

Death Wish
Why So Many People Choose to be So Destructive
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
December 12, 2021

There may be no existential threat in history that proves humanity's collective insanity more than our widespread failure to adequately combat Global Warming. If it goes unabated, Global Warming could be a death sentence for us all and will certainly make life on Earth unbearable, just as it did only two days ago when one of the most destructive tornadoes in a hundred years, fueled by warmer weather than usual in December, left a path of devastation and death across four states. Scientists have understood the impacts greenhouse gases are having on our climate for over a hundred years, yet as their predictions have increasingly come true, resistance to doing anything about it has also increased. The same can be said of the gun control measures needed in our country to stop an epidemic of mass homicides. But the more need there is for action, the more rigid the opposition is to doing anything about this horrifying problem. Why?

This widespread disregard for the destruction of life and the suffering of others isn't reserved for matters of extinction and murder. The rising costs of healthcare in our own nation is a case in point. What is more important to our quality of life than to be cared for when we are sick or injured, and the security of knowing our loved ones will be cared for if and when necessary? If our love for others is most proven by our care for them when they need it most, then our unwillingness to do so as a nation likewise proves how callous we are toward suffering and, thus, for life itself. Why?

Contaminated water, air-pollution, poverty, inequality, authoritarianism, and lack of human rights are among the most pronounced causes of human suffering in the world. Yet, as a world, there are too many of us who don't seem to care; making it difficult for the rest of us to make meaningful strides in overcoming these challenges. Why? How is it possible for so many people to ignore the obvious suffering of others and the destruction of life itself?

I want to explore what I believe is the answer to this seemingly inexplicable question by turning to one of my favorite thinkers, Erich Fromm, who was the first to seriously suggest the possibility that an entire society can be mentally ill in his book, *The Sane Society*. This is not to suggest that everyone in our society is callous toward life, only that there are enough who are that it's difficult for the rest of us to make much headway on addressing the concerns that most threaten our lives. It is difficult, for example, for us to make long term changes to help address climate change when about half or more of us are willing to elect political leaders who claim they disbelieve in global warming, refuse to cooperate with anyone who does, and promise to undue any positive measures already taken, like the Paris Climate Agreement, just as soon as they are in power.

In another of his books, *The Heart of Man*, subtitled, *It's Genius for Good & Evil*, Erich Fromm provides us with a framework for understanding the mystery of why when faced with the

choice between good and evil too many of us choose the latter. It's important to remember here that for Fromm "the principle that 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*"¹ So a better way to express the question before us, rather than using the terms "good" and "evil," is to ask why, when faced with the choice of doing what is beneficial to human welfare and what is detrimental to human welfare, too many of us choose the latter?

In this way, good and evil are not abstract forces over which we have little influence. They are not Fates that hover over and control our lives. They are outcomes that come into existence in the choices we make or refuse to make. And anyone, or any group of people, who intentionally make choices detrimental to human well-being, including to the destruction of our habitat, which in our case is the entire planet, must be nuts. Individuals who suffer such behavior are diagnosed as anti-social, sociopathic, even psychopathic, but there is no such diagnosis for an entire society sickened by such insane behavior.

So, Fromm came up with his own term to describe this social disorder, the *necrophilous orientation*, which he says is, "the quintessence of evil, the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity."² In my opinion, doing nothing to stop the behaviors that may turn our beautiful planet into a fiery asteroid, nor to prevent the mass killings of our children in their classrooms, ought to be counted among this "quintessence of evil" and is proof enough of this death-loving sickness.

As Fromm uses it, the term *necrophilia* does not refer to those who literally desire corpses, although such a desire may be a manifestation of the more general phenomena. Rather, he uses it in reference to a mindset that is "directed *against* life."³ Such an extreme example, according to Fromm, was Adolph Hitler, whom he says, "was fascinated by destruction, and the smell of death was sweet to him."⁴ At the outset, it may have appeared that Hitler wanted only to destroy his enemies, but as a true necrophile, his lust for death could only be satiated with the complete destruction of everything and everyone. Toward the end of *Götterdämmerung*, the Twilight of the Gods, the Great War to End all Wars, Fromm says Hitler "showed that his deepest satisfaction lay in witnessing total and absolute *destruction*: that of the German people, of those around him, and of himself."⁵ Regarding the two tragic issues I've already mentioned, global warming and mass shootings, I can think of nothing more destructive today than the will to ignore these brutalities, both of which endanger us all, even the necromancers themselves.

The symptoms of this malady, according to Fromm, include a tendency to dwell in the past, usually with made up sentiments about the "good old days" that never really existed. This makes sense, for how can those who hate life value the future?

The necrophilous orientation also loves force. It is, in other words, an authoritarian mindset, which may be why Simone Weil once define force as "the capacity to transform a

man into a corpse.”⁶ When it comes to force and authoritarianism, this capacity is often figurative. “I may not kill a person but only deprive him of his freedom,” Fromm explains. “I may want only to humiliate him or take away his possessions—but whatever I do, behind all these actions stands my capacity to kill and my willingness to kill. The lover of death necessarily loves force.”⁷

The necrophilous orientation centers around the polarity between “the powerful and the powerless; the killers and the killed.”⁸ The necrophile, Fromm says, “is in love with the killers and despises those who are killed.”⁹ Imagine, for example, hypothetically speaking, we should ever somehow elect a President who prefers the company of authoritarian dictators, rather than the leaders of our Allied nations. If this were within the realm of possibility, such an individual would demonstrate this death-loving orientation.

This orientation also delights in the destructive power of machinery, especially those machines that can “transform the organic into the inorganic,”¹⁰ life into death. For such a mindset can only relate to things it can possess and control, including living things. As Fromm further explains, the necrophile is “deeply afraid of life, because it is disorderly and uncontrollable by its very nature.”¹¹ This would explain why there are so many, in particular, who are not dissuaded from their course even in the face of global warming and the destruction of our planet. They are more afraid of life and its uncertainties than anything else.

Of course, our concern with this orientation should not be for the individual, destructive as such individuals can be when given power, but for the masses who share this mindset and put them into power. Some of these love death and know they love death, even if they don’t understand why and would never admit it to anyone but themselves. Others cannot admit it even to themselves and so they tried to compensate for their fear of life by pretending to love life in some insincere, meaningless, compulsive way.

For example, there are few in the world who would claim abortion is the ideal method for dealing with unwanted pregnancies. Many of us want to alleviate such need by promoting women’s health and education, including contraception, sex education, and planning for parenthood. Yet there are many others who inexplicably make ending abortion their *raison d’être* yet they are also vehemently against proper sex-education and contraception. As we have seen; that their only solution is one of force by making the procedure entirely illegal is itself proof they are approaching the difficult matter from a necrophilous orientation. The reality is, the number of abortions performed in our country have been declining for decades since the passage of *Roe vs. Wade*, not because necrophiles keep lowering the hammer with heartless laws, but because of organizations like Planned Parenthood that provide women, especially low-income women, with the education, contraception, and other tools necessary for preventing unwanted pregnancies to begin with, and because of

other global trends in women's health, education, and rights that are resulting in dramatic decrease in birth rates around the world.

Furthermore, those ferocious about preventing abortion solely by force don't seem to care as much about life when it is sacrificed in war, or ended by lethal injection, or in slow death for lack of adequate healthcare, or in schools and classrooms with machine guns. It's easy to deceive oneself into believing one is a lover of life with an unyielding devotion to people who are unborn, for whom they bear no real responsibility, but doing so without at least as much devotion the life and wellbeing of those who have been born, should deceive no one. Jesus is reported to have said, "I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."¹² Life without an abundance of health and happiness, of love and acceptance, of security and freedom, is only a half-life. Life doesn't end with being born, and those who think otherwise are only fooling themselves into a false sense of self-righteousness that helps them compensate for an otherwise dismal record when it comes to loving the living.

Of course, we all want to see ourselves as good people, as the heroic protagonists of our own stories. The same is true of nations. We want to portray ourselves as the greatest on Earth, the greatest in history, as a chosen people with a manifest destiny, and we too often do so by fabricating myths to cover our collective butts. As William James once wrote, "We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end in which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world really is."¹³

We also fool ourselves into thinking the necrophiles whom we sometimes choose to lead us are also heroic figures leading the charge when what is really admired is "their unlimited capacity and willingness to kill," as Fromm says. "For this they were loved by the necrophiles."¹⁴ He also recognizes that many people prefer to admire them rather than to become conscious of the fear they have of them, while others refuse to recognize their necrophilous qualities and, instead, see them as "builders, saviors, good fathers."¹⁵ Fromm says, "If the necrophilous leaders had not pretended they were builders and protectors, the number of people attracted to them would hardly have been sufficient to help them to seize power, and the number repelled by them would probably soon have led to their downfall."¹⁶

There are a few other symptoms of this orientation, but I will only point out one more that I consider important for us to understand, the need for certainty. Certainty is alone a rejection of life, as Fromm explains, because "life is never certain, never predictable, never controllable; in order to make life controllable it must be transformed into death."¹⁷ This is why rigid, extremist, fundamentalist thinking is typical of necrophiles, because they fear life and, therefore, fear its uncertainty. By treating every belief that we have as if were a dogma to force upon others, or as a dividing line between us and them, we feel justified in the necrophilous habit of using force against those who disagree with us and, in so doing, to kill

them, sometimes literally through warfare and violence, and sometimes figuratively by killing their wills and denying their freedoms. As the authoritarian government of Big Brother says in Orwell's horror novel, *1984*, "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves."¹⁸ This is a kind of death, and such is the necrophilous agenda. Alas, it is also a way of committing intellectual suicide, for rigid ideas are dead ideas, ideas stiffened with *rigor mortis*. Life on the other hand, requires us to surrender to the uncertainty, to remain openminded, and to let go of control, even in the face of tragedy.

This is an important point to grasp because it helps us understand why so many people gravitate toward the necrophilous orientation. It's not because they are evil people and truly love death, but because they are afraid of life, which is always accompanied by suffering and tragedy. Who among us doesn't want to have some control over these harsh realities, or, at least, to fool ourselves into thinking we do? In another of his great works, *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm tells us destructiveness "is rooted in the unbearableness of individual powerlessness and isolation," and that, "The destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it."¹⁹

In some twisted kind of logic, the love of death is ultimately an attempt to destroy the world so we don't have to live with the anxiety and fear of losing it, which explains the widespread reluctance to confront climate change. "There is virtually nothing that is not used as a rationalization for destructiveness," Fromm says. "Love, duty, conscience, patriotism have been used as disguises to destroy others or oneself."²⁰ Today, many claim they want to protect the unborn, or to protect jobs, or to protect our 2nd Amendment rights, even as their choices lead to mass death and destruction.

All of this is a truly miserable way of looking at the world. Fortunately, Fromm does not leave us hanging here. He also tells us of the opposite mindset, the biophilous orientation, that reflects a love of life that is innate in all of us, even those who gravitate toward necrophilia. For, as Fromm says, "The most elementary form of this orientation is expressed in the tendency of all living organisms to live."²¹ As Spinoza said, "Everything insofar as it is itself, endeavors to persist in its own being."²² Yet this drive can be experienced as an enthusiastic passion for living, or as a fear of death—biophilous or necrophilous.

But the biophilous orientation is more than just about fighting to preserve life, both for oneself and others. "The other aspect is a more positive one," Fromm says: "living substance has the tendency to integrate and to unite; it tends to fuse with different and opposite entities, and to grow in a structural way. Unification and integrated growth are the characteristic of all life processes."²³ Hence, "The person who fully loves life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres."²⁴ Rather than being destructive, the lover of life is constructive. Rather than becoming rigid, one "is capable of wondering, and ... prefers to see something new to the security of finding confirmation of the old. [One] loves the adventure of living more than [one] does certainty ... [One] wants to mold and to influence

by love, reason, by [one's] example; not by force, by cutting things apart, by the bureaucratic manner of administering people as if they were things."²⁵ For the lover of life, "Good is reverence for life, all that enhances life, growth, unfolding."²⁶

And so, I will begin to close as a true lover of life by working to unite these two orientations. To some degree, I already have by noting that the death orientation is rooted in fear, not hate, and that all of us, to some extent, are afraid of losing our lives and are, thus, driven to protect ourselves, to avoid threats, and to predict and control the future and others as much as possible. I think one of the most important points Fromm makes on this subject is in pointing out that nobody is "entirely necrophilous or biophilous. There are some who are totally devoted to death, and these are insane. There are others who are entirely devoted to life, and these strike us as having accomplished the highest aim of which [humanity] is capable ... [but] In many, both the biophilous and the necrophilous trends are present, but in various blends."²⁷ In other words, each of us is on a spectrum. What matters most is which orientation is strongest in us, and in the whole of our society, that which is rooted in fear or rooted in love, rooted in force or rooted in freedom, rooted in destruction or rooted in construction, rooted in death or rooted in life.

But I think, being that we are all most likely on a spectrum, whether conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, that we are all sometimes swayed by the necrophilous orientation and sometimes by the biophilous. This means each moment, each decision, requires us to choose between these tendencies and, hopefully, to choose the side of life. The more of us who do, and the more often we do, the sooner we can begin to seriously address the destructive habits our society currently engages in, including apathy toward global warming and gun violence on the Right and a frightening new wave of authoritarianism and dogmatism on the far Left. Today, there are just enough of us driven by the love of death, which is really the fear of life, to prevent the rest of us from making real progress in overcoming the socially divisive and life-threatening problems impacting us all.

I think those on the biophilous end of the spectrum should coopt the saying "Choose Life," from those on the necrophilous end, and start applying it constructively to all of our challenges. When facing war, choose life. When considering capital punishment, choose life. When addressing gun control, choose life. When tackling climate change, choose life. But choosing life must be more than an empty cliché that makes us feel good about ourselves despite our destructive behaviors. It must protect the children learning in our classrooms at least as much as unborn children. It must be manifested in our passion for and preservation of life by assuring human welfare, individual unfolding, and the health of our planet and all creatures upon it. Let us courageously choose life and fearlessly love life in every way. For it is only by doing this that we can truly come to love one another.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

² Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, p. 37.

Death Wish

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John 10:10

¹³ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1902, 1958, p. 85.

¹⁴ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁸ Orwell, George, *1984*, Signet Classics, Harcourt Inc., Penguin Group (USA), 1949, p. 256.

¹⁹ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 202.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, *ibid.*, p. 45.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 45f.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 38.