



The Heroics of Everyday Life: A Theorist of Death Confronts His Own End Joy and hope and trust are things one achieves after one has been through forlornness.”

A conversation with Ernest Becker by Sam Keen



Sam Keen

Ernest Becker: You are catching me in *extremis*. This is a test of everything I've written about death. And I've got a chance to show how one dies.

The attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts his death.

Sam Keen: This conversation can be what you want it to be. But I would like to relate your life to your work. And I would like to talk about the work you haven't been able to finish.

Becker: That's easy enough. As far as my work is concerned, I think its major thrust is in the direction of creating a merger of science and the religious perspective. I want to show that if you get an accurate scientific picture of the human condition, it coincides exactly with the religious understanding of human nature. This is something Paul Tillich was working on but didn't achieve because he was

working from the direction of theology. The problem is to work from the direction of science. If I have anything that I can rub my hands together in glee about in the quiet hours and say, "Tee hee, this is what I've pulled off," I think I have delivered the science of man over to a merger with theology.

Keen: How have you done this?

Becker: By showing that psychology destroys our illusions of autonomy and hence raises the question of the true power source for human life. Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and particularly Otto Rank, demonstrate how we build character and culture in order to shield ourselves from the devastating awareness of our underlying helplessness and the terror of our inevitable death. Each of us constructs a personality, a style of life or, as Reich said, a character armor in a vain effort to deny the fundamental fact of our animality. We don't want to admit that we stand alone. So we identify with a more powerful person, a cause, a flag, or the size of our bank account. And this picture of the human condition coincides with what theology has traditionally said: man is a creature whose nature is to try to deny his creatureliness.

Keen: And when the half-gods go, the gods arrive? When we abandon our pseudocontrol we discover that we are lived by powers over which we have no control? Schleiermacher, the 19th-century theologian, said the human condition was characterized by absolute dependency, or contingency.

Becker: Exactly. I also see my work as an extension of the Frankfurt school of sociology, and especially of the work of Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer says man is a willful creature who is abandoned on the planet; he calls for mankind to form itself into communities of the abandoned. That is a beautiful idea and one that I wanted to develop in order to show the implications of the scientific view of creatureliness.

Keen: What are the implications?

Becker: This gets us into the whole problem of evil. One of the things I won't be able to finish, unfortunately, is a book on the nature of evil. I wrote a book called *The Structure of Evil*, but I didn't talk much about evil there. When I got sick, I was working on a book in which I try to show that all humanly caused evil is based on man's attempt to deny his creatureliness, to overcome his insignificance. All the missiles, all the bombs, all human edifices, are attempts to defy eternity by proclaiming that one is not a creature, that one is something special.

Searching out a scapegoat comes from

the same need to be special. As Arthur Miller said, "everybody needs his Jew." We each need a Jew or a nigger, someone to kick to give us a feeling of specialness. We want an enemy to degrade, someone we can humiliate to raise us above the status of creatures. And I think this is an immense datum, the idea of the dynamic of evil as due fundamentally to the denial of creatureliness. Obviously, the idea is that if you accept creatureliness you no longer have to protest that you are something special.

Keen: But in your writing you stress the need to believe that we are special. You say that we must all be heroes in order to be human.

Becker: That is true. But the important question is how we are to be heroes. Man is an animal that has to do something about his ephemerality. He wants to overcome and be able to say, "You see, I've made a contribution to life. I've advanced life, I've beaten death, I've made the world pure." But this creates an illusion. Otto Rank put it very beautifully when he said that the dynamic of evil is the attempt to make the world other than it is, to make it what it cannot be, a place free from acci-

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dent, a place free from impurity, a place free from death.

The popularity of cults like Nazism stems from the need for a heroic role. People never thrive as well as when they feel they are bringing purity and goodness into the world and overcoming limitation and accident.

Keen. Do you think any of the present political crisis is due to our lack of heroic ideals? Whatever the reality of the Kennedy Administration, it did produce a sense of Camelot and a new heroic image. Nixon has given us lackluster and short-haired plumbers.

Becker: Well, America is very much looking for heroes, isn't it? I think one of the tragedies of this country is that it hasn't been able to express heroics. The last heroic war was World War II. There we were fighting evil and death. But Vietnam was clearly not a fight against evil. It is a terrible problem and I don't pretend to solve it. How does one live a heroic life?

Society has to contrive some way to allow its citizens to feel heroic. This is one of the great challenges of the 20th century. Sometimes there is a glimpse of constructive heroics—the CCC in the mid-'30s,

the camaraderies in a just war, the civil-rights campaigns. Those people felt that they were bringing a certain amount of purity and justice into the world. But how do you get people to feel that society is set up on a heroic order without grinding up some other society, or finding scapegoats the way the Nazis did?

Keen: In the terms of your understanding of society, it seems to be a Catch-22 problem. If the mass of people are encapsulated in character armor that prevents them from facing the horror of existence and therefore seeing the necessity for a heroic life, then the mass heroic models must be, by definition, unconscious. Isn't the idea of heroism an elite idea? In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell says the hero's journey is not taken by every man.

Becker: I am using the idea of heroism in a broader sense. To be a hero means to leave behind something that heightens life and testifies to the worthwhileness of existence. Making a beautiful cabinet can be heroic. Or for the average man, I think being a provider is heroic enough. In stories and plays they make fun of the old folks when they said, "Well, I've always provided for you. I've always fed you." But those are the heroics of the average man. It is not something that one should disparage. I suppose (I haven't thought about it) that the American heroism is that one has always made a good living, been a good breadwinner and stayed off welfare roles.

Keen: The hero as self-sufficient man.

Becker: Yes. But I don't think one can be a hero in any really elevating sense without some transcendental referent, like being a hero for God, or for the creative powers of the universe. The most exalted type of heroism involves feeling that one has lived to some purpose that transcends one. This is why religion gives the individual the validation that nothing else gives him.

Keen: I remember Hannah Arendt's lovely statement that the Greek polis was formed by the warriors who came back from the Trojan wars. They needed a place to tell their stories, because it was only in the story that they achieved immortality. Democracy was created to make the world safe for telling stories.

Becker: In primitive cultures the tribe was a heroic unit because its members and the ancestral spirits were an audience. The tribe secured and multiplied life and addressed itself to the dead ancestors and said, "You see how good we're doing. We are observing the shrines and we are giving you food." Among some Plains Indians, each person had a guardian spirit, a per-

sonal divine referent that helped him to be a hero on earth. I think this accounts for a good deal of the nobility and dignity in some of those Indian faces we see in photographs. They had a sense that they were contributing to cosmic life.

Keen: It may be much harder for modern man to be a hero. In tribal cultures, heroism had to do with repeating archetypical patterns, following in the footsteps of the original heroes. The hero was not supposed to do anything new. We have thrown away the past and disowned traditional models. So the terror of the modern hero is that he has to do something new, something that has never been done before. We are justified only by novelty. I

"Here we are all eggs, placental eggs. We all hatched on this planet and our main life's task becomes to deny that we're eggs."

think this is why modern man (and with women's liberation, modern woman) is anxious and continually dissatisfied. We are always trying to establish our uniqueness.

Becker: Yeah, that's very true. Tillich concluded that for modern man to be heroic, he has to take nonbeing into himself in the form of absurdity and negate it.

Keen: In Buddhism and Eastern philosophy there is an even greater fascination with embracing the Void. The hero is the one who can overcome the desire to exist and embrace nonbeing.

Becker: I have a feeling there is a certain cleverness in Buddhism. Since you can't have what you want in the world you renounce it altogether; since you can't beat death, you embrace it. They keep talking about getting off the wheel of karma but with tongue in cheek, hoping they will get on again. Buddhism never appealed to me because it lacks an explanation of why we're here. Western man is interested in whys, and causes.

Here we are all eggs, placental eggs. We all hatched on this planet and our main life's task becomes to deny that we're eggs. We want to protest that we're here for some higher reason and we've been trying to find out what this reason is. There's no answer but the reason must be there. And it seems to me Buddhism never tries to answer these questions: Why are we here? Why do eggs hatch on this planet in the form of embryos? This seems to me our major question, the one that torments us all.

Keen: You will need to tell me when you are becoming tired because I can come and go as your energy permits.

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Becker: Well, I don't know what course my illness is going to take, so I would just as soon get the conversation finished. This fatigue is not going to hurt me terribly.

I would like to talk about some of the misgivings I have about my earlier work. One of the big defects with my early work is that I tried to accommodate ideas to the opportunities of the '60s, to be relevant.

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Recently I have tried to present an empirical picture of man irrespective of what we need or want. Today I hold, with the Frankfurt school, that the only honest praxis is theory. There is nothing honest for the intellectual to do today in the world mess except to elaborate his picture of what it means to be a man. Man is the animal that holds up a mirror to himself. If he does this in an entirely honest way, it is a great achievement. To just run, to be driven without elaborating an image, without showing oneself what one is, this makes a creature very uninteresting.

Keen: Perhaps. But Hegel made just the opposite point: it is in blindness rather than self-knowledge that man serves the purposes of the Absolute Spirit. The cunning of the Spirit is that it uses the partial passions of man to serve the ends of the cosmos. And somehow our self-ignorance is necessary to the whole drama.

Becker: I think Hegel may be right after all. We are here to use ourselves up, to burn ourselves out. But it is still the job of the thinker not to be blindly driven and to try to hold up a mirror for man. It doesn't follow that everyone should be in the business of trying to figure things out. In his study of primitive man, Paul Radin makes the distinction between the thinker and the man of action. The Shaman is a thinker and everybody knows he is an oddball, and not a model for other members of the tribe. But the thinker of today imagines that it is the task of everybody to gain insight and be self-realized.

Keen: So the task of going beyond character is a very limited human vocation and the ordinary man must live a heroic life within the limits of his character armor?

Becker: Yes. Very few people can live without repression, without limitations. Knowing how difficult self-awareness is, and what a hazardous and anxious thing it is to get rid of character armor, I would not

recommend it for all people. Fritz Perls said "to die and be reborn is not easy." That is the understatement of the year. I can't imagine what many of the everyday people I know would do without their character armor. For most people mental health is a controlled obsession, the channeling of one's energies in a limited and definite direction. Those people who are self-realized still live in a very obsessed way, don't they? They have to write another book, do another job, grow, improve. They are really not very attractive creatures. They are different from the average man only in knowing that they are obsessed. I mean, here is the proof of that: I am lying in a hospital bed dying and I am putting everything I have got into this interview, as though it were really important, right? And I consider myself to be a self-realized person in the sense of having seen through my Oedipus complex and broken my character armor. But if I am going to live as a creature, I have to focus my energies in a driven way.

Keen: Is it accidental that you became fascinated with the question of death and wrote *The Denial of Death* and then became ill? Was the fascination a kind of premonition?

Becker: No. That book was finished a full year before I became sick. I came upon the idea of the denial of death strictly from the logical imperatives of all my other work. I discovered that this was the idea that tied up the whole thing. It was primarily my discovery of the work of Otto Rank that showed me that the fear of life and the fear of death are the main-springs of human activity.

Hi Nurse, am I still alive?

Nurse: You're still alive.

Becker: This girl takes such excellent care of me. Such excellent care. It's amazing.

Nurse: Anything you need?

Becker: I would like some ice to suck on.

Nurse: OK.

Keen: Sometime I want to push you on some critical points. Is your energy high enough now, or should I wait until this afternoon?

Becker: My energy is good. My mother [the intravenous glucose] is working well.

Keen: OK. Here goes. It seems to me you do an excellent job in reviving the lost realism of the tragic vision of life, but I find a certain distortion in your perspective. Rudolph Otto said that if we look at the holy—life in the raw—it can be characterized by three ideas. It is a mystery; it is terrifying or awesome; it is fascinating and desirable. You seem to over-

stress the terror of life and undervalue the appeal. Life, like sexuality, is both dreadful and desirable.

Becker: Well, all right. I think that is very well put, and I have no argument with it except to say that when one is doing a work, one is always in some way trying to counter prevailing trends. My work has a certain iconoclastic bias. If I stress the terror, it is only because I am talking to the cheerful robots. I think the world is full of too many cheerful robots who talk only about joy and the good things. I have considered it my task to talk about the terror. There is evil in the world. After the reports that came out of Nuremberg about the things that were done in the death camps, it is no longer possible to have a naturally optimistic view of the world. One of the reasons we are on the planet is to be slaughtered. And tragedy strikes so suddenly. We must recognize this even as we shield ourselves against the knowledge. All of our character armor is to shield us from the knowledge of the suddenness with which terror can strike. People are really fragile and insecure. This is the truth. There is a beautiful line from

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The Pawnbroker where the main character says "I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do anything." We do anything to keep ourselves from the knowledge that there is nothing we can do. We manufacture huge edifices of control. In Russia, for instance, they don't report disasters like plane crashes. In paradise, these things are supposed to have been eliminated.

Keen: It is like the *Christian Science Monitor*—it monitors out catastrophes.

Becker: Well, this is the control aspect of character armor which is so vital to the human being. I don't know what people would do if they had to live with the knowledge of the suddenness of catastrophe. You just can't worry that any car on the street might strike your child on the way to school. But it might. It is natural for man to be a crazy animal; he must live a crazy life because of his knowledge of death.

Keen: Another critical probe: You say: Man lives on two levels: he is an animal and a symbol-maker, hence he lives in one world of fact and another of illusion; and our character armor builds the illusory edifices that keep us from the threatening knowledge of the raw facts of life. But it

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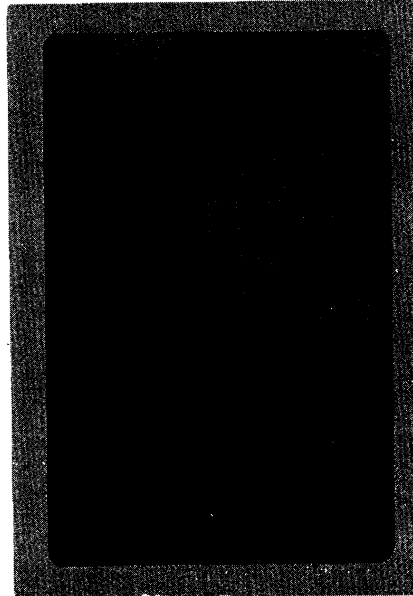
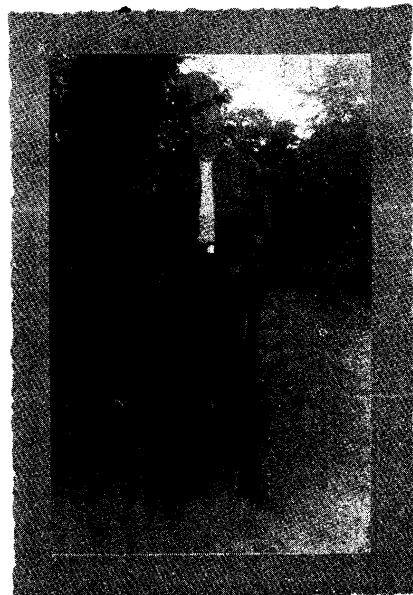
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seems to me you fall into the old positivist distinction between fact and interpretation or data and meaning. I doubt that we have anything like a raw world of facts to which we then add a layer of symbolic interpretations. Tillich always insisted: "Never say only a symbol." Symbolic knowledge is the highest form of knowledge we have. How can you justify the position that the *factual* world elicits only primal terror and certainty of the finality of death? The fact is we do not know. As Kierkegaard might have said, "Where do you, Ernest Becker, a historical

ERNEST BECKER, realistic theorist, finished high school in time for World War II. In the '50s, center left, he worked at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. Students at Berkeley and San Francisco State, in the '60s, loved his spacious, fiery mind.

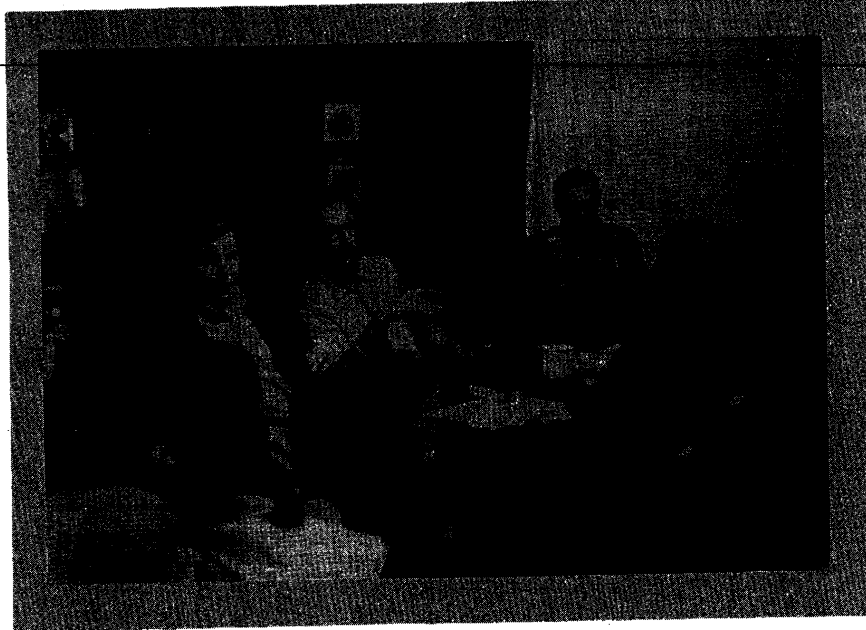


individual, stand in order to give so certain a separation of fact and illusion?"

Becker: Yes, I see. That is a very good point. I don't really know how to answer that. What you are saying is that the symbolic transcendence of death may be just as true as the fact of death.

Keen: Right, but let me elaborate a little. Our modes of thinking about the world are basically dual. We can call them right- and left-brain dominance, or Dionysian and Apollonian, or primary- and secondary-process thinking. If we take our clues from the rationalistic, or Apollonian mode of thinking, time is linear and we are all individual atoms that end in death. But in the unconscious there are no straight lines, no time and no death.

Becker: I see what you mean. I would have to agree that the transcendence of death, symbolically or from the point of view of the whole universe, may be very



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real. But as a philosopher I am trying to talk to the consciousness of modern man, who by and large doesn't live in a Dionysian universe and doesn't experience much transcendence of time. I am speaking to the man who doesn't have a canopy of symbols to surround himself with and who is, therefore, quite afraid.

Keen: But our experience of being captives within time and victims of time may be more a sociological than a philosophical datum. It may reflect a judgment we should make about our society rather than about the universe. In most pre-technological cultures, death was not as much of a problem as it is today. In some cultures, death was seen as analogous to the transition from winter to spring and the resurrection of the earth.

Becker: That's right. Certain peoples believed that death was the final ritual

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promotion, the final rite of passage where the person became individuated to the highest degree. But we don't hold those beliefs any more.

Keen: But we have to ask ourselves why we don't. Are they intellectually invalid or have we only lost the knack of thinking with anything except the left hemispheres of our brains? One thing that is emerging from the new studies of ESP, psychokinesis and psychic healing is that the orthodox models of mind and reality that have been considered beyond question since the 19th century are no longer adequate. If mind is not an isolated brain-mechanism within a machine-body, if there is something like a field or a pool of consciousness (the metaphors are makeshift) a hypothesis like reincarnation or the survival of consciousness becomes more interesting.

Becker: I have to admit that I am of the Apollonian bias and I can't fathom the mind of those who are into ESP and that sort of thing. I want to keep an open mind, but based on the way I see the world and feel about it, people don't communicate. People are really separate minds and separate bodies. Children and parents don't understand each other. It takes 20 years of marriage to finally communicate with one's spouse. Everyone lives in his own little compartmentalized world to an extent that is terrifying. Sam, let's put it this way, I have grown increasingly suspicious of all idealisms and all hopefulneses. For

me, it works like Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* that give a true picture of the human condition—the terrible, hopeless, isolation of people. To me it seems like grabbing at straws to talk about left brain and right brain.

Keen: Your personal philosophy of life seems to be a Stoic form of heroism.

Becker: Yes, though I would add the qualification that I believe in God.

Keen: And to come to that point of trust you must break all illusions?

Becker: Right. The fundamental scientific, critical task is the utter elimination of all consolations that are not empirically based. We need a stark picture of the human condition without false consolations.

Keen: I prefer a more pluralistic approach. On certain days, I operate dominantly as a thinking being; on other days I am dominantly a compassionate being. And on some few lucky days I live largely in sensations. From which type of experience should I draw my clues to interpret the world? On my hard days I am a Stoic and I know that the courageous thing to do is look straight at the wintery smile on the face of truth. But on those soft days when I am permeable to everything around me, anything seems possible and I know that the courageous way is the one with greater trust and greater openness to what is strange.

Becker: I think that is good and true but it represents a level of achievement. Joy and hope and trust are things one achieves after one has been through the forlornness. They represent the upper reaches of personality development and they must be cultivated. But for people to talk of joy and happiness and to be dancing around completely under the control of their Oedipus complexes, without any self-knowledge, completely reflexive, driven creatures, doesn't seem honest to me. I always watch Billy Graham because there is something spooky about this kind of reflexive joy that I can't understand. The thing has all the characteristics of straight conditioning phenomena. It is a Skinner box. And at that level I don't like to talk about faith and joy. But in the way you express it, I would want to begin talking about a higher human achievement where intellect is left behind and emotional and other types of experience start coming into play. I suppose that in my writing I have been doing an intellectual house-cleaning to make room for the higher virtues.

Keen: In the moment when your mind flips into the space where you can say, "I am a Stoic but I believe in God," what

does the world look like? How do you see yourself?

Becker: Well, I suppose the most immediate thing I feel is relieved of the burden of responsibility for my own life, putting it back where it belongs, giving it back to whoever or whatever hatched me. I feel a great sense of relief and trust that eggs are not hatched in vain. Beyond accident and contingency and terror and death there is a meaning that redeems, redeems not necessarily in personal immortality or anything like that but a redemption that makes it good somehow. And that is enough. . . .

Keen: I realize that this morning I held you at arm's length. My attitude was a perfect illustration of your thesis about the denial of death. I wanted to exile you in a category from which I was excluded—namely, the dying. That is human enough but very silly because it prevents me asking you some questions I would like to ask. As a philosopher you have thought as hard about death as anybody I know. And now, as it were, you are doing your empirical research.

Becker: It only hurts when I laugh.

Keen: And somehow, I would like to ask you what you can add now that you are closer to experience.

Becker: I see what you mean, yes. Gee, I don't know. I can't say anything that anyone else hasn't already said about dying or death. Avery Weisman and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross have been working with patients who were dying. What makes dying easier is to be able to transcend the world into some kind of religious dimension. I would say that the most important thing is to know that beyond the absurd-

"Based on the way I see the world and feel about it, people don't communicate. People are really separate minds and separate bodies."

ity of one's life, beyond the human viewpoint, beyond what is happening to us, there is the fact of the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos that are using us for some purposes we don't know. To be used for divine purposes, however we may be misused, this is the thing that consoles. I think of Calvin when he says, "Lord, thou bruises me, but since it is You, it is all right." I think one does, or should try to, just hand over one's life, the meaning of it, the value of it, the end of it. This has been the most important to me. I think it is very hard for secular men to die.

Keen: Has this transcendent dimen-

sion become more tangible to you since you became ill or were you always connected through some religious tradition?

Becker: I came out of a Jewish tradition but I was an atheist for many years. I think the birth of my first child, more than anything else, was the miracle that woke me up to the idea of God, seeing something pop in from the void and seeing how magnificent it was, unexpected, and how much beyond our powers and our ken. But I don't feel more religious because I am dying. I would want to insist that my waking to the divine had to do with the loss of character armor. For the child, the process of growing up involves a masking over of fears and anxieties by the creation of character armor. Since the child feels powerless and very vulnerable, he has to reinforce his power by plugging into another source of power. I look at it in electrical-circuit terms. Father, mother, or the cultural ideology becomes his unconscious power source. We all live by delegated powers. We are ut-

"For the child, the process of growing up involves a masking over of fears and anxieties by the creation of character armor."

terly dependent on other people. In personality breakdown, what is revealed to the person is that he is not his own person.

Keen: We are all possessed. Perhaps when we reach 40 we begin to have the chance to expel our interiorized parents and make autonomous decisions.

Becker: Maybe. It is a fascinating phenomenon because the fundamental deception of social reality is that there are persons, independent, decision-making centers walking around. But the human animal has no strength and this inability to stand on one's own feet is one of the most tragic aspects of life. When you finally break through your character armor and discover your vulnerability, it becomes impossible to live without massive anxiety unless you find a new power source. And this is where the idea of God comes in.

Keen: But that is only one side of the story. When the personality defenses are surrendered, there is more anxiety but there is also automatically more energy, more eros, available to deal with the world since less of it is being invested in a holding action. So there is an overflow, a net increase in joy.

Becker: Yes, definitely. There is an increase in creative energies.

Keen: I would like to go on a different

tack. In the days before Job, illness was thought to be the result of a divine judgment. If you were sick, it was proof that you were in a state of sin. With the introduction of the naturalistic theory of disease, suffering was severed from guilt. Now, with the advent of psychosomatic medicine, we have brought Job's comforters back to the bedside and we talk about parallels between styles of life and styles of illness. And the cruelest question that is always present, even if unasked, in the presence of illness is: "Why are you sick?" or worse yet, "Why have you done this thing to yourself?" I wonder what thoughts you have about the relation of styles of life and types of disease.

Becker: I think one of the great tragic paradoxes is that we are finding out so much about illness and psychosomatic disease and that we can't do anything about it. I go back to what I said this morning: we are driven creatures. Suppose we find out that a certain style of life leads to heart attacks or cancer. I think the approach still has to be the microscopic one, that is the physiochemical one, because practically, people cannot change their characters. It is like the knowledge we have about how parents can induce schizophrenia in children. We know about double-binds and things like that, but we still can't envision societies taking children away from their mothers. There is no way to program society so that people aren't helplessly dependent upon other people. And this leads to depression when betrayal or abandonment occurs. So the approach must be a remedial, biochemical one, where you give people shots so they don't feel bad or at least tone down the symptomatology.

Keen: It seems to me that in some way your thought is excessively masculine which is forgivable since you are a man. But when you talk about the effort of man to be self-sufficient, I wonder if the condition you portray is not more the masculine condition than the human condition, and if it is not exaggerated by the kind of rational, competitive, masculine culture in which we live. If you were a woman how would your philosophical perspective differ?

Becker: That's some question. I don't know. Certainly heroism, the search for scapegoats, the avoidance of death and the vain attempt to make the planet into something which it is not are as much feminine as masculine traits.

Keen: But traditionally women satisfied their immortality drive more by creating children than by fabricating artifacts. Men must create *ex nihilo* while women

have the option of biological reproduction. I think because men's creativity inevitably involves the ephemeral world of symbols, there is greater insatiability among males than females. We make a building or write a book and then we have to do it all over again to keep proving to ourselves that we are creative.

Becker: A book is such a shallow phenomenon compared to a child, isn't it? And it is such transient heroics compared to a baby.

I don't know about my work. I think there is an awful lot of femininity in it in terms of the kinds of things I had to feel in order to write. When it comes to the drive toward heroism, I think men are more competitive than women. The whole drama of history is the story of men seeking to affirm their specialness. One war after another has been caused by the efforts of man to make the world into something it can't be. And look at the energy we put into symbolic pursuits. You just can't imagine a feminine Bobby Fischer with that fantastic, energetic devotion to a symbolic game—chess.

Keen: If you were assigned to the job of creating a symbolic portrait of Ernest Becker to accompany this conversation, what would it look like?

Becker: If I had to do a symbolic portrait? Maybe what is significant is that I hesitate every time you ask me a personal question. My personality is very much in the background in my work. The only dis-

"A book is such a shallow phenomenon compared to a child, isn't it? And it is such transient heroics compared to a baby."

tinctive thing I think I have really achieved as a person is a self-analysis of an unusually deep kind.

Keen: You were never in analysis?

Becker: No, and that is a long story I had hoped at some later date to be able to write up because I think it is very important.

Keen: Then why don't you tell me about your self-analysis?

Becker: Let me say a word about this other thing first. If I were forced to paint a portrait of myself the things that come to mind are Rembrandt's successive self-portraits, in which we see him aging and see the effects of his life on his face. First, there would be the young man and every successive portrait would show the face marked by the teachings of life, by the disillusionments. It would show maturity as disillusionment into wisdom. But my first

choice would be to let my ideas be presented without an accompanying portrait of me. I am very much against the cult of personality. I can't stand actors' faces, or gurus' faces. I object to pushing the image of oneself as the answer to things, as the one who is going to figure things out. I have never forgotten what Socrates said. He claimed that he was obviously a better teacher than the Stoics because of his ugliness. He argued that the Stoics won people over by their handsomeness, so if a person was won over by his doctrine it had to be the doctrine itself. One ought to be won over by the force of intellectual ideas, not by the personality of the thinker. And again there is something false about a face because it implies that there is an independent person behind it, which is very rarely the case.

Keen: The self-analysis?

Becker: I think that was a big event in my life lasting over a period of years. In my mid-30s, I suddenly started to experience great anxiety, and I wanted to find out why. So I took a pad and pencil to bed and when I would wake up in the middle of the night with a really striking dream I would write it down, and write out what feeling I had at certain points in the dream. Gradually my dream messages, my unconscious, told me what was bothering me—I was living by delegated powers. My

"Gradually my dream messages, my unconscious, told me what was bothering me—I was living by delegated powers. My power sources were not my own."

power sources were not my own and they were, in effect, defunct. I think if you are talking about analysis what you are revealing to the person is his lack of independence, his conditioning, his fears and what his power source is. To find my way out of the dilemma my self-analysis revealed, I started exploring other dimensions of reality, theological dimensions and so on.

Keen: How has the theological perspective changed the way you view man?

Becker: Well, for instance, I was once a great admirer of Erich Fromm but lately I believe he is too facile and too optimistic about the possibilities of freedom and the possibilities of what human life can achieve. I feel there may be an entirely different drama going on in this planet than the one we think we see. For many years I felt, like Fromm and almost everybody else, that the planet was the stage for the future apotheosis of man. I now feel that something may be happening that is

utterly unrelated to our wishes, that may have nothing to do with our apotheosis or our increasing happiness. I strongly suspect that it may not be possible for mankind to achieve very much on this planet. So that throws us back to the idea of mankind as abandoned on the planet and of God as absent. And the only meaningful kind of dialogue is when man asks an absent God, "Why are we here?" I suppose, to use Tillich's terms, I am changing from the horizontal to the vertical dimension: I think a person must address himself to God rather than to the future of mankind. It would be funny, wouldn't it, if Jerusalem did win out over Athens?

Keen: The most passionate statement I heard Tillich make in the years I studied with him was that the genuinely prophetic thinkers in the modern age were those who spend a lifetime combating the Grand Inquisitor. It seems that the visions of apotheoses, of ideal states and of utopias in which there is to be no repression inevitably lead to the five-year plans and the bloodiest political purges.

Becker: The beautiful thing about America is, that whatever is wrong with us, we have not gone the road of sacrificing people to a utopian ideal.

Keen: The Greeks knew what they were doing when they said hope was the last of the plagues in Pandora's box. It seems that disillusionment must come before trust.

Becker: And the sense of joy is something achieved after much tribulation where, in the Franciscan sense, all activity stops to listen to a bird. But that is an achievement and not something that one gets in a couple of group sessions or by a few Primal screams. At the very highest point of faith there is joy because one understands that it is God's world, and since everything is in His hands what right have we to be sad—the sin of sadness? But it is very hard to live that.

I think it is the task of the science of man to show us our real condition on this planet. So long as we lie to ourselves and live in false hopes, we can't get anywhere. I don't know where we are going to get, but I think truth is a value, an ultimate value and false hope is a great snare. I always like Nikos Kazantzakis' phrase "hope is the rotten-thighed whore." I think the truth is something we can get to, the truth of our condition, and if we get to it, it will have some meaning. It is this passion for truth that has kept me going.

Keen: Are there other things you would like to talk about?

Becker: We seem to be all talked out, don't we? In an uncanny way we have covered everything. You have put some ques-

tions to me that really stumped me and made me think beyond what I would normally do. I am really surprised that I was able to respond to you as well as I have, because I have been very tired. But the mind works quite a bit better than the body in that sense; it has its own alertness.

I am sorry to have put you through this trial. It is a little bit like the anthropologist with the dying American Indian, you know, trying to get the last names down on the tape recorder before the Indian expires and there isn't time. You never had an interview like this before, did you?

Keen: No. But once I opened the possibility and you wanted to do it, it had to be done. And it has been an event in my life.

Becker: I am sorry I probably won't get

"There is joy because one understands that it is God's world, and since everything is in His hands what right have we to be sad?"

to see it. It's funny, I have been working for 15 years with an obsessiveness to develop these ideas, dropping one book after another into the void and carrying on with some kind of confidence that the stuff was good. And just now, these last years, people are starting to take an interest in my work.

Sitting here talking to you like this makes me very wistful that I won't be around to see these things. It is the creature who wants more experience, another 10 years, another five, another four, another three. I think, gee, all these things going on and I won't be a part of it. I am not saying I won't see them, that there aren't other dimensions in existence but at least I will be out of this game and it makes me feel very wistful.

Keen: I hope I will feel that way too. I think the only thing worse would be not to feel wistful. So many people are finished before they die, they desire nothing more: they are empty.

Becker: That's a good point.

Keen: I know that what I fear more than anything is not having the green edge there until the end.

Becker: Well, if you are really a live person, I don't see how that is possible. You are bound to be more and more interested in experience. There is always more to discover.

Keen: I guess I should go.

Becker: What time is it?

Keen: A quarter after six . . .

To obtain reprints of this article, see page 102. For a tape of this conversation, see page 102.