



# The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life

*Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski*

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**The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life** Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski  
**A transformative, fascinating theory—based on robust and groundbreaking experimental research—reveals how our unconscious fear of death powers almost everything we do, shining a light on the hidden motives that drive human behavior**

More than one hundred years ago, the American philosopher William James dubbed the knowledge that we must die “the worm at the core” of the human condition. In 1974, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, arguing that the terror of death has a pervasive effect on human affairs. Now authors Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski clarify with wide-ranging evidence the many ways the worm at the core guides our thoughts and actions, from the great art we create to the devastating wars we wage.

*The Worm at the Core* is the product of twenty-five years of in-depth research. Drawing from innovative experiments conducted around the globe, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski show conclusively that the fear of death and the desire to transcend it inspire us to buy expensive cars, crave fame, put our health at risk, and disguise our animal nature. The fear of death can also prompt judges to dole out harsher punishments, make children react negatively to people different from themselves, and inflame intolerance and violence.

But the worm at the core need not consume us. Emerging from their research is a unique and compelling approach to these deeply existential issues: terror management theory. TMT proposes that human culture infuses our lives with order, stability, significance, and purpose, and these anchors enable us to function moment to moment without becoming overwhelmed by the knowledge of our ultimate fate. The authors immerse us in a new way of understanding human evolution, child development, history, religion, art, science, mental health, war, and politics in the twenty-first century. In so doing, they also reveal how we can better come to terms with death and learn to lead lives of courage, creativity, and compassion.

Written in an accessible, jargon-free style, *The Worm at the Core* offers a compelling new paradigm for understanding the choices we make in life—and a pathway toward divesting ourselves of the cultural and personal illusions that keep us from accepting the end that awaits us all.

## **Praise for *The Worm at the Core***

“The idea that nearly all human individual and cultural activity is a response to death sounds far-fetched. But the evidence the authors present is compelling and does a great deal to address many otherwise intractable mysteries of human behaviour. This is an important, superbly readable and potentially life-changing book.”—*The Guardian* (U.K.)

“A neat fusion of ideas borrowed from sociology, anthropology, existential philosophy and psychoanalysis.”—*The Herald* (U.K.)

“Deep, important, and beautifully written, *The Worm at the Core* describes a brilliant and utterly original program of scientific research on a force so powerful that it drives our lives.”—**Daniel Gilbert, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *Stumbling on Happiness***

“As psychology becomes increasingly trivial, devolving into the promotion of positive-thinking platitudes, *The Worm at the Core* bucks the trend. The authors present—and provide robust evidence for—a psychological thesis with disturbing personal as well as political implications.”—**John Horgan, author of *The End of War* and director of the Center for Science Writings, Stevens Institute of Technology**

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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