

## Embracing the Ultimate Unknown

By Scott Barry Kaufman on April 27, 2020

A few years ago, I had an existential crisis. I underwent a very benign medical procedure, for which I was told that the probability of death was very low. I remember wanting to respond, “You mean not zero? You mean there’s a chance I could die?” The procedure went according to plan, but I was left with a sudden awareness of my mortality. For some strange reason, I went nearly forty years of my life without the deliberate conscious awareness that this life, at least in this body, won’t last forever. And quite frankly, the thought terrified me.

To get a grip, I read the classic book *The Denial of Death* by anthropologist Ernest Becker. Drawing heavily on the work of the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Becker declares that there is a “rumble of panic underlying everything.” According to Becker, this is the result of an “existential paradox”:

This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life, and self-expression—and with all this yet to die.

I definitely apprehended the “rumble of panic” that Becker described, but his proposed solutions—which included taking a “leap of faith” into the “invisible mystery” of creation that has a design beyond human comprehension—offered no guidance as to how to actually live my life even if I took such a leap of faith.

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