Beyond Death Anxiety
Robert W. Firestone, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, author, and artist, who has established a comprehensive body of work that explains how defenses formed by children early in life in relation to interpersonal pain are strongly reinforced as they become aware of death. These defenses impair people’s ability to sustain intimate adult relationships and have a damaging effect on their children. Dr. Firestone was engaged in the private practice of psychotherapy from 1957 to 1979, working with a wide range of patients, expanding his original ideas on schizophrenia, and applying these concepts to a theory of neurosis. In 1979 he joined the Glendon Association as its consulting theorist. Dr. Firestone’s major publications include The Fantasy Bond, Compassionate Child-Rearing, Fear of Intimacy, and The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships. His studies of negative thought processes—or internalized “voices”—led to the development of an innovative therapeutic methodology described in Voice Therapy, Suicide and the Inner Voice, Combating Destructive Thought Processes, Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice, Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy, and Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships. In collaboration with his daughter, Dr. Lisa Firestone, he developed three assessment instruments based on the concept of the voice process: The Firestone Assessment of Self-Destructive Thoughts (2007), The Firestone Assessment of Suicide Intent (2007), and the Firestone Assessment of Violent Thoughts (2008).

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Beyond Death Anxiety

Achieving Life-Affirming Death Awareness

ROBERT W. FIRESTONE, PhD
JOYCE CATLETT, MA
To Fred Branfman, with affection and appreciation
for his support in writing this book.
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This book represents a towering synthesis of personal and clinical wisdom about death. Particularly for the first author, Robert Firestone, this book could be viewed as a capstone for his illustrious career as both existential-analytic practitioner and theorist. However, Beyond Death Anxiety is much more than a book about death: at its heart, it is a meditation on life and how to live it really well.

Beginning with a superb overview of the psychology of death and death anxiety, the volume gradually and methodically wends its way through Dr. Firestone’s development of both Separation Theory and Voice Therapy. In his formulation of these theories, Dr. Firestone draws on the best of the existential-humanistic as well as the psychoanalytic thinkers to address a flourishing path toward self-realization. I am especially moved by the authors’ embrace of spirituality and awe—within their worldview, and by the personal and practical nature of their findings. If one is to address a topic as nebulous and intricate as death anxiety, it is essential to ground one’s observations in both practical and living case illustrations; and this, the authors accomplish with aplomb.

Although the authors focus ostensibly on the negative voices (or voice attacks, as they call them), their aim ironically is to help clients find their authentic voice or true self. To this extent they affirm the transformative power of the voice dimension, which is much subtler than is generally recognized. Indeed, as R. D. Laing, one of Dr. Firestone’s most ardent supporters, well knew, the voice is an instrument of one’s whole bodily being—one’s whole sensibility about life—and not merely the movements of some isolable vocal chords. To find one’s voice, as the early Gestalt, analytic, and existential-humanistic pioneers also tacitly (as well as on occasion explicitly) recognized, is to find one’s way, comparatively unencumbered, toward what really matters; and what really matters is the centerpiece around which this volume revolves.
To sum, this book shows how the finding of one’s authentic voice is integral to death awareness and to the absorption of the anxiety related to that awareness. In this light it is both akin to and a practical application of the writings of Ernest Becker, whose insights into the vicissitudes of death, as well as its denial, are unsurpassed.

If we are to achieve a sane existence, much more of this terrain needs to be plumbed in the coming years; and much more will be, I’m convinced, in the wake of this volume.

—Kirk J. Schneider, PhD
Part-time faculty, Saybrook Graduate School
Author, *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy* and *Awakening to Awe*
In essence, we attempt to escape from death concerns by avoiding life. The unique purpose of this work is to suggest that the acceptance of death and dying as a reality and an awareness of the typical defenses that people develop to counter the dread can be life-affirming rather than leading to cynicism or depression. Challenging psychological defenses formed in childhood and reinforced by death anxiety can lead to more personal satisfaction in living and expand the opportunity for self-realization. Facing one’s mortality and feeling the appropriate emotions of sadness, anger, and fear can give greater meaning to life and make it all the more precious. This awareness also places one’s experience in perspective and helps to avoid trivializing one’s existence.

This book is not about dying and death; rather, it is about facing death in the prime of life instead of limiting life through the process of denial. The book, with its numerous personal stories, illustrates an important truth: that defensive denial of death has profoundly negative consequences for each person’s life.

Most people spend their lifetime without a great deal of self-awareness, living lives of emptiness and drudgery based on their early programming. They rarely reflect on their circumstances but rather are addicted to a lifestyle of form and routine. Few develop a life plan or project that gives value and substance to their daily lives. The search for transcendent goals, supported by death awareness, makes life more meaningful. Humans are a meaning-seeking species. When this experience is limited or entirely excluded, one is deprived of one’s human heritage.

However, when one breaks through one’s defensive barriers, there is always tension and anxiety and a marked tendency for the issue of death to manifest itself. Uniquely positive events make one aware of the value of life, but are also a reminder that life is temporal. The more we invest in life and love, the more we achieve, the more we are valued, and the more we are aware of our existence, the more we are reminded
of our eventual non-existence. When we love life and the people closest to us, we must mourn the ultimate loss of loved ones and ourselves. This explains why most people limit their experiences, forsake a purposeful life, and hold on to illusions that help them escape from painful realities.

Death denial has other destructive complications. Religious faiths that offer the promise of an afterlife provide comfort but tend to polarize people of different beliefs against one another. People are threatened when their defensive resolutions of the death issue are challenged by nonbelievers. They become hostile and aggressive when their defenses are disrupted by people with different attitudes and customs. Much of the destruction caused by warfare and ethnic cleansing is due to these defensive machinations.

In some sense, all people maintain a belief that they will not die despite conscious awareness to the contrary. In their magical thinking, free from logical constraints, they are able to maintain the fantasy or dream of immortality in their unconscious minds. Certain attitudes and belief systems support the illusion whereas other events and circumstances challenge it. For example, moving along the life cycle from childhood to maturity, separation experiences that make us aware of our aloneness and signs of aging and ill health dispel the illusion, whereas religious beliefs, an imagined fused identity in personal relationships, vanity, and fantasies of omnipotence help to maintain it. When this internal fantasy process is disrupted, the original suppressed fear reaction is activated and there is considerable hostility directed toward the source.

Lastly, the authors feel that the subject of death must be brought out of the closet. People need to be free to think, feel, and talk about the subject. Addressing the issues surrounding death has a therapeutic effect. However uncomfortable or painful this may be, it is preferable to the emptiness of the unexamined life.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section explains the impact of death anxiety, particularly unconscious death anxiety, on the life experience. Most people do not think much about death on a daily basis, and many feel that they have come to terms with the fact of death. But the majority are still driven by unconscious death fears and resort to a variety of defenses that exert a negative influence on their lives. This section also describes the dawning awareness of death in children, the psychological defenses that characterize everyday life, the literal and symbolic defenses against death anxiety, and the dynamics of microsuicide that arise as an attempt to achieve mastery over death concerns.
The second section presents the first author’s (Robert Firestone) theoretical position. It describes the \textit{fantasy bond} as the core defense against separation and death anxiety. The fantasy bond refers to a fantasy of connection or fusion with other individuals, starting with the mother or primary caretaker. The illusion offers a false sense of continuity and security at the expense of honesty and a genuine attachment. Eventually it is applied to one’s relatives, one’s couple relationships, and one’s children. The sense of merged identification is extended to one’s neighborhood, city, country, etc., and is encompassed in one’s religion and nationality. One feels a sense of superiority toward other people with different beliefs and they are seen as outsiders.

Separation Theory combines psychoanalytic concepts and the concepts of existential psychology. It explains how defenses formed in childhood in relation to interpersonal stress are intensified and rigidified as the child becomes aware of his or her mortality. The combined effect of the defended posture acts as a core resistance in psychotherapy and is a harmful, maladaptive barrier to personal growth and the evolution of the self. The \textit{voice}, a critical and destructive thought process, supports a mode of defended living. This process, which is sometimes conscious but often unconscious, can be accessed in Voice Therapy. Action can then be taken to release the associated feelings, identify and challenge defenses, and alter self-limiting and self-destructive behaviors, thereby helping the individual move toward a more positive, fulfilling life.

The third section examines several subjects that enhance life in the face of death. Chapter 9 deals with challenging the defenses that interfere with living a full life, including breaking destructive addictions and routines, disrupting the fantasy bond, and maintaining independence and respect in couple and family relationships. This chapter also discusses the importance of being aware of microsuicidal tendencies and of breaking with religious dogma and cultural worldviews that are limiting and damaging to self and others.

Chapter 10 addresses the value of psychotherapy for the so-called \textit{normal} individual, the personal qualities of an effective therapist, the death of depth therapy and psychoanalysis, the practice of Voice Therapy, and the effectiveness of corrective suggestions.

Chapter 11 discusses facing death and dying with appropriate emotion. It describes the merits of sharing one’s death anxieties in an open forum.

Chapter 12 elucidates the concept of love. It defines the dimensions of a truly loving relationship and distinguishes love from emotional
hunger. It describes how the ability to love can be learned like any other skill, and how a person can develop in relation to both giving and receiving love. It speaks of the importance of sexuality and of respect for each other’s goals, personal boundaries, and personal freedom.

Chapter 13 delineates the various aspects of a meaningful life. It emphasizes the importance of love, generosity, the therapeutic value of friendship, the development of empathy, and a love and respect for all people. It also includes accepting one’s feelings uncritically, developing self-knowledge, formulating one’s unique value system, pursuing a personal project or search for meaning in life, transcendent goals, and spirituality. In concluding, the authors outline many of the significant insights that were learned within a unique reference population.

The first author begins Chapter 14 with a brief autobiography. He then describes the evolution of his perspective on life and of his personal system of values. He discusses his relationship to the reference population and the development of his ideas in the field of psychology. He concludes the book with a reflection upon his life. In conveying his professional legacy, he briefly summarizes the scope of his fifty-year investigation of resistance in psychotherapy and people’s resistance to a better life in general. The chapter closes with his personal legacy in relation to his loved ones.
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We express our gratitude to the men and women whose personal stories are recounted throughout this work. We thank them for their courage and honesty in describing their feelings and thoughts about a topic that is difficult still for many people to openly discuss. They were strongly motivated to share the insights they gained so that others might benefit from their experiences.

The names, places, and other identifying facts in the personal stories contained in this book have been fictionalized, and no similarity to any persons, living or dead, is intended, with the exception of Robert Firestone, Tamsen Firestone, and Fred Branfman.
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The Subjective Impact of Death Awareness and Its Denial