CHAPTER 6

Symbolic Immortality

The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when *death does not appear under its own name;* in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.

—ZYGMUNT BAUMAN,
Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies

This Grave
contains all that was Mortal,
of a
YOUNG ENGLISH POET,
Who,
on his Death Bed,
in the Bitterness of his Heart,
at the Malicious Power of his Enemies
Desired
these Words to be engraven on his Tomb Stone
"Here lies One
Whose Name was writ in Water.
Feb 24th 1821

SO READS THE TOMBSTONE OF JOHN KEATS, ONE OF THE GREAT ENGLISH Romantic poets. Far from family and friends, dying a slow, choking death of tuberculosis in Rome at the age of twenty-five, Keats was tormented by the thought that he would expire without having achieved the fame that he felt was his destiny. So he requested "Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water" for his epitaph (his friends added the rest). If you visited the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, you would never know that Keats was buried there unless you were familiar with this gloomy memorial.

Keats's story is a particularly pitiable one. The son of a stable keeper, he lost his father in a riding accident when he was eight. He then nursed both his mother and his younger brother when they died of tuberculosis. He earned a license to work as an apothecary, but a small inheritance allowed him to abandon the trade and dive headlong into poetry. The work he managed to publish was roundly rejected and ridiculed. "It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet," advised *Blackwood's Magazine* in a review. "So back to the shop Mr. John, back to 'plasters, pills and ointment boxes.'"

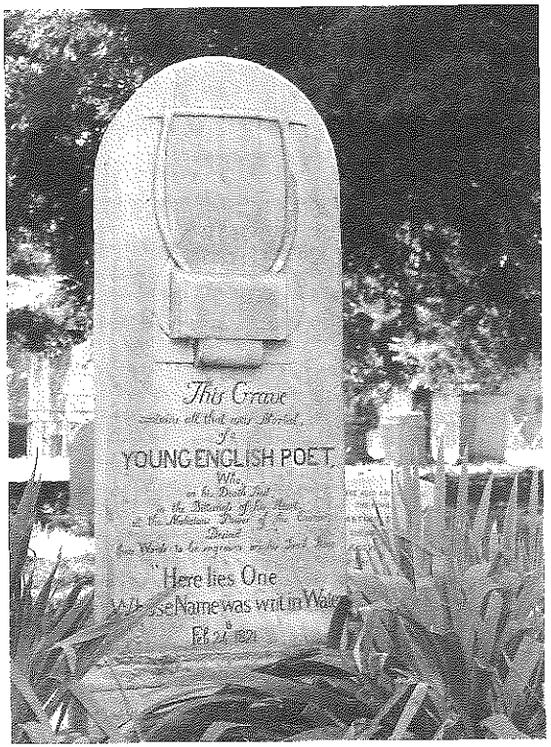
Keats didn't give up. In the short span of five years, he produced many timeless poems including the astonishing "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale." Before he became desperately ill, he was confident that his verse would live on after him, despite the bad reviews. He predicted, "I shall be among the English Poets after my death." And indeed, Keats was obsessed with death, which seemed to hover over his shoulder and dictate to his pen. At twenty-one, he was already imagining what it would be like to lie in his grave. "If I do fall, at least I will be laid / Beneath the silence of a poplar shade," he wrote in the poem "Sleep and Poetry," "And over me the grass shall be smooth shaven; / And there shall be a kind memorial graven."

The memorial he might have imagined then was not the one that ultimately came to be. His experience of life was too short. His body of work was too small and too immature. His experience of love was too truncated to have produced a child that could carry on his name. Mortally ill, Keats

felt his life had been worthless. His self-esteem had fallen so low that he asked to be buried anonymously.

In the end, he did not believe his work would survive him, and he asked the eternal question that all mortals ultimately ask themselves. "Is there another Life?" he inquired in one of his last letters home. "Shall I awake and find all this a dream?" He came to the conclusion that there must be, for "We cannot be created for this sort of suffering."

But he did live on, at least in his poetry. He did, in the end, join the canon of the great English poets. And he continues to speak to readers through his art nearly two hundred years after his death.



John Keats's tombstone in a quiet corner of the Protestant Cemetery, Rome, Italy

THE QUEST FOR LITERAL immortality helps us manage the terror of death. But people also yearn to view themselves as part of an enduring culture tied to the past and the future: "symbolic immortality." A symbol stands for something: Keats's verses are not the physical man, but they represent

the best of his unique imagination. Like him, we all want to leave a mark: we want to feel that something of us will persist long beyond our physical death. Otherwise our names indeed have been written in water.

"Modern man," Ernest Becker observed, "is denying his finitude with the same dedication as the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, but now whole masses are playing the game, and with a far richer armamentarium of techniques. . . . The hushed hope is that someone who can do this will not die." Keats's disdain for death and his desire to feel he would endure beyond it through his poems are obvious—he himself made them explicit in his work. As kids, many of us likely aspired to the kind of transcendent fame sought by Keats in his day or, say, LeBron James today. However, most of us, eventually figuring out we're not going to make it that big, deploy more modest, subtle, and even disguised routes to symbolic immortality.

Let's peruse these various paths and expose their existential underpinnings.

FAMILY IS FOREVER

In cultures throughout history, individual identity has been defined by ancestry. Knowledge of our ancestors keeps the past alive, and if those who have already died are still with us, then we, too, can continue to exist in the minds of future generations after our own death. This is one reason why the dead figure prominently in so many cultures. Recent excavations have found decorated skulls of dead ancestors in homes in the ancient city of Jericho. Today, in Japanese homes, you can often find a *butsudan,* or family altar, which displays tablets inscribed with ancestors' names. Americans now devote considerable resources to searching for distant relatives on websites to flesh out their family trees. Indeed, thanks to DNA sequencing technology, you can now spit in a cup and find out if you are a descendant of Genghis Khan, Thomas Jefferson, or even a nameless Neanderthal.

Our families offer us the promise of living beyond our bodies through our offspring as well as through their memories of us. Parents throughout the ages have beamed with pride when a cousin says that their child has

"his mother's singing voice" or "her father's sense of humor." This delight reflects the hope that a part of you, be it a fondness for mirth or a twinkling gaze, lives on in your child. Your own body may rot under the ground or turn to ash, but those looks and mannerisms will endure in your bloodline as your own children pass those eyes and singing voice on to theirs.

Knowing that we are not the last of our ancestral line, we can better accept our own transience by believing that we live on through our children, and our children's children. Research around the world confirms that reminders of death increase the desire for children in the service of symbolically transcending death. Germans who wrote the first sentence that came to mind while thinking about their own death subsequently reported a greater desire to have children, and to have them sooner, than those who wrote about being in pain. After being primed with death thoughts, Chinese participants were more resistant to the nation's one-child-per-family policy, and Americans indicated that they were more likely to name future offspring after themselves. And after thinking about having children, Israelis reminded of their mortality completed fewer death-related words on a Hebrew version of our word-stem task, signifying that death was less troubling after the prospect of progeny was brought to mind.

But children are more than a physical amalgam of their parents. We cultivate our cherished beliefs and values in them in hopes that they take root and get passed on in turn. One friend of ours seriously laments that his son, though a successful attorney and fine family man, doesn't share his love of Wagner's operas and Kafka's stories. We don't just want our children to move our genes forward in time; we want them to move our beliefs, values, and group identifications into the future as well. In one incident that made the news, a Malaysian father shouted, *"Aku tak mengaku anak"* (I disown you), when his son came home for lunch merely wearing a badge of support for a rival political party. The fact that some parents disown, abandon, or even murder offspring who stray from their own beliefs suggests that passing on the symbols we cherish can even be more important than passing on our genes.

FAME AND CELEBRITY

Keats attained the recognition he sought posthumously, but like the rest of us, he would no doubt have preferred to secure that renown in his lifetime. Indeed, human beings have sought fame at least as far back as Gilgamesh. After he failed to gain literal immortality, Gilgamesh focused on enhancing his own reputation through deeds that "all the world shall know of" in order to "leave behind me an enduring name." He took solace in the idea that his deeds and accomplishments would live on after his death, as indeed they have.

Throughout history, extraordinary men and women who scaled remarkable military, political, economic, scientific, athletic, literary, or artistic heights became famous, not just in their time but after; for most of them, achieving fame for their accomplishments was a large part of the goal. Alexander the Great, for example, toted a copy of Homer's *Iliad*—in which heroic behavior in war was rewarded by "imperishable fame"—along with him on military campaigns. He also made sure that scribes accompanied him along on these exploits to record his unprecedented military exploits.

The word "fame" comes from the Roman goddess Fama, the personification of popular rumor. Fama repeated what she heard, first in a whisper to a few others, then louder and louder until all heaven and earth were informed. As this etymology suggests, fame has more to do with celebrity than anything else. It doesn't necessarily have to be conferred on superior or even good people. Those who lack the talent, skill, or prowess to achieve lasting, centuries-long greatness can also claim a measure of "fama" for themselves through other means.

In China, for example, an undistinguished minor official during the Jin Dynasty, Ge Hong (A.D. 283–343), desperately wanted to be immortal. He figured out a way to live beyond the grave by writing about himself. A literary wannabe, he was an avid practitioner of Taoist longevity techniques, and he was especially keen on developing a gold-based elixir of immortality. He also viewed fame as a viable alternative to literal immortality if his elixir proved elusive, observing that while "physical forms sink into the

earth, praise [of good men] continues to circulate and be recorded. Thus, whether a hundred or a thousand generations pass, people still remember [great men] this way."

However, Ge Hong was painfully aware that he was unlikely to attract the attention of historians. Consequently, he wrote an autobiographical account of his life with the explicit hope that he might be remembered by future generations. (Our mention of him here reveals that his effort to immortalize himself was not in vain!) Ge Hong was thousands of years ahead of his time in thinking that he could achieve lasting fame without any noteworthy achievements. By the sixteenth century, the invention of the printing press and the increasing popularity of portrait painting enabled many more people to have their life stories and physical images preserved for the future.

Celebrities are known for being known, even if they have never done anything particularly noteworthy or productive. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol famously predicted, "In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes." Less known, but perhaps more prescient, was Warhol's conjecture a decade later: "In fifteen minutes, everybody will be famous."

What a perfect depiction of the twenty-first century. In 334 B.C., Alexander the Great took ten years to conquer the world and earn enduring fame. In 2009, Joey "Jaws" Chestnut took ten minutes to devour sixty-eight hot dogs and garner international renown. Today, anyone with a cell phone who is camera-savvy enough to document himself stumbling around in a drunken stupor is a YouTube upload away from notoriety, albeit quite fleeting. The more sublimely ridiculous, the better: a sexy blonde named Justine Ezarik, known as a "lifecaster," has posted more than seventeen hundred videos on YouTube. She is so popular that her video story about trying to order a cheeseburger in a posh restaurant (featuring nothing but her Barbie-like face in different expressions) garnered six hundred thousand views in a week, earning her star status and guest TV appearances.

CELEBRITY CAN EVEN HAVE a psychologically uplifting effect on others. Try this thought experiment:

You're boarding a morning plane from New York to London, and you have a ticket in coach. The first-class passengers have already boarded and are sipping their coffee and orange juice, and as you walk by them you enviously check them out. There is one square-jawed fellow wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap pulled low, and a one-day grizzle who is reading a newspaper. He clearly doesn't want to be recognized, but he looks a little familiar. You know you've seen him before.

The liftoff goes smoothly, and soon the flight crew is coming around to take drink orders. Then the pilot's voice comes over the PA system. "Folks, it looks like we're going to get some severe turbulence up ahead. Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts."

You tighten your seat belt a little anxiously. A few minutes later, the plane feels like it's been walloped on the right side. It bucks for a bit, stabilizes, and then it feels like the bottom has fallen out. As you go down, people start to scream. Babies cry. The woman next to you has gone white, and she is fingering the crucifix around her neck. The thought occurs to you that the plane will end up in the Atlantic. You remember that the people on the American Airlines flight that flew into the Twin Towers called their loved ones on their cell phones to say goodbye. You start to reach for yours, then think again. "Hold on," you tell yourself. "Breathe."

You breathe, and the plane stops dropping, but it continues to buck like a rodeo horse. Then, mercifully, the bucking stops and the plane smooths out. You and everyone else on board breathe a huge sigh of relief. A cheer goes up. "Sorry, folks," says the pilot. "That was a big one. We're going to raise our elevation, and hopefully we'll be able avoid more turbulence."

People are talking all around you. The person in the seat behind you says, "Wow. Did you know George Clooney is on this plane? He's sitting up in first class. Maybe that's why we didn't go down."

If this sounds superstitious, it is; but research has shown that in fact, people believe that a plane is less likely to crash if a famous person is among the passengers, because proximity to a famous person confers upon you some magical sense of your own immortality.

Thoughts of death also increase admiration for famous people and be-

lief in the lasting nature of their work. After a death reminder, Americans viewed abstract paintings reputedly created either by Johnny Depp or by a relatively unknown artist, and they found the paintings "by" Johnny Depp more admirable. Death enhances our regard for celebrities because they provide proof that being remembered "forever" is possible.

Continuing the thought experiment, imagine you get to London and settle in at your hotel. You're still rattled, and you can't quite get the feeling of having had a near-death experience out of your mind. You call your spouse and tell him or her all about it, and about what the passenger behind you said about the movie star on the plane.

Then you turn on the television and absentmindedly start flipping through the channels. You run across an ad for a website called Namestar .net, which says that for the low, low price of $28.95 you can name a star after someone. "Looking for a unique, personalized gift?" the voice-over asks. "Give a star a name for someone! Don't let this opportunity to immortalize a loved one pass you by! Buy the Name a Star gift package for that special someone now! The perfect gift for all occasions." "What a great idea," you think. "I need a star for me."

One of our studies confirmed the plausibility of this anecdote. Participants were shown an advertisement for "YourStar.com," a now defunct Internet-based service, where people could pay to have a star named after them. YourStar.com claimed to work with an outfit called the Universal Star Council to ensure that each star is permanently registered with only one name, allowing the person to "own" a star for billions of years. After thinking about dying, people reported greater interest in having a star named after them, and a willingness to spend more money to do so.

In short, if you can't be a star, at least you can have one named after you that will be around for billions of years. And if you are utterly desperate or mentally unstable, you can seek lasting renown by committing horrible crimes. In a special Secret Service project conducted in the 1990s, psychologists studied case reviews of eighty-three people who attacked or threatened a prominent public official or popular figure. Achieving notoriety topped their list of motives. As a murderer in Wichita, Kansas, put it in 1978, "How many times do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper

Celebrities get their own stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, although, perhaps like all forms of symbolic immortality, up close and over time they look a bit dingy and lose their luster.

or some national attention?" Keats and a vicious murderer could not be more dissimilar, yet the same underlying desire motivated their sublime and egregious accomplishments.

LIVING LARGE: THE ALLURE OF WEALTH

If you can't pray your way into heaven, wait until science conquers death, feel sufficiently fortified by your place in an ongoing ancestral line, or become famous, money and stuff offer another gateway to immortality. The trappings of wealth are about much more than comfort and aesthetics.

They are also about feeling special and therefore immune to life's normal limitations.

Traditional economists assume that money was originally created, and still serves, only to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. As the Nobel economist Paul Krugman depicts this view, "The hypothetical Economic Man knows what he wants [and] his choices are driven by rational calculations . . . whether consumers are deciding between corn flakes or shredded wheat, or investors are deciding between stocks and bonds." From this perspective, all economic activity, and human behavior in general, results from considering the costs and benefits (although not always consciously) of existing options and choosing the best—that is, the most useful—alternative. However, we humans behave like *Homo economicus* only on occasion, and this über-rational conception of money and consumption does not tell the whole story, for money serves an archetypal role in human ritual and religion in direct service of transcending death.

Thousands of years ago, money originated in religious rituals as consecrated tokens with immortal connotations. The sacred value of the exchange was its primary purpose. In ancient Greece, families held communal feasts in honor of their heroic ancestors. The families believed that ancestors had the character and power of immortal gods and could thus provide protection, advice, and direction for their living progeny. So the living relatives sacrificed bulls (the word "capital" comes from "cattle") and roasted them on spits. Then they distributed the pieces of meat to everyone in attendance, withholding only the "surplus," a piece left on the spit to be "consumed" by the fire as an offering to the heroic ancestors.

The "surplus" meat on the spit was called the *obelos,* or "coin" (related to the word "obligation"). *Obeloi* were also made from pieces of metal, bearing images of individual ancestors. Outsiders could use these coins to join the feasts. People would eagerly trade goods in order to obtain these highly valued coins. Because they attributed magical qualities to the coins, people began to worship them. Carried as amulets, the coins derived their power from "basking in reflected glory" of the heroic ancestors depicted on them. In this way, the coins used in the communal feast kept the ancestors' sacred power circulating. Sacrificing the bulls and giving the surplus

to the dead ancestors showed reverence for the past. Sharing one's food with ancestors imbued the living with supernatural attributes to ensure prosperity in the future.

Originally, then, people didn't want money to buy stuff. They wanted stuff to exchange for money. Money was a tangible repository of supernatural clout. It still is. In Fiji, money is called *tambua,* derived from the word *tambu,* which means "sacred." In New Guinea, the Wodani of Irian Jaya use shell money; each shell is different and perceived as an immortal person. Gold has always been both a highly valued religious symbol of immortality and cherished coinage in many cultures throughout history. Then take a look at the back of an American dollar bill: *In God We Trust.* On the left of the bill is a pyramid, with an enlightened (literally) eyeball embedded in the top. According to Joseph Campbell, this symbolizes the eye of God opening at the apex of the pyramid conferring immortality to those who reach the top.

Although early humans valued money and possessions, they disdained having to work to get them. In the biblical story of Genesis, Adam and Eve lived an idyllic leisurely life until they were cast out of the Garden of Eden as punishment for their sins: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." The Bible explicitly linked work to both sin and death. The ancient Greeks also viewed manual labor as beneath the dignity of upper-class people. Plato and Aristotle emphasized that the majority of men labored "in order that the minority, the élite, might engage in pure exercises of the mind—art, philosophy, and politics."

Money, like fame, also confers the kind of laurel wreath that Keats was after—being well regarded by those still living. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* the less well known complement to his canonical work *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith observed that people pursue wealth not to "supply the necessities of nature" so much as to procure "superfluities" that satisfy the fundamental psychological imperative to be thought well of by others: "It is not wealth that men desire, but the consideration and good opinion that wait upon riches."

The physical stuff we accumulate may well last longer than we do. And, along with DNA, some fortunate people also inherit money and physical stuff. Amassing wealth marked the beginning of an ancient transition from relatively egalitarian seminomadic hunter-gatherer communities—in which people were valued for their actual abilities—to agricultural and industrial societies, in which people were measured less by actual achievement and more by prestige, which itself was largely based upon the acquisition and exhibition of wealth.

For aboriginal people, one way to secure power was to hold gift-giving festivals called "potlatches," which were their versions of extravagant holiday parties. As anthropologist Sergei Kan put it, a primary objective of the potlatch "was to create an impression of an endless supply of wealth." Members of Native American tribes of the Pacific coast from Oregon to Alaska have for centuries held potlatches on special occasions to display their wealth and thereby establish superiority over their peers. After months or years accumulating excessive resources, the wealthiest families would host festivities that began with dancing, singing, speeches, and feasting. The host then distributed gifts to the guests, including fish, meat, berries, skins, blankets, slaves, and copper shields. This process could take several days. Guests were often cajoled to accept more gifts than they could carry and eat more food than they could stomach. As gracious recipients of their neighbor's display of wealth, they were obliged to hold potlatches of their own, at which they tried to give gifts of greater value than those they had received in order to flaunt their own affluence. It was a competitive besting.

For those in larger societies, the accumulation of property and material goods also signaled royalty and privilege. In America, the term "conspicuous consumption" was coined during the Gilded Age to describe the profligate spending of moneyed families such as the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Vanderbilts. In the 1890s, when 92 percent of Americans earned less than $1,200 a year (with an average income of $380), Newport socialite Mamie Fish held an extravagant dinner party in honor of her dog, who came decked out in a $15,000 diamond collar. Not to be outdone, Theresa Oelrichs decorated her estate with white flowers and swans, and commissioned a flotilla of white ships to hover offshore. Grace Vanderbilt brought the cast of a popular Broadway show to Newport to play at a theater she had specially constructed on her property.

And just before the economic meltdown instigating the current recession, the Robb Report's 2007 Ultimate Gift Guide for Christmas included a 459-foot six-story "giga-yacht" for $250 million, a 300-carat diamond necklace for $16 million, and a $1.4 million "man cave" equipped with an antique pool table, two vintage pinball machines, and giant plasma television screens. In Singapore, $1,200 Jimmy Choo shoes and $850,000 Lamborghini sports cars sold briskly. Affluent Australians paid up to $2 million for special car license plates with one, two, or three digits; the lower the number, the higher the price. At Russia's second annual Millionaire Fair, "regular" Swiss GoldVish cell phones went from $18,000 to $150,000; the $1.27 million diamond-studded phone in a white gold case included a plaque certifying it was the world's most expensive mobile phone. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who already owns a Boeing 747, ordered an Airbus A-380 with a base list price of $320 million before modifications including bedrooms, a bar, and a gym.

Gratuitous spending is hardly confined to the wealthy, because we all like to feel rich, at least once in a while. In 2007, during the three days after Thanksgiving, 147 million Americans, almost half of the population and more than the number who voted in the 2004 presidential election, spent $16.4 billion shopping for stuff, mostly paid for by their soon-to-be-underwater home mortgages.

Bear in mind, however, that for many people the connection between fortune and immortality is fundamentally anchored in religious belief. Just like the ancient Greeks, in America, the early Protestants, especially the Calvinists, sought wealth as a sign of God's benevolent intentions toward them. Those who were not Chosen were (and still are, in many Calvinist minds) condemned to poverty.

Today, those in Pentecostal religious movements who subscribe to prosperity theology, also known as "Word of Faith," "Health and Wealth," or "Name It and Claim It," pursue wealth and spend lavishly because they believe God wants them to be rich. According to Edith Blumhofer, director

of Wheaton College's Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, "You don't have to give up the American Dream. You just see it as a sign of God's blessing." For example, George Adams, a car salesman who subscribes to this theory, sold a Ford F-150 pickup truck with a leather interior. "It's a new day God has given me!" he shouted. "I'm on my way to a six-figure income!" The implicit message is, and has long been, that wealth means we are favored by the gods (if not that we are gods ourselves).

One of us got this sense from a mere car rental while attending a pair of conferences in Seattle and Spokane, Washington, with a friend. They arrived at the Seattle airport to pick up a Ford Taurus, in keeping with the humble nature of their own cars, an old Dodge Caravan and Chevy Cavalier. As luck would have it, at the rental car counter, they were given the option of either an SUV or a Cadillac for a mere $5 more per day.

They looked at each other and blurted out simultaneously, "The Caddy." For seven glorious days, they were treated like superior beings. When they pulled up to hotels and restaurants in a shiny, sleek, leather-seated chariot, people seemed eager to see them. They were complimented on their "ride" everywhere they went. Giving up the keys to the Cadillac provoked a deep sadness. They felt demoted or thrown out of an exclusive club; in the Caddy, they felt "big," but in surrendering it, they shrank back down to their normal, merely human size.

Although neither of them was particularly materialistic or especially fond of cars, that week made them feel like emperors rather than measly mortals. If you can afford the finer things in life, people pay attention to you. You feel special. Your self-esteem, that critical bulwark against the fear of death, rises.

BUT JUST HOW CLOSELY is the desire for money and nice stuff related to the fear of death?

Let's say researchers ask you to complete a survey about depression, rating statements such as "I have trouble sleeping through the night," or you complete a survey about death, rating statements such as "The idea of never thinking again after I die frightens me." Then you peruse the following print advertisements:

> A shiny new Lexus RX300 SUV, described as "remarkably powerful, stronger than the average beast," with "3,500 pounds of towing capacity. . . . It's like no other vehicle on earth."
>
> A cylinder of Pringles potato chips, featuring a Pac-Man figure happily consuming some Pringles accompanied by the slogan "Once you pop, YOU CAN'T STOP" at the top of the page.
>
> A tiny, squat, energy-efficient Chevy Geo Metro shown on a highway in front of a city skyline. "It's stingy," reads the copy. "Geo Metro has the highest mileage in America. . . . It's smart. Geo understands the value of the dollar. . . . It's protected. A Bumper to Bumper Plus Warranty protects Geo for 3 years/50,000 miles."
>
> A pink-gold Rolex watch featuring a display "Oyster Perpetual Day-Date."

How do you rate these ads? How effective are they? How interested are you in buying the product after reading the ad, and how likely would you be to purchase a Lexus, Pringles, a Chevy Geo Metro, or a Rolex?

The researchers who conducted this experiment found that after the people in the study thought about death, it didn't change their opinion of Pringles or the Chevy. But they were much more interested in owning a high-status, self-esteem-boosting Lexus or Rolex. Other studies have shown that people who view death most negatively are most attracted to high-status material possessions, especially if they have shaky self-esteem. And after thinking about their mortality, people estimated that they would make more money in the future and spend more of it on luxuries like clothing and entertainment. Death reminders also spurred those with low self-esteem to plan more extravagant parties. Thoughts of death led people in

Poland to overestimate the physical size of coins and paper money; and Poles asked merely to count monetary notes rather than pieces of blank paper of the same size reported a reduced fear of death.

The findings of these experiments are inexplicable if people make economic decisions based solely on rational considerations. Rather, they confirm that managing existential terror underlies our insatiable desire for money and the urge to splurge, and they corroborate Tennessee Williams's observation in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that "the human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting."

HEROIC NATIONALISM AND CHARISMATIC LEADERS

People also gain a sense of symbolic immortality from feeling that they are part of a heroic cause or a nation that will endure indefinitely. Homer's epic poems and Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War described the feeling of transcendence that comes from being part of a powerful tribe, a great city, or a thriving, dominant empire. Through identification as an Egyptian, Mexican, Nigerian, or American, people can conceive of themselves as part of a stable and ongoing community united by a common background, conception of the world, and future destiny.

Nationalism acquires a sacred dimension when group identity is strengthened by the sense of being "chosen people" of distinctive character and origin who inhabit a hallowed homeland with a heroic history and a limitless future. And those who die for their country are immortalized in song and story, ceremony and monument. As the Roman rhetorician Cicero noted, *"Nemo unquam sine magna spe immortalitatatis se pro patria offerret ad mortem"* ("No one could ever meet death for his country without the hope of immortality"). "Every group, however small or great," Otto Rank observed, "has an 'individual' impulse for eternalization, which manifests itself in the creation of and care for national, religious, and artistic heroes."

Moreover, according to the great German sociologist Max Weber, charismatic leaders—those who possess, or are viewed by their followers as possessing, "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities"—often emerge during periods of historical upheaval. In a remarkable chapter in *The Denial of Death,* "The Spell Cast by Persons—The Nexus of Unfreedom," Becker provided a potent psychodynamic account of why people find charismatic leaders so alluring in troubled times and, more important, why and how particular individuals are able to capitalize on this proclivity to rise to power and alter the course of history.

Becker began by observing that charismatic leaders rarely assume power unilaterally without the enthusiastic assent of their followers. He then made the now familiar point that we humans procure psychological equanimity by being valued in the eyes of higher powers: at first our parents, and, as we mature, the culture at large. But when protracted difficulties or acute crises arise, when the crops fail and the hunters return empty-handed, when wars are lost, when people are plagued with economic woes and civil unrest to the point where the cultural scheme of things no longer seems to provide a reliable basis for feeling significant and secure, they will look elsewhere to fulfill that need.

Under such conditions, people's allegiance may shift to an individual who exhibits an "unconflicted" personality—in the sense of appearing supremely bold and self-confident—and offers a grand vision that affords a renewed prospect of being a valuable part of something noble and enduring. Furthermore, Becker noted, this charismatic individual typically performs a striking initiatory act that shines a magnifying light on him, makes him seem larger than life, and enthralls followers who wish they had the courage to follow suit. Teeming with admiration and sensing a way to feel significant again, people join the cause of the seemingly larger-than-life leader as a revitalized basis of self-worth and meaning in life. Nationalism, and passionate affection for, deference toward, and identification with, charismatic leaders, therefore supplies what Rank aptly dubbed "collective immortality" to satisfy our aching need for heroic triumph over death.

Becker's analysis explains the well-documented rise to power of Adolf

Hitler, the most notorious charismatic leader of the twentieth century. After the brutal suffering and humiliation of World War I and the Versailles Treaty, German national pride was shattered, along with trust in its leaders. Hitler's initiatory act was the failed "beer hall putsch" plot to overthrow the Weimar Republic government by kidnapping three of their leaders who were guests of honor at a gathering of three thousand businessmen in a Munich beer hall on November 8, 1923. Hitler burst into the room with his storm troopers, fired a pistol into the ceiling, and yelled "Silence!" at the stunned crowd. "The National Revolution has begun!" Hitler proclaimed, "The Bavarian and Reich governments have been removed and a provisional national government formed.... I am going to fulfill the vow I made to myself ... to know neither rest nor peace until the ... criminals had been overthrown, until on the ruins of the wretched Germany of today there should have arisen once more a Germany of power and greatness, of freedom and splendor."

Quite astonishingly, the crowd in the hall roared in approval and sang *"Deutschland über Alles"* (Germany above all). Professor Karl Alexander von Mueller of the University of Munich, who was in attendance, later reported: "I cannot remember in my entire life such a change in the attitude of a crowd in a few minutes, almost a few seconds.... Hitler had turned them inside out, as one turns a glove inside out, with a few sentences. It had almost something of ... magic about it." Although the putsch was quickly suppressed, Hitler gained national attention in his highly publicized trial for treason. The sympathetic German tribunal gave him a relatively light prison sentence. While incarcerated, Hitler refined and articulated his grandiose worldview in *Mein Kampf,* declaring himself Germany's divinely chosen savior and leader of the vastly superior Aryan master race who would attain their destiny as world rulers when the impurities within, especially the Communists and Jews, were eliminated.

The Nazis remained a marginal force until the Great Depression, when, with political dissatisfaction and economic fears on the rise, the party garnered 230 seats in the Reichstag, culminating in a deal with President Hindenburg to make Hitler chancellor as part of an elected coalition government in 1933. Once in power, he took complete control, and with the global economy on the mend, his approval by the German public soared.

Hitler's unconflicted personality was subsequently on full display in his grand speeches, in which he alternately soothed and exhorted the admiring and enthusiastic crowds with his absolute conviction and utter certainty about restoring German power and potency. And his rhetoric clearly revealed the central role of assuaging death fears and providing hope of death transcendence in the Nazi worldview. Hitler urged Germans to replace the worship of God for the worship of Germany, declaring in 1923, "We want no other God except Germany." The Führer became Germany's infallible, omnipotent messiah. The SS and other party organizations resembled religious orders; their ceremonial halls looked like secular monasteries. The Nazis established their own national holidays. On January 30, for example, they celebrated Hitler's assumption of power in 1933. Nazi ceremonies supplanted Christian baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

The Nazis venerated their dead. Indeed, like other fascist movements, they seemed to have a pathological affection for death. "Long live death" was a famous fascist slogan. However, they believed that "the dead are never really dead" and that they could be revived by the faithful exhortation of the living. In *Mein Kampf,* Hitler wrote that Germans lost in previous wars could be resurrected: "Would not the graves of all the hundreds of thousands open, the graves of those who with faith in the fatherland had marched forth never to return? Would they not open and send the silent mud- and blood-covered heroes back as spirits of vengeance to the homeland?" In a 1935 speech commemorating the death of sixteen of his followers in the 1923 putsch, Hitler affirmed their symbolic immortality: "These sixteen soldiers have celebrated a resurrection unique in world history.... They are now attaining German immortality.... Yet for us they are not dead.... Long live our National Socialist Germany! Long live our people! And may today the dead of our Movement, Germany and its men, living and dead, live on!"

Of course Hitler wasn't the only prominent twentieth-century leader who came to serve as the prophet of symbolic immortality for an entire

nation when turbulence and death were in the air. Vladimir Lenin was the Russian Communist revolutionary and political theoretician who in 1917 took the helm of what would become the Soviet Union. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, the Communists outlawed religion, choosing to worship Lenin instead. Russians viewed Lenin as a messiah and savior who would make life on earth as it was purported to be in heaven. In 1918, Lenin ordered the Commissar of Enlightenment to construct giant monuments throughout the Soviet Union to serve as constant reminders of great revolutionaries. Busts of Lenin were installed in twenty-nine major cities in the next two years, along with numerous political posters with Bolshevik icons and images of Lenin and Marx. Routinely praised for his superhuman powers, Lenin was often depicted as larger than the sun and the earth, with his outstretched raised hand conferring a benediction or blessing in ways that were reminiscent of Russian Orthodox images of Christ or saints. In this way, Lenin seemed to be promoting both his own immortality and that of those who followed him.

After his death in 1924, Lenin's body was embalmed and placed in a sarcophagus inside a gleaming red granite mausoleum on Red Square abutting the Kremlin for public viewing. This was in accord both with the Russian Orthodox belief, like that of the Egyptians and Chinese before them, that the body of a saint did not decay after death, and with the expectation of eventual scientific resurrection of the dead—ancient and modern versions of immortality coexisting. Russian peasants and workers were devastated by the news of Lenin's death. Many refused to believe it. For decades to come, legend had it that Lenin, like Elvis, was still alive, traveling incognito, observing the work of the authorities, and taking notes to ensure the emancipation of the proletariat.

And around the same time Hitler seized full control in Germany, Mao Zedong emerged as the leader of the Communist Party in China, following the 9,600-kilometer Long March in 1934–1935. Only one tenth of Mao's followers survived the trek as they retreated from Jiangxi province to escape from Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang army. The fact that he had survived the ordeal gave Mao an aura of prestige and invincibility that contributed to his deified status in the years to come. Like Lenin and Hitler, Mao promised a revolutionary transformation resulting in an earthly paradise of infinite duration. The Chinese Communist slogan *May the revolutionary regime stay red for ten thousand generations* says it all. Ten thousand generations is longer than the current age of the human race. And "ten thousand" in Chinese numerals connotes infinity, so it's pretty clear that Mao, like Hitler, was digging in for the long haul. The revolution would be "eternal and indestructible." And in his 1957 poem "The Immortals," Mao wrote that those killed in battle would "soar lightly to the heaven of heavens."

To demonstrate experimentally that charismatic leaders become more appealing when existential concerns are aroused, after a reminder of death or an aversive control topic we had participants read campaign statements by three candidates in a hypothetical gubernatorial election. One candidate was task-oriented and emphasized the ability to get the job done: *"I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done so that there is no ambiguity."* A second was relationship-oriented and emphasized the importance of shared responsibility, relationships, and working together: *"I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state. I know that each individual can make a difference."* The third candidate was charismatic, bold, self-confident, and emphasized the group's greatness: *"You are not just . . . ordinary citizens, you are part of a special state and a special nation."* Participants then selected the candidate they would vote for. The results were striking. In the control condition, only four of ninety-five participants voted for the charismatic candidate, with the rest of the votes split evenly between the task and relationship oriented leaders. However, following a reminder of death, there was almost an eightfold increase in votes for the charismatic candidate. Intimations of mortality amplify the allure of charismatic leaders (and, as we will see in the next chapter, this is true for real candidates in actual presidential elections as well).

"HISTORY," ERNEST BECKER CONCLUDED, can be viewed as "a succession of immortality ideologies." Passionate devotion to our tribe or nation and steadfast allegiance to charismatic leaders, particularly in unsettled times,

mitigates existential terror by infusing us with a sense of pride and power accompanied by the assurance that our group will persist in perpetuity.

"AS LONG AS WE ARE NOT ASSURED OF IMMORTALITY, WE SHALL NEVER BE FULFILLED"

Mao's revolutionary minions soared to the heavens. The ancient Egyptians went by boat. Contemporary immortalists are happy on earth as long as they can stay there forever. The particulars vary from place to place and time to time, but the underlying eternalizing urge remains potent, persistent, and intact. We crave literal immortality, and the symbolic kind, too. Forced to choose, most would agree with Woody Allen that literal immortality is preferable: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying." We like long shots at the track and in the lottery, but when it comes to the immortality sweepstakes we'll take the sure thing every time. Only by not dying can immortality be unequivocally assured.

It has always been this way. During a battle in the *Iliad,* Hector's ally Sarpedon said to his cousin Glaukos, "could we . . . live forever deathless, without age, I would not ever go again into battle, nor would I send you there for honor's sake!" But when it comes to something as pressing as immortality, people will take whatever they can get, so long as one's name is not "writ in water."

WE HAVE NOW SEEN how expanding consciousness gave rise to potentially debilitating and demoralizing terror. Such fear would have rendered our ancestors quivering piles of biological protoplasm on the fast track to oblivion save for their ingenious construction of a supernatural dimension of reality in which death was literally and symbolically averted. Consciousness became a viable form of mental organization, unleashing a torrent of imagination and creativity, resulting in some of our finest discoveries and inventions. And thanks to effective terror management—the belief that

one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe—life for many of us is generally pleasant and productive, and sometimes even noble and heroic.

However, the supernatural cultural scheme of things that we humans embrace to manage existential terror is nevertheless ultimately a defensive distortion and obfuscation of reality to blot out the inevitability of death. And as Ernest Becker explained, this "necessary lie" about the nature of reality invariably sows interpersonal strife and undermines our physical and psychological well-being. Next we will consider why and how such complications arise.