Fear of Life and Fear of Death – A Cross Cultural Study Part I: General Considerations

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Abstract: Fear of death and fear of life are two psychological forces that are important in driving human behavior. The understanding of these forces may help therapists to better identify the underlying dynamics of their client's behavior and responses. This article proposes a conceptual framework that puts both fears into a broader, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical context. The article explains why fear of life and fear of death may be universal and presents arguments supporting the notion that they have prenatal origins. Using the proposed framework, both fear of the death of other people and fear of the life of other people can actually be seen as projections of these fears for oneself.

Keywords: death, life, fear, prenatal, psychoanalysis

Speaking to friends, family, and clients, and reading newspapers, magazines, and novels, it seems that many people accept fear of death and–possibly to a lesser degree–fear of life as "normal" feelings that exist everywhere. Yet relatively little effort is made to better understand these feelings, both in day-to-day life and in psychology. What is the source of our fear of life and our fear of death? How can these feelings affect our emotional disposition and our behavior?

Anthropologist Becker (1985) stated that the fear of death is universal, that the terror of death is at the core of human endeavors: "Because all individuals instinctively fear their own annihilation, death confers a narcissistic need to preserve the individual's self-esteem in the

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face of the pointlessness of life" (p.116). This may explain why, as Lowen (2012) says, the modern individual is committed to being successful instead of being a person. Thus, expectations and demands from the outside world become essential and with it, the fear of not being able to measure up to these expectations. This may also be a reason why fear of life seems widespread. If the fear of death and fear of life are omnipresent, they potentially also have a profound influence on the way we live our lives, which makes a much more fundamental investigation worthwhile. This can help the therapist to better identify the underlying dynamics that drive a client's behavior and responses, and accordingly adapt the focus and approach of therapy. The author has recently conducted client-based research into the presence and some of the characteristics of both these fears (Moonen - Budhi Nugroho, 2017). A conceptual framework is needed that puts both fear of death and fear of life into a broader, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical context in order to properly understand, interpret, and utilize in therapy the results of this research– and similar research conducted by others. This article provides such a conceptual framework. Using the insights from depth psychology, philosophy, and some recent neuro-scientific findings on prenatal psychological development (Hüther & Krens, 2011), possible sources of fear of life and fear of death are addressed as well as their descriptive characteristics and the dynamics of these fears in the human psyche. A simple descriptive model is proposed that can be used by a therapist to recognize if the client may indeed be affected by one of these fears (or both).

Perspectives on Fear of Life and Fear of Death

If we are to investigate fear of death and fear of life in a meaningful way, it is important to be clear about how we are using the terms fear of life and fear of death and what qualities we associate with each. Are these feelings universal? What is the source of our fear of death and of our fear of life? Different scholars look at these questions in very different ways. In their comprehensive study, "The Universal Fear of Death and the Cultural Response," Moore and Williamson (2003) show how, through the ages, fear of death has been a shaping influence on cultures, religions, philosophy, and reason, as well as modern thought. They show that this influence occurs across the world and they conclude that:

> The evidence suggests that human progress is indeed ultimately driven by fear of death. Death, in all its complexity, finality, and absurdity, its challenge to existence, its ugliness, pain and isolation,

> and its power to deprive, continues to hold sway over humankind. (p. 11)

And also:

> Culture is the primary vehicle through which passion and reason are mediated, and by which the pangs of death are lessened. Culture ennobles efforts at self-restraint and turns into heroes those who deny the self and face the possibility of self-annihilation for a larger cause. Through culture, the insulting banality that death confers on life is transformed through symbolism into a noble quest for being, a heroic struggle against the forces of evil. (p. 12)

Many scholars have given consideration to the human fear of death. Aristotle referred to death as "the most terrible of things" (Moore and Williamson, 2003). Many of the early philosophers were trying to provide arguments why one should not fear death. This implies that they were indeed familiar with fear of death as a condition in humans. Some, such as Plato (Edman, 1930), argued that death should not be feared because the soul does not perish. Others like Epicurus (Bailey, 1926) reasoned that there is literally nothing after the body dies and therefore there is nothing to be feared either:

> We don't have to fear death because, firstly, nothing follows after the disappearance of the body, and, secondly, the experience of death is not so: 'the most terrible evil, death', is nothing for us, since when we exist, death does not exist, and when death exists, we do not exist. (p.1)

During medieval times and the renaissance, theologians and philosophers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant all have taken up Plato's argument and expanded on the notion of an afterlife, giving this as a reason why death should not be feared. It has only been with the arrival of psychology in the 1870s that this fear of death became an object of study and consideration in its own right. Scholars started to ask questions like "What is the impact of fear of death on the human psyche?", "Where does the fear of death originate?", and ultimately, What is fear of death?"

The latter question has led to various ways to "dissect" and describe fear of death. For example, Hoelter and Hoelter (1978) identify eight distinct dimensions to fear of death (fear of dying process, fear of premature death, fear for significant others, phobic fear of death, fear of being destroyed, fear of the body after death, fear of unknown, and fear of

the dead). According to Florian and Mikulincer (1993), fear of death has three components (an intrapersonal component related to the impact of death on the mind and the body, an interpersonal component that is related to the effect of death on interpersonal relationships, and a transpersonal component that concerns fears about the transcendental self, composed of fears about the afterlife and punishment after death). Langs (2004) distinguishes three forms, namely predatory, existential, and predator death anxiety. He makes these distinctions based on their perceived effect on the human psyche. He postulates that predatory death anxiety mobilizes, either consciously or unconsciously, a fight or flight response. Existential death anxiety is sometimes experienced consciously, but mostly in the deep unconscious. It activates the use of denial mechanisms as a way of protecting the conscious mind from being disruptively overwhelmed. It may cause behaviors such as irrational violence and/or the seeking of excessive power and wealth as a way of creating the illusion of immortality. The third form, predator death anxiety, arises when humans actually harm others (physically or emotionally). According to Langs (2004), it triggers conscious and/or unconscious guilt. All of these descriptions or models of fear of death highlight certain important aspects of it. Taken together, they also show the many facets and complexity of this fear. Later in this article, the author proposes a simple framework that may encompass most of the facets mentioned here.

A lot less has been written about the fear of life. Nevertheless, a philosopher as early as Socrates has already been implicitly acknowledging its existence by saying, “This thing [being sentenced to death] that has happened to me is likely to be a good thing, and those of us who believe that being dead is an evil cannot be thinking rightly.” (as cited in Austin, 2010, p.40)

The expulsion from Paradise, as narrated in the Book of Genesis, is often interpreted as symbolizing birth. If this is so, this biblical story also expresses fear of life, since the world after this birth is full of pain and sorrow, in contrast to the supposed blissful condition in the womb. Another historical reference to fear of life comes from the New Testament, where Jesus tells his audience:

> For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

> Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them . . . He who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.' (Matthew 25: 14-30 and Luke 19:12-27)

This parable clearly refers to the fear of the third servant to use his talents, to make mistakes, to take risks, and to realize his potential. All of these can be unambiguously understood as the symptoms of fear of life. So, from the above it can be reasonably assumed that mankind already recognizes not only fear of death but also fear of life for eons.

One of the few contemporary sources on fear of life is Lowen (2012), who states that it reflects one's early life experiences, including the parents' influence on the child to "mold" it to society's expectations (Lowen, 2012):

> Parents as representatives of the culture have responsibility to inspire their children with the values of the culture. They make demands upon a child in terms of attitudes and behaviour that are designed to fit the child into the social and cultural matrix. On one hand the child resists these demands because they amount to a domestication of his animal nature. He must be 'broken in' to make him part of the system. On the other hand the child wishes to comply with these demands to keep love approval of his parents. Unfortunately, in most cases the process of adapting the child to the culture does break his spirit, which makes him afraid of life. (p.3)

In Lowen's (2012) view, these influences, and especially the parental expectations, have formed into a pattern of behavior arising from internal conflict and causing a degree of neurosis that is present in most modern humans:

> We want to be more alive and feel more, but we are afraid of it. Our fear of life is seen in the way we keep busy so as not to feel, keep running so as not face ourselves. Therefore the modern individual is committed to being successful. Not to being a person. He belongs rightly to the 'action generation', whose motto is do more but feel less. (p. 1)

Thus, fear of life can be directly related to the expectations and demands that the outside world, represented initially by the parents and other caretakers on whom the child depends, impresses upon the individual. And since this pattern both develops from and keeps alive the social and cultural matrix, without being aware, it may be passed on from generation to generation. According to Sherman (2014), most of the time, "it recedes into a barely noticeable murmur of anxiety, worry, discontent and distrust of our own lives" (p.1). Some of the symptoms that are typically associated with fear of life are: the sense that life will never quite live up to its promise; being afraid to fully be oneself; inability to sense [one's being]; inability to fully enjoy pleasurable experiences; fear of reaching out to others; fear of rejection; being protective, defensive, guarded, and closed in relationships with others; sexual anxiety and the inability to fully function in life. These symptoms can also be interpreted as an idealization mechanism (Rump, 2002). If a parent has high expectations of the child, that parent can be said to idealize the child and put it on a pedestal. This leads to a degree of distancing or separation between the parent(s) and the child, as the connection to the real person, accepting all of his or her strengths and weaknesses as well, is lost. The separation is then internalized in the child, who will distance him or herself from (experiencing) the real Self.

Most authors address either fear of life or fear of death and do not connect the two. However, Freud and some of his students, like Melanie Klein (Demir, 2008), connect the element of life with the element of death. Freud seems to have been ambivalent about the fear of death. On the one hand, he is quoted as stating that the fear of death "dominates us oftener than we know" (as cited in Drobot, 2002). On the other hand, Freud did not accept fear of death as a driving psychological force, "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death" because, as Freud goes on: "whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators so that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality" (as cited in Drobot, 2002, p. 62). Freud hereby seems to follow at least the first part of Epicurus's argument. When he was confronted with the omnipresence of death during (and after) the First World War and the psychological distress this caused, around 1920 Freud developed the opposing concepts of Life Instinct and Death Instinct (Demir, 2008). His [Death] Instinct Theory postulated that all living creatures engage in an ongoing scrimmage between competing impulses for activity and survival on the one hand, and withdrawal and death on the other. Klein elaborated on the Instinct Theory with the Life Instinct and the Death Instinct as essential elements in the functioning of

the ego. She identified them with Eros/Love and Thanatos/Hate respectively (as summarized in Drobot, 2002).

Eros	Thanatos
Life, Love, Creation, Attraction, Union, Integration, Reparation, Abundance, Wholeness, Harmony, Beauty, Guilt, Pleasure, Motivates towards satisfaction, fertile, reproduction, building and creating.	Death, Hate, Destruction, Repulsion, Separation, Disintegration, Fragmentation, Privation, Parts/Pieces, Anxiety, Ugliness, Envy, Displeasure, Motivates towards aggression, sterile, empty, depression and deterioration.

Klein (Demir, 2008) also acknowledged the unconscious fear of annihilation as being directly related to these instincts. From this acknowledgment and a comparison of the above descriptions of the basic instincts with the symptoms typically associated with fear of death and fear of life respectively, the author suggests that the Life Instinct (Eros/Love) can actually be equated to fear of death and that, conversely, the Death Instinct (thanatos/hate) can be equated to fear of life.

The Origins of Fear of Death and Fear of Life

The above descriptions of fear of death and fear of life bring up the questions at what phase of human development they become identifiable and what is their source or trigger. Psychological measures, reaction times, and questionnaire rating scales have been used to scientifically test the presence of fear of death in young children (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). In this way, the existence of fear of death has been demonstrated in children as young as age four. Death is the most commonly feared item and remains the single most commonly feared item throughout adolescence (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Rump (2002) postulates that the origins of this fear can be found at least as early as the moment of birth by stating that every human being has a fear of annihilation that manifests itself as a fear of transformation at the moment of birth.

Similarly, Lowen (2012) and Sherman (2014) contend that the fear of life finds its origins at the birth of a human being, when

> Without warning, we are abruptly awakened into a wild, raging storm of what we will eventually come to call experience, feeling, sensation, emotion, and so forth. Consciousness of our existence is driven from its deep slumber in the womb into a startling eruption of violent and erratic movement, pain, pressure, noise, glaring light, and all the drama that attends our expulsion into the world. Fear and contraction inevitably ensue. (Sherman, 2014, p.1)

However, if it is possible that both these fears are present at the moment of birth, the possibility that they find their origins before birth, when the subject is still a fetus in the womb, should also be examined. For this to be true, it is necessary that a fetus in the womb can already have experiences and feelings that build up to become part of its unconscious mind and which survive into its postnatal life. There is a substantial body of evidence that this is indeed the case. Current neuro-scientific findings underscore the critical importance of prenatal development on psychological growth as shown by Hüther, a professor of neurobiology at the University of Göttingen, Germany, and Krens, a Dutch psychotherapist with a primary focus on prenatal psychology, in their book *Das Geheimnis der ersten neun Monate. Unsere frühesten Prägungen (The Mystery of the First Nine Months: Our Earliest Formative Influences*) (Hüther & Krens, 2011). Kohler (2013) summarizes this pre-natal psychological development as follows:

> The mother archetype becomes active within hours of conception, and complexes, such as hyperactivity and depression, can constellate already in the womb. Learning commences in the womb and includes the evaluation as good or bad of experiences made since conception. The emotional lives of the mother and of the people in her world deeply influence the foetus both through direct physiological connection and through indirect sensory perception. At birth the child is already a combination of both "nature" and "nurture", i.e. the result of a unique set of genes and the unique experiences made in the womb. (p.2)

According to Hüther and Krens (2011), we never really learn anything "new." "Not new" in this context means "not without a prior association." Everything we learn either builds on or modifies something that we already know. Thus, a child is born with a large amount of already existing experiences, in addition to the lust and joy of integrating new insights and information with this pre-existing experience base.

In depth psychology there is also a growing awareness of the critical importance of the child's prenatal development for the structure and functioning of personality. Analyst Kohler (2013) in his paper "Archetypes and Complexes in the Womb" wrote:

> The emotional life of the mother deeply influences the life of the foetus which is connected to the mother with the umbilical cord. Since feelings of the mother have a physiological basis and counterpart, any change of the mother's feeling state is immediately and automatically transmitted to the foetus. Changes in feelings result, among other consequences, in changes of the hormonal levels in the mother's blood, of the amount of the available oxygen, and of the frequency and strength of the heart beat. (p.10)

In light of this, Kohler (2013) also argues that:

> Learning by the child does not begin only at birth, but begins immediately after conception. Quite possibly, a human being learns more in the first nine months (during pregnancy) than in the entire remainder of life. Furthermore, this learning does not occur in a vacuum but is embedded in the relationship within and without the embryo. . .without are the relationships of the foetus to the mother and the people to whom she relates. This means, most importantly, that we, the adults – be we more or less "adult" – do and can have an influence on what and how the foetus learns. (p.4)

Thus, it can be said that a fetus in the womb already has experiences and feelings that build up to become part of its unconscious mind and which survive into its postnatal life. From this, it is only a small step to argue that, at this very early stage in a person's life, there already exists a sense of what is good for this child and what is bad or [potentially] fatal (Kohler, 2013), which in turn makes it likely that this early stage fear of death already starts to play a role.

If it is true that the origins of fear of life and fear of death can be found in prenatal feelings, fears, and expectations and also that both these fears can be found throughout the ages, this begs the question whether or not fear of life and/or fear of death can be considered archetypal in nature. To answer that question, we must first consider what makes an archetype. Based on Jung (2009), Chalquist (n.d.), Sharp (1991) and Hopcke (1999), the author has identified four properties that together define an archetype:

(1) it operates unconsciously, outside of the cognitive mind,

(2) it is universal, common to all human beings,
(3) it has been inherited, from one generation of humans to another, and
(4) it operates like a psychic filter or mechanism that processes individual experiences to form images, symbols, ideas, notions, feelings, and emotions.

Collectively, the images, symbols, ideas, notions, and feelings that are formed through the action of an archetype are often called archetypal images. It should be noted that the filter mechanism itself cannot be directly recognized by the conscious mind, only indirectly through its effects–the archetypal images that it forms.

The author's own client-based investigations provide strong support for the notion that both fear of death and fear of life find their origins before birth. By using regressive analysis of multiple single cases, the author has been able to show that the prenatal experiences that can be brought up from the unconscious include clearly identifiable feelings of fear of life and of fear of death (Moonen-Budhi Nugroho, 2017). Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate further if fear of life and fear of death meet the above criteria and can be classified as archetypes. This investigation can be done as part of the wider client-based research, involving subjects from diverse cultures, age groups, and social background, which the author is recommending.

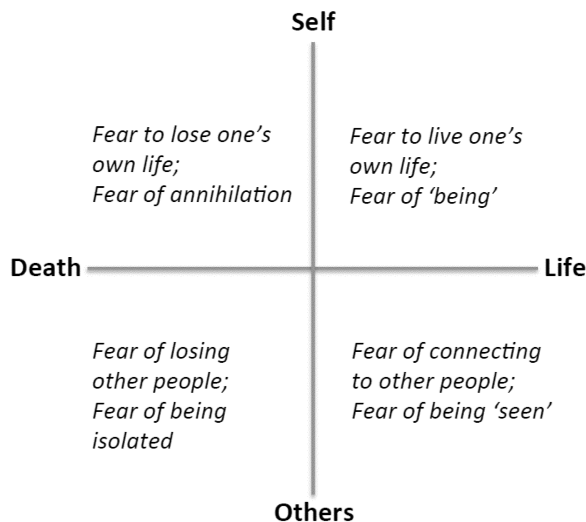
Fear of Life and Fear of Death in relation to "Self" and "Others"

From the perspective of depth psychology it is important to understand the dynamics of the fear of life and fear of death in an individual's psyche. In some of the literature, when fear of death is referred to, a distinction is made between the fears that a person holds for his or her own life and/or death and those that a person may hold for the life(s) and death(s) of other people, including those who are close to him or her (Lowen, 2012; Hüther & Krens, 2011; Hoelter & Hoelter, 1978). The first expression of fear of death is the existential fear of being annihilated; the latter amounts to the fear of being left behind, of being isolated. Whilst, therefore, it is fairly easy to understand how one can fear the death of others, it may be less obvious how someone could also fear the life of others. Since the fear of death of others immediately implies that there must exist a relationship between oneself and these others (whose death is being feared), somehow the fear of life of others must also relate to oneself. After all, if the other(s) is/are totally unconnected to the person in question, their lives are–psychologically speaking–irrelevant, one way or the other. With this in mind, it is possible to understand the fear of life of

others as being the true counterpart of the fear of death of others. In other words, where the latter is the fear of being isolated, the former is in fact the fear of being connected, of being "seen" and regarded by others–and therefore also embodies the fear of being rejected.

This understanding makes it possible to construct the simple framework presented in figure 1.

Figure 1



However, taking these notions one step further, the author argues that, actually, the "Self" side and the "Others" side are one and the same. The reason for this is that the "Others" side is nothing other than a projection of the "Self" side. Again, this is most easily understood when looking at the fear of death.

Clearly, the death and loss of the mother is the most lethal of events that could happen to a child. Therefore, if one makes the assumption that the fetus can have a sense of apprehension of the possibility that mother may die, this equates a sense apprehension of the possibility of its own death. This sense is carried forward and continues in early childhood, where the child is still fully dependent on the mother. Gradually, the circle expands to include the father and other caretakers. As the child develops, the loss of others may no longer mean the loss of its own life in a literal sense but, more and more, it means the loss of its life in terms of its possibilities for self-realization and self-fulfillment. In addition, at a yet later age, when images and symbols play an increasingly important role,

the image of the dead will become an unavoidable reminder of the inevitable end to one's own life.

In a very similar way, the fear of life of others can be understood to be a projection of the fear of life of oneself. As the author has demonstrated earlier, the fear of life of others is the fear of being connected with others. Naturally, being connected to other people brings with it the reality of being evaluated and judged by the same people, to be "seen" by others for who one really is. This also implies the possibility that these "others"–who could for example be parents or grandparents, teachers, or co-workers–find out that one doesn't measure up to expectations or even is an outright disappointment, which would be extremely hurtful. Even if the response from the others to one's "being" is positive and supportive, this may be perceived as just raising the bar of expectations even further. All the sensations that can be experienced in interactions with others–as joyful, painful, or unexpected as they may be–amount to only one thing: truly sensing that one is a real person, being very much alive and therefore exposed and vulnerable. The author's own findings, from regressive analysis of multiple single cases, confirm the above (Moonen-Budhi Nugroho, 2017). These findings show patterns that link the feelings of fear of life or fear of death to specific unconsciously stored themes that were experienced by the clients as fetuses in the womb.

Conclusion

Throughout the ages, fear of death and–to a lesser degree–fear of life have been recognized by scholars as important driving forces of human endeavor and behavior. Classic Greek philosophers as well as medieval and renaissance theologians and philosophers were mainly concerned with the question why people should or should not fear death. The arrival of psychology in the late 1800s also meant that these fears became objects of study and consideration in their own right. Scholars started to "dissect" and describe fear of death and fear of life. Given the acknowledgment of the existence of both fear of life and fear of death throughout the ages and also across cultures it must be considered very likely that these fears are universal and possibly of an archetypal nature. Client-based research, involving subjects from diverse cultures may be able to provide further confirmation of this.

Fear of death is usually associated with a desire to prove oneself, to be successful, or to "live on the edge," etcetera, and thus to be defiant of death. Fear of life, on the other hand, is typically linked to fear of not measuring up to the expectations of others, fear of being fully be oneself, inability to fully enjoy pleasurable experiences, fear of reaching out to others and/or to fully commit oneself, fear of rejection, sexual anxiety,

etcetera. Freud was one of the first modern psychologists to connect the element of life with the element of death, talking about a Death Instinct and a Life Instinct. However, where Freud had difficulty to fully accept the notion of fear of death, his student Klein not only accepted that there exists an unconscious fear of annihilation but also that fear of death (or the Life Instinct) and fear of life (or the Death Instinct) are two driving forces in the functioning of the Ego that work as an opposing pair (Demir, 2008). Various contemporary authors have used a multitude of different distinctions to describe and analyze especially fear of death. A common thread between these is that –in one way or another– each distinguishes between the fear of death of oneself and the fear of death of others. In this article, the author has taken this notion further by showing that the same distinction can be made in the case of fear of life.

In order to bring these concepts together, the author has proposed a simple model that puts fear of life vs. fear of death on one axis and self vs. others on a second axis, providing four quadrants. For each of the major descriptors of either fear of life or fear of death it proved possible to identify the quadrant to which it belonged. The model proved highly useful to understand how each of the fears, i.e. fear of death of self, fear of life of self, fear of death of others and fear of life of others, relate to each other. Using the model, it was possible to show how both fear of death of others and fear of life of others can actually be seen as projections of these fears for the self.

Finally, this study has also considered where and when in a person's life fear of life and fear of death may originate. There exists significant evidence from clinical research that fear of death already exists in young children (aged four years and above). At the same time, various scholars in the field of depth psychology argue that fear of life originates during the birth process. However, when we also consider recent neuro-scientific findings that show that a fetus in the womb already has experiences and feelings that build up to become part of its unconscious mind and which survive into its postnatal life, the possibility must be considered that both these fears already start to develop before birth. Client-based research by the author using regressive analysis–which is described in a separate paper–has provided strong support for this possibility. It is strongly recommended that more client-based research is conducted to further confirm this.

In summary, this study has provided a conceptual framework that puts both fear of death and fear of life into a broader, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical context which may prove useful to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of these fears and that can help interpret client-based research into the subject and that can equally

be used by a therapist to recognize if the client may indeed be affected by one of these fears (or both).

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