effect of three hundred and forty-five unsolved homicide cases? The effect is loss of faith in law-enforcement personnel. That is our motive. The pattern is complete. We are involved here in a far-reaching conspiracy to undermine respect for our basic beliefs and most sacred institutions.

The daft Lieutenant speaks great truth if one overlooks the paranoid conspiracy part of his tirade. That is, "once respect for our basic beliefs and most sacred institutions" is undermined, symbolic, meaning-making, self-esteem-seeking social animals become disillusioned, demoralized, and... dangerous.

Fetishism: Resorting to Concrete Bases of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem—the primary psychological defense against mortality concerns—can come under threat when the validity of the worldview upon which it is based is called into question. To recap, faith in the worldview is sustained primarily by means of social consensus—the more people who subscribe to the worldview, the more veridical it appears to be (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Consequently, encounters with ideologically dissimilar others ("He doesn't want God in the ceremony?!") can weaken the individual's confidence that adhering to the worldview's standards for value will ensure lasting personal significance. Restoring this confidence is normally achieved by defending the worldview (e.g., surreptitiously arranging to have God mentioned in the ceremony).

In his early works *Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964) and *Angel in Armor* (1969), Becker described a related but distinct type of self-esteem threat. He claimed that while people derive self-esteem from various specific sources, subjective certainty of one's personal value essentially hinges on the perception that the self is capable of acting efficaciously—of exercising power over the social and physical environment. People look to their environment

for clearly defined and reliable standards for effective action (that is, for "meaning," in Becker's succinct definition). Therefore, when the standards for effective action in a situation are *ambiguously defined* or *unreliable*, people can become uncertain about their personal value. The worry here is less "Am I doing the right thing?" and more "What should I be doing?"

To compensate for this uncertainty, Becker claimed, people sometimes reduce their conception of the world and themselves to exceedingly narrow dimensions, or "fetishes," that afford clearly delineated, concrete opportunities to act efficaciously and thus sustain self-esteem. People invest their fetishes with undue psychological importance, and rely on them to understand and relate to the world, because they help fend off the uncertain and negative self-views that might arise from relating to the environment in a more open, flexible manner.

Fetishes provide a basis for confidently held feelings of personal value primarily by virtue of their *concreteness*, not their consensual validation. That is why most fetishes are embodied in some tangible aspect of the world that can be pointed to and understood with objective certainty (e.g., a prop in a choreographed sexual encounter). That is also why fetishes tend to be idiosyncratic—one might say *creative*—in a way that mainstream worldview investment is not. Put simply, fetishes need not be shared to provide security. Next we consider two manifestations of fetishism that appear in *Little Murders*.

Alfred's materialism. Successful interpersonal relationships are a conventional basis of self-esteem, but they come with an inherent challenge. The person can never really be certain what is going on in other people's minds, so she can never know conclusively whether or not she is able to influence others' thoughts and feelings in desired ways. Whereas most people tolerate this uncertainty, for Alfred it is oppressive. He lacks confidence in his ability to sustain emotional commitments and he shrinks from unfamiliar social encounters ("I hate families"). Interpersonal transactions no longer afford Alfred clearly-defined routes to effective action and thus a confident basis for viewing himself as valuable.

Alfred's first line of defense is to downplay awareness of others' subjectivity, dismissing the hidden, nebulous, and unreliable states that he feels powerless to influence. He does not attend to others' emotional experience as communicated through their face or body language, nor does he seem intent on anticipating others' reaction to his own behavior or persuading others of his specialness.

Still needing to feel a sense of mastery, though, Alfred has reduced his understanding of the world and his own behavioral repertoire to the narrow dimension of inanimate objects—things that lack subjectivity

and thus never betray or disappoint, resist or forget. Alfred recounts his descent into fetishistic materialism over the course of his photography career: "After a couple of years...things began to go wrong: I began losing my people. Somehow I got my heads chopped off, or out of focus...the harder I tried to straighten out, the fuzzier my people got and the clearer my objects. Soon my people disappeared entirely; they somehow never came out. But the *objects* I was shooting: *brilliantly* clear." The face/head—the most prominent window into others' subjectivity—lost meaning for Alfred at the same time that manipulating objects filled in as a confident (albeit limited) basis for self-esteem.

The *solace of sadism.* Becker's analysis of fetishism sheds light on perhaps the most surreal element of *Little Murders*, namely, the orgy of sadistic violence in the film's final scene. Here we see Alfred, Carol, and Kenny break a window in the apartment and start shooting at random people in the street. We might interpret from their gorilla-like grunts and chest pounding that they have simply regressed to a pre-human stage of primate evolution. But that interpretation misses an important point. We are still witnessing creatures with a distinctive craving for meaning and self-esteem. Indeed, this scene includes two poignant instances of characters receiving long-awaited tokens of approval: Carol expresses fatherly pride for Kenny, and Alfred addresses Carol warmly as "dad." So what is happening here?

As mentioned, Becker (1969) noted how the uncertainty involved in impressing one's value on others, and keeping their sense of one's value alive and alert, is a major obstacle to the person's efforts to act effectively and thereby maintain self-esteem. We can try to convince others of our powers—show them we are smart, funny, and so on—but we can never know with certainty whether we have succeeded. When a person feels particularly insecure in his ability to understand and control others at a subjective level, he can avoid the interpersonal world altogether, as we just saw exemplified in Alfred's materialism.

Another compensatory strategy is sadism: the assertion of one's power over others through conspicuous physical violence. Sadism is appealing because it affords relatively indisputable evidence for one's value. After all, if one can prove oneself physically stronger than another, or can gain power over the life of another, one's own value can appear unambiguously superior: *I am standing and you are not; hence, I had an effect on the world; there is no doubt about my powers now.* The sadist protects himself against feelings of impotence by reducing others to the status of objects that can be physically overpowered and destroyed, thereby affording a tangible, concrete basis of self-esteem that leaves no one in doubt (at least

temporarily; Becker suspected that sadism supported self-esteem only in the short-term).

And that is what is happening in this scene. Alfred, Carol, and Kenny have been continually frustrated in their attempts to assert worth through conventional routes. Mounting nihilism and feelings of personal inadequacy have prompted them to abandon those conventional routes and switch to a more concrete, well-defined avenue for effecting *some* change in the world. The definitive *Crack!* of the rifle, the sight of motionless bodies on the ground: the sheer concrete certainty of physical conquest makes sadism so attractive when uncertainty about one's value becomes intolerable.

Death, Not the Breather, as an Existential Wake-Up Call

Through analysis of the so-called normal personality, Becker showed how common modes of thinking, feeling, and acting represent strategies for maintaining the perception that one is a valued member of a meaningful cultural reality who will continue on in some fashion after death. The characters of *Little Murders* are walking caricatures of these strategies. Through them we observe how people's efforts to deny their mortal fate often lead to antisocial and self-destructive behavior.

This grim diagnosis of the human enterprise may be humbling, but it need not be hobbling. Both Becker's writings and *Little Murders* point at modes of personality capable of overcoming maladaptive responses to death. In some cases, reminders of mortality do not increase adherence to familiar sources of meaning and self-esteem; rather, they produce the opposite effect, breaking people out of their habitual modes of thought and action. For example, survivors of trauma or near-death experience often report emerging from their harrowing experiences ready to embrace a more expansive and flexible conception of the world and themselves (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

This is exemplified in Alfred's initial response to Patsy's death. Shortly after the murder, Alfred is on the subway, his shirt covered in Patsy's blood. Other passengers see this pathetic figure, but none thinks to come to his aid. Instead, they look upon Alfred with disgust and contempt, shifting their bodies to avoid getting blood on their clothes. Alfred, typically deadened to others, finally has his apathy thrown back at him, and he does not like it. He is primed to open himself up to new modes of relating to the world.

Moments later we see Alfred in Central Park. As is his custom, he prepares to take pictures of feces, further indulging his fetishistic tendency to engage with the object world. Yet, seeing the park through Alfred's eyes/

viewer, we sense his incipient curiosity and an urge to expand his horizon of possibilities to progressively greater degrees of vital dynamism. First he turns to trees (inanimate, yes, but more dynamic than feces); then to a statue of a man's bust (static, sure, but at least a perceptible human face). Now he feels eligible to commune face-to-face with other persons in their full humanity—or at least to take pictures of them. He beholds an elderly man in lederhosen sitting under a tree. Next up: people interacting with one another. He catches a tender moment between lovers on a bench; now children waving enthusiastically and making funny faces; now a track team racing by. Note how each of these subjects—romantic love, fun, and athletic activity—was previously a target of Alfred's cynical scorn. Finally, Alfred allows himself to be captivated by the *mystery* inherent in other people. He encounters a man impeccably dressed in a white suit that contrasts with his rustic surrounds, and he savors the man's mystique. In the space of an afternoon, Alfred reverses his career trajectory, gradually relaxing his constricted focus on the object world and bringing "his people" back into clear view. For that afternoon, the world spoke passionately to Alfred, and he joined the dialogue.

In fact, Alfred's expanded awareness extends to his own subjectivity and humanity. At one point he looks up to find that another photographer is taking pictures of *him*, and he seems offended at being objectified in this manner. Why should he be? Earlier in the film we saw him consenting to having his face bashed in by bullies (he even came prepared with a mouth guard!). At that point he accepted having his total personality reduced to the status of a passive punching bag. But now, having just participated in the ongoing flux of life, responding spontaneously to other's actions and delighting in even fleeting moments of beauty, such objectification is unacceptable. Now Alfred is conscious of his own distinctive inner personality, and he wants assurance from others that they recognize him and not merely his body.

In short, Patsy's untimely demise prompted Alfred to confront his existential limitations, particularly the inevitability of his own death, and this experience oriented him toward intrinsically rewarding activities and a greater acceptance and appreciation of life and all it has to offer. Is this a sustainable terror management strategy? The film suggests that it is not. In the very next scene, Alfred arrives at the Newquist residence with a gun, ready to enlist Carol and Kenny in a conspicuous display of power that reduces others to the status of moving targets. What happened? According to Otto Rank, people spend their lives oscillating between the need for psychological security and the growth mechanisms by which liberating activity is enjoyed and becomes integrated into one's

character (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003, for further discussion). Rank noted that asserting individuality and tapping into liberating new expressive energies can elicit anxiety and guilt because it involves stepping outside of familiar sources of meaning and value that provide protection from basic fears. To minimize these negative feelings, the person may cling to those familiar sources of meaning and self-esteem even more rigidly, even if it means cutting off growth.

Coda

Nietzsche posited a will to power that drives humans to continually expand, seek new experiences, and move toward self-reliance, creativity, and realizing their potential. He described the process of growth with a parable about three stages of a person's maturation: the camel who becomes a lion who becomes a child.

Much like a camel dutifully lugging baggage through the desert, the other at the first stage accepts the constraints on freedom imposed by other people's expectations, cultural standards, and their own internal impulses and habits. *Little Murders* offers vivid portrayals of the camel in Mr. and Mrs. Newquist, among other lesser characters. Nietzsche's second stage of development is the age of lion—the person who rejects the limitations and rebels against his or her past, the cultural establishment, and the circumstances of his life. Nietzsche pointed out that the rebellious lion has a false sense of freedom, however, because by aggressively attacking traditional values and meaning systems he still defines themselves in terms of those external systems. That is, whereas the conformist camel looks at the mainstream worldview and says "it must be," the rebellious lion says "it cannot be," but both are alike in that they define themselves largely in terms of their relationship with that worldview ("for what we hate, we take too seriously"—Montaigne, 1925, p. 7). Alfred is the lion for the majority of the film, railing against convention and other repressive aspects of bourgeois culture.

This brings us to the third stage of maturation—the age of the child. Whereas the camel accepts limitations and the lion rejects them, the child accepts its limitations but turns joyously toward life and embraces new possibilities. Nietzsche claimed that people at this stage are not *childish*, but *child-like* in their curiosity and creative energy; they affirm life even when it seems unjust and absurd, and they strive to realize their personal potential. In the Central Park scene, Alfred offers a vivid example of the child who accepts his nothingness in the cosmic scheme of things but nevertheless turns around to say "Yes" to creative love and work.

Notes

1. The film originated as a Broadway play in 1967, which closed after only seven performances. A contemporaneous London production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Christopher Morahan at the Aldwych Theatre, was better received. Alan Arkin then directed an off-Broadway production of the play in 1969, which ran for 400 performances and garnered several awards.
2. In a February 1, 1967 letter to director Christopher Morahan during rehearsal of the London production of the play.
3. Thanks to Pink Floyd ("comfortably numb") and Soren Kierkegaard ("tranquilization by the trivial") for these phrases.
4. In fairness to Patsy, her affection for Alfred is sincere (above and beyond a dysfunctional romantic solution to existential concerns), and is genuinely reciprocated.
5. It is somewhat ironic, yet perhaps not insignificant, that this defense comes from a judge in a courtroom in a country founded on the principle of separation of church and state, in glaring contrast to Reverend Dupas' take on traditional religion in a church (of sorts) depicted later.

References

- Becker, E. (1964). *Revolution in psychiatry*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Becker, E. (1969). *Angel in armor*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Becker, E. (1971). *The birth and death of meaning: An interdisciplinary perspective on the problem of man* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Feiffer, J. (1968). *Little murders*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and human growth: The struggle toward self-actualization*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Montaigne, M. (1925). *The essays of Montaigne* (Vol. 2; trans. George B. Ives). Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Nietzsche, F. (1887/1974). *The gay science*. Tr. W. Kaufmann. New York, NY: Random House.
- Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Goldenberg, J. (2003). Freedom versus fear: On the defense, growth, and expansion of the self. In M. Leary, & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 314–343). New York: Guilford Press.
- Rank, O. (1931/1961). *Psychology and the Soul*. New York, NY: Perpetua Books Edition.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, 1–18.