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REAPER MAN, TEACHER MAN: USING POPULAR CULTURE TO TEACH GRIT, MORTALITY AWARENESS, AND GOAL SETTING IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY

Brant von Goble[i]
Jilin International Studies University,
P. R. of China

Abstract:
Since the advent of low-cost modern media technologies (records, films, radio, television, and the internet), *popular culture* has both shaped and been shaped by complex economic, political, governmental, moral, and artistic concerns. *Fear and anxiety* and the human capacity to control, reduce, or induce them in others have been tools for influencing both individual and societal behaviours for far longer. At the juncture of these two are both opportunity and hazard. This paper will briefly consider the historical context of our current apprehensiveness and collective neuroticism from the early media age to the present and how anxiety has been used by significant power players and the nominally disadvantaged alike. It will then turn to the role of media technologies in distorting our understanding of risk, mortality, and the potential for (and the sustainability and importance of) happiness. Finally, it will present a series of suggestions to produce more resilient, realistic, and goal-oriented learners by cultivating within them a robust understanding of their mortality, the inevitability of suffering, and the tenuousness of the human condition. Much of the material and culture referenced will be from the United States; however, the observations and suggestions throughout this paper should be broadly applicable to the peoples of the developed world. Finally, this paper will include ample content and conversational suggestions, examinations of media context and interpretations, and questions for classroom discussion for the teacher who wishes to guide students towards a better-grounded mental state.

Keywords: media, grit, happiness, mental health

1. Introduction: Fear in the Information Age, Fear in Many Ages

The concept of a *basic emotion* can be traced back to Charles Darwin, who argued that some emotions are shared by all mentally normal humans and mammals. Each emotion encompasses a common set of facial muscular expressions and physiological and

[i] Correspondence email: bvongoble@jisu.edu.cn

neurological responses. Darwin identified eight such emotions, with some later researchers suggesting that there are fewer—four or six. But regardless of the model used, *fear* is included (Matsumoto et al., 2011). For as long humans have been humans (and likely before that, in the ancestors of the species), fear has influenced human behaviour. *Fear management*—the individual and societal processes by which fear is generated, eliminated, or channelled—has been integral to the function of civilisation since its beginning. Comprehending its history—on the most superficial level, if nothing else—is essential to placing our current culture of anxiety in context.

1.1 A Brief History of Panic: Communists, Satanists, Terrorists, and Perverts, Oh My!

At least since the Haymarket Affair of 1886, mass media has amplified and promoted fear, oftentimes to certain political or ideological ends. The *Affair* began as a protest in Chicago by an estimated 2,500 people against unpleasant and dangerous working conditions and the excessive number of working hours required by many employers of that era. As the protest wound down and less than 200 people remained, law enforcement moved to disburse the participants. While the police action was ongoing, an unknown person threw a dynamite bomb at officers. A total of seven policemen and four protestors perished. One person was killed by the initial explosion, and others died in the resultant gunfire, with reports suggesting that some police officers were accidentally shot by their own in the confusion (Adelman, n.d.).

Compared to modern mass killings, such as the 2022 Uvalde, Texas, school shooting, in which 19 students died at the hands of a single attacker, the Haymarket Affair was very nearly bloodless (Levenson et al., 2022). Nor was the number of protestors at the Haymarket Affair enough to warrant great alarm given the population of the city—109,000 in 1860 (Nugent, 2004). Yet local print media successfully exploited the event for maximum coverage and attention.

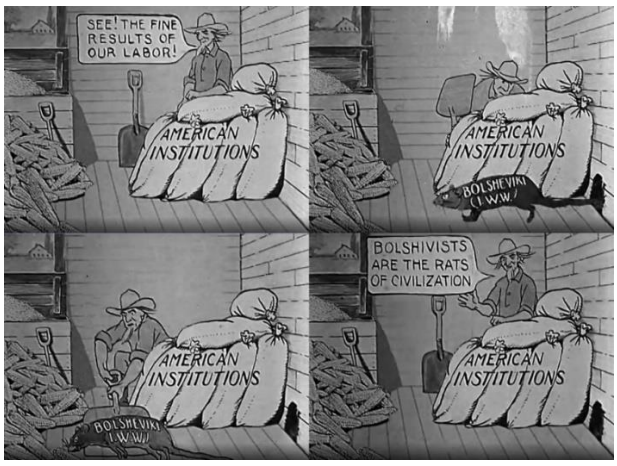
After an extensive and likely unconstitutional campaign of raids on labour union offices and newspapers and the detention and interrogation of several labour organisers, eight men were arrested and tried for the Affair. The culpability of several of these was suspect, with more than one of them having testimonial evidence to support their claims that they were not at Haymarket Square at the time in question. Yet the media, as is sometimes the case today, militated against the accused before a thorough investigation of the evidence was conducted, with the *Chicago Tribune* making a flagrantly illegal offer to pay jurors if they convicted the men. And publications throughout the city promoted fear of the (largely German) immigrants and their leftist ideology, presenting them as threats to the city and her people (Adelman, n.d.; Lumm, 2016).

Ideological and moral fear campaigns in which a people's *way of life* are held to be under threat are not unique to the Windy City. The *First Red Scare*, which began shortly after the end of the First World War, was a nationwide campaign against leftist organisations. In a single day—2 January 1920—thousands of suspected Communists and anarchists were arrested throughout the United States at the behest of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer (Byrne, 2023). The Palmer Raids (as these warrantless

searches and arrests came to be known) were executed under the pretence that Communists were more or less *everywhere* in American society, looking for the first opportunity to destroy American freedoms and virtues. While there was *some* threat to American peace—bombings and other acts of terrorism—the risk was consistently overblown, and Palmer's prediction of massive acts of destruction by Communists never came to pass, which resulted in him eventually losing public support (Reed, 2020).

The aggressive anti-Communism of the First Red Scare served establishment and corporate interests well. Protection of employers' interests and the maintenance of *Americanism* and the existing power structure were actively furthered during this era. And public fears were not entirely the result of opinions advanced organically during the First World War or government policy. Media played a critical role as well, with a great many newspapers actively supporting the infringement of the rights of citizens and immigrants. The *Washington Post* declared that "*There is no time to waste on hair-splitting over infringement of liberties*," and other media outlets (some considered *socially progressive* in more recent times) were no less enthusiastic (Byrne, 2023; Setter, 2020). And then there was the emerging technology of silent film, which could be used to present anti-capitalist organisations in the worst possible light.

Figure 1: Stills from *Uncle Sam and the Bolsheviki—I.W.W. Rat*



The above image, a collection of stills taken from a public domain 1919 propaganda short, engages in two acts of what was effectively defamation. The first (and most obvious) is to portray the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a fast-growing union in the early 20th century, as *rats*. The second is slightly more subtle in that it conflates them with *Bolsheviks*—the most far-left Communist group in Russia and the one most likely to be considered an eminent threat to the rights and personal property of Americans. The I.W.W. *was* more left-leaning than its largest competitor, the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.), being both open to a more diverse range of workers, including women, minorities, and the unskilled, and being opposed to the comparatively pro-capitalist policies of the A.F.L. (Goldman, 2023). But these half-truths were deceptive in their own way, and as will be demonstrated throughout this paper, fear-mongering relies less on complete lies than it does on significant exaggeration and distortion.

The *Second Red Scare* was more of the same, but bigger, better, and longer—a higher-budget, director's cut sequel, with the greatest difference being that advances in media technology allowed for the more aggressive cultivation of panic. The previous cinematic metaphor is deliberate and points to the role film and entertainment played—both as an actual and suspected propaganda tool—in shaping government and public perceptions of Communism and its potential harm to the nation.

The most obvious difference between the two Red Scores is their length. Whereas the First Red Scare lasted a few years, the Second Red Scare ran from 1947 to 1960. The second distinction is the emphasis placed on the role of film and television, which had gone from a nascent, novelty entertainment to media of cultural consequence. The televised attacks on members of the Hollywood film industry by the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) are widely known, and the subsequent professional blacklisting (banning from employment in the film industry) is but slightly less so (CRC Staff, 2022; Dunbar, 2015). The fear of anti-capitalist propaganda was at least as real as the propaganda itself, with a considerable number of anti-Communist films produced around the era and later, and anti-Communist cinema existing as an active minor film genre until the 1980s (Patterson, 2016; University of Washington Libraries, 2022).

Not all anti-Communist films were poorly made or cheaply produced. *Ninotchka*, a 1939 film starring Greta Garbo, slightly predates the Second Red Scare, and its use of humour sets it apart from other early anti-Communist films in that it presents Soviet Russia and Soviet agents as being more deserving or ridicule than terror. Post-Red Scare films, particularly those of the 1980s, demonstrate a similar light-heartedness. For instance, *Red Dawn* (1984), which stars a young Patrick Swayze and an equally youthful Charlie Sheen, follows a gang of freedom-loving teenagers as they successfully repel an attempted Russian invasion of a small town.

Decent filmmaking bookends the anti-Communist era. Pre- and Post-Red Scare films demonstrate a level of self-awareness, craftsmanship, and sophistication that allow them to stand on their own. With few exceptions, those produced in the middle of the Scare do not. A potential exception to this generalisation, the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), can be interpreted as an allegory for Communist efforts to destroy American freedom and individualism. But it can also be seen as an attack on anti-Communist paranoia or the pulverisation of human emotions and character under the heavy wheels of modernity, technology, and heartless pragmatism (Nunez, 2020). This film, subject as it is to varied interpretations (as good films often are), can be contrasted to a number of its patriotic peers. *The Red Menace* (1949) was no less heavy-handed than it sounds. And *Big Jim McClain*, starring famously conservative actor John Wayne, went so far as to portray the HUAC as being a heroic force, with Wayne's 1950s lawman/investigator tracking down (and punching out) evil Communists determined to destroy Hawaii and her beautiful land and people. Other films of the Second Red Scare were not much better, with a 1949 Howard Hughes production, *I Married a Communist* (later renamed *The Woman on Pier 13*), and *My Son John* (1952) being indicative of the lack of subtlety, overreliance on drama, and profound *lack of humour*.

And this brings us a common theme of fearmongers and extremists—an allergic intolerance to humour, lightness, and introspection. The assertion of the fearmonger that *this is no time to laugh—things are too serious* is *almost* always wrong. The dire, the desperate, the hopeless, the evil, and the merely frustrating—there are few more effective tools to allow one to adjust and adapt to the bleakest of circumstances and interactions than the ability to laugh. In even the most genuinely awful of times when facing the worst of misfortunes—such as being confined to a Nazi concentration camp—humour has proven a way to make the unbearable slightly less so and a tool for building mental resilience (Ostrober, 2010; Sover, 2021). To strip a people of their sense of humour (or to not allow them to express humour) is to *fragilize* them. Conversely, to teach and promote humour is to make a people more resilient. Beyond that, it is to endow them with *grit*—a concept to be examined in more depth in a following section.

Equally joyless (and considerably more absurd) than either Red Scare was the 1980s satanic ritual abuse panic. There *were* Communists in Hollywood. The HUAC was not wrong. Its treatment of the accused might well have been cruel and excessive, and the belief of its members in the capacity of the Communists to corrupt American culture overblown (*or not*, depending upon whom one asks), but the Communists were real, not figments of a distorted imagination (Bawer, 2021; Irvine & Kincaid, 2000). The *satanic panic* could lay no such claims to legitimacy.

In 1980, the *panic* began with the publication of *Michelle Remembers*, a book written by Lawrence Pazder, a psychiatrist, and his patient (and later wife), Michelle Smith, that purports to contain details of satanic abuse experienced by Smith. Smith's recollection of this highly ritualised, sexual abuse was purportedly hidden from her consciousness until restored using *recovered-memory therapy*, a widely discredited technique (Victor, 1991). From this confabulation grew many others, culminating in a series of satanic child abuse trials (primarily focused on daycare centres) throughout the United States. The most famous of these—the McMartin Preschool cases—demonstrate the irregularity of the proceedings and allegations that defined much of the panic. During a 28-month trial (the longest and costliest trial in American history up to that point), claims of sexual assault blossomed into claims of children being taken to tunnels underneath a daycare centre (where they were forced to touch corpses), elaborate satanic rituals, and animal sacrifice.

Similar trials of the era brought to life claims that were no less incredible, including testimony that children were tied to trees and molested by clowns and that one child was anally penetrated with a 12-inch hunting knife—an act that would have caused serious (and likely fatal) harm. Yet none of the accusing children showed any serious signs of injury. In one of the later cases, the defendant was said to have killed several babies as part of a satanic ritual. And this testimony was admitted by the prosecution, despite their being no reports of missing children in the region (Frontline, 1998; Yuhas, 2021). The defining element of the satanic ritual abuse trials was the *impossibility* of many of the claims made. Non-existent under-preschool tunnels, children that had allegedly been horribly abused but remained miraculously uninjured, and slaughtered toddlers that appeared to have no parents to report their absence—these claims were allowed to stand,

and sometimes taken seriously, despite anyone with the most rudimentary understanding of physics or medicine being able to quickly debunk them. In the end, *none* of the more than 12,000 claims made to law enforcement of satanic ritual abuse were substantiated (Goleman, 1994). Yet the fear was real, as was the industry that came into existence around it. Experts—meaning pastors, religious workers, or anyone who had read *Michelle Remembers* more than once—emerged, offering their services to the public (almost always for a *reasonable* fee, of course). And towards the nadir of the panic, video courses were made to provide ordinary law enforcement officers rudimentary instruction on how to identify and understand satanic rituals.

The *Law Enforcement Guide to Satanic Cults*, a 1994 film purporting to provide a detailed framework for assessing the *satanic threat* in every community, reports upon everything from *the levels of dedication to satanic principles* (of which there are three, apparently) to *deviant sexology*. The *Guide* also considers the *practice* element of satanism, with one of the two hosts—an alleged former Satanist high priest—walking through a (supposedly) randomly chosen park littered with one large and conspicuously placed unholy symbol after the next.

Figure 2: Stills from *Law Enforcement Guide to Satanic Cults*

Just as 1950s television and government propagated fear of a Communist takeover, 1980s and 1990s cable and broadcast television, the United States Congress, and the music industry did their part to contribute to (and actively stoke) dread in the hearts of the populace.

Since at least the 1970s, the American music industry has actively explored politically and culturally sensitive issues, sometimes in an offensive way. And by the 1980s, bands that openly, if often satirically, attacked established middle-American Christian values were selling hundreds of thousands of records per year. Judas Priest, Megadeath, Metallica, and Ozzie Osbourne—leading acts of the era—all embraced violent, sexual, or occult imagery (if not all three). Even popular music acts—Madonna and Cyndi Lauper—displayed sexuality in a way (and to an extent) that would have likely been found criminally indecent a generation ago.

As it did during the Second Red Scare, Congress exploited and promoted the fears of the times. The *Parents Music Resource Center* (PMRC)—an organisation founded by Tipper Gore (wife of Albert Gore, Vice-President of the United States under the later Clinton administration) and supported by prominent Washington, D.C. wives—demanded and eventually received a United States Senate hearing on the harmfulness of

modern music. Never ones to turn down an opportunity for self-aggrandisement, the Senate called a great many popular musicians to testify as to the meanings and intent of their music (Fisher, 2016; Kelly, 2015).

Television's role in promoting panic was no less significant in the 1980s than it was in the 1940s and 1950s. Popular cable channel MTV fed controversial music videos into millions of American homes, and *20/20*, a well-respected television news program, broadcast "Devil Worshippers," which took a single (if horrific) incidence of teen violence in New York and extrapolated a larger trend of cultural decay (Fisher, 2016). "Devil Worshippers" never went so far as to claim that satanism was rampant in the United States in 1985, but it did warn that "*there is no question that something is going on out there*" (Downs, 1985). Such statements as those made on *20/20* never quite rise to the level of dishonesty—they are too ambiguous—but they are not much better insofar that they feed the unease of the viewer, and contribute to their suspicion of the world around while offering nothing in the way of readily implementable solutions.

Home video, a technology novel in the 1980s, also played a role in the satanic panic. Films that might have been shown in a small number of theatres even ten years prior could be easily watched by children at home without parental oversight—with *a lack of parental oversight* being a frequent occurrence for a generation of latchkey kids (Blakemore, 2015; Brackett, 2018; Ganapati, 2010). And video technology allowed for smaller, cheaper cinematic productions, and distribution that circumvented the theatres altogether. This was instrumental in the growth of the *direct-to-video* horror genre, with *video nasties*—low-budget, often quite violent content that few (if any) theatres of the era would have been willing to show—being very much a product of the home entertainment age (Clarke, 2021).

Fear of film corrupting public morals predates the satanic panic by decades. Consider the Hays Code, which was voluntarily adopted in 1930 by the major American film studios. The Code, a guideline for self-censorship, was constructed as a proactive measure by Hollywood to prevent the United States federal government and various state governments from exercising their right to regulate the film industry—which was determined to the constitutional at the time. It prohibited films from displaying nudity, scenes of sexual passion, homosexuality, the glorification of crime, and any other kind of morally suspect content (MasterClass, 2021).

The Hays Code reflects a large, generalised moral concern—one very much in line with efforts to protect public morality around the globe, such as the mainland Chinese government's ongoing efforts to rid its version of the internet of material it deems corrosive to the public wellbeing (Yang, 2021). But the satanic panic and the fear of the corrupting effects of video were different. The latter two are defined by an intense focus on the collapse of the family—such was at the heart of 1980s worry.

The unease parents felt at the prospect of leaving their children in hands of strangers or electronic devices was real. Such may not seem radical or damaging to modern Americans, but it was something that had rarely been done by middle-class White Americans until women entered the workforce in large numbers (Gerson, 2020).

There was *no one* minding the home. While the children of that era—Generation X—largely survived their youths of frozen pizza, MTV, horror films, and unsupervised hellraising, and went on to become productive members of society, the results of this experiment in restructuring the family could not be known until after the fact.

As is so often the case with panics, much of the fearmongering is absurdist, and to the right mind, might well appear darkly humorous were it not used to inflict very real harm on otherwise blameless people. In the *Law Enforcement Guide to Satanic Cults*, Satanism appears so prevalent, yet with its acolytes forever unseen, that one cannot help but wonder if the dark arts *do* allow one the magic of invisibility. In the PMRC hearings, the public was told that children were at risk of irreparable moral corruption, possibly by way of subliminal messaging—a fate that none but a gaggle of politicians and their busybody wives could forestall. And in the McMartin trial, the jury was presented with testimony that suggested the McMartins were so improbably extreme in their abuse of children that they broke the most important laws of all—the laws of physics.

More seriously (and tragically), the satanic panic demonstrated how little humankind has progressed over the last few centuries, with modern men and women proving no less inclined to mass psychosis than they were their forebears in the days of the witch trials. How to discipline and cultivate the minds of the young to resist this primitive impulse and the larger animal impulse of irrational fear will be considered later in this paper.

Next, we examine the 9/11 and the post-9/11 panic of the early 2000s.

In retrospect, the 11 September 2001 (*9/11* in the American format, which places month ahead of day) airline attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon were facilitated by several weaknesses in American security protocol and regulations. Before these attacks, airports had minimal security. Passengers and their bags were scanned using metal detectors by airline staff, but few, if any questions, were asked before one was allowed to board. And the public—non-travellers included—were allowed to walk past security checkpoints with minimal interference and accompany passengers to the boarding gates (Bednarek, 2021). Stated directly: Neither the American government nor the American people gave any indication of seeing airports as anything more than ordinary public facilities.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 airport security changed—as one would expect—and the entire American security apparatus did as well. Colour-coded terror risk assessments in the form of the *Homeland Security Advisory System* were introduced in 2002 (replaced in 2011 with a different system) and provided Americans with little information as to the risks they faced from terrorists, but considerable reasons to fret over the risk of *something* happening (Carafano, 2012; Shapiro & Cohen, 2007).

In media, the tone and style of television changed. The most popular shows of the 1990s in the United States—*Friends*, for example—were defined by a light-hearted style and optimistic outlook. Popular American dramas—*ER* being one example—had death and suffering in them, but rarely presented the world in a pessimistic or anxious light. Shows that began airing after 9/11 are qualitatively different. One of the best examples of

this is *24*, in which counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer repeatedly saves the United States from extremists. With a clock quite literally ticking at key points in the show, Bauer is under tremendous time pressure to prevent nuclear, biological, or chemical attacks on Americans. Bauer's response to this pressure entails shooting *bad guys*, flying around in helicopters and other military transport, and engaging in heroic chases and hand-to-hand combat. This much is to be expected in American action television. What one might *not* expect, at least before 9/11, is Bauer's frequent use of torture against male terrorists (although never female ones). Given that the United States has had a well-known constitutional ban on torture—*cruel and unusual punishment*, more precisely—for more than 200 years, torture would seem to be *unamerican*. Yet the public embraced this narrative. Some junior military members did as well, so much so that the dean of West Point—the college of the United States Army—travelled to Los Angeles to ask producers to rely less heavily on torture as the show was influencing the conduct of servicemen in Iraq (Yin, 2008).

The post-9/11 American television landscape was marked by two emotional states rarely found before that time—*desperation* and *claustrophobia*. The walls (or in the case of *24*, the terrorists) are closing in, and civilisation, the American way of life, is but one misstep away from falling into the void. *A terrible darkness is everywhere around us*. Heroes are hardly new. Superman has been fighting for *Truth, Justice, and the American Way* since the 1940s, when given the motto as part of a bid to boost the morale of American troops (Vary, 2021). However, Superman was defined by *abundance*. An abundance of strength, an abundance of speed, an abundance of health (unless in proximity to kryptonite), an abundance of time, and an abundance of goodwill—these are the resources of the Man of Steel. Jack Bauer is defined by quite the opposite. Without a minute to spare in the battle against a series of potential apocalypses, he has *no choice* but to break the rules, lest innocent Americans perish. This is not a trivial distinction. It is exemplary of the changed American mindset. The United States may still be *Number 1* (so goes the narrative), but challengers and enemies are everywhere.

Finally, we turn to a later minor panic of the post-2000s—QAnon.

Based on online postings of an unknown person (or persons) identified as *Q*, the QAnon movement began sometime in 2017. Although much of Q's postings concerned political deception and corruption, some proposed that powerful government officials were involved in a massive international child sexual slavery ring. This alleged organisation trafficked children around the world, often directly into the homes and offices of the powerful (Eustachewich, 2020). Unlike the satanic panic of the 1980s, QAnon theories are decidedly anti-elitist, reflecting a populist scepticism of the agents of power that was either unformed or nascent throughout the 1980s. Rarely does QAnon blame small business owners or ordinary families. The local daycare centre may be entirely trustworthy. The globe-trotting leaders of industry are decidedly less so. The rise of QAnon can be taken to suggest a declining faith in institutions and the international order.

Excluding the matter of post-9/11 fears of terrorism, there was an undercurrent of sexual/familial insecurity in every panic. The Communists of the 1950s were alleged to be set to destroy the American family and promote licentiousness and promiscuity (Licata, 2021). The death-metal-loving Satanists supposedly intended the same, albeit while wearing more interesting garments and having considerably more impressive hair. And the perverts—be they of the pederasty rings said by Q to exist or the comparatively mundane (if equally suspect) campus gang sexual assault variety—threatened sexual morality at its very core (Coronel et al., 2015). To note the irrational nature and exaggerated emotionalism of these panics should not cause one to dismiss legitimate concerns. The American family has been in a state of decay since the 1970s, if not before (Lu, 2019). And at least one heavy metal band—*Mayhem*, a Norwegian group—participated in *and* inspired acts of arson, murder, and suicide in the 1980s (Bhatia, 2019).

But hyperbole and witch hunts do little to mitigate authentic and pressing cultural and social problems. If anything, action and feeling undisciplined by logic and methodical assessments of actual conditions interfere with efforts to build a better, safer, and more stable society by causing those who raise legitimate concerns to be lumped together with alarmists and by forcing *solutions* that antagonise the innocent.

The other great problem with panic is that it leads to a sense of helplessness—the idea that the problems faced by society are so complex that the average person can do nothing to resolve them. This contributes to the *superman complex*—with a great many people growing passive, waiting for superman, and a few taking advantage of this passivity (and craving to be led) to enrich and promote themselves.

1.2 Only I Can Protect You: Fear and Power, Fear as Ruling Tool

Sometimes, it is more profitable to prolong the problem than to offer an effective solution. The problem with self-professed supermen (in the heroic sense, if not necessarily the Nietzschean one) is that they are oftentimes less capable and more self-centred than they would admit. And top-down solutions, such as heavy-handed government interventions to social problems, work imperfectly, if at all. Efforts to solve poverty, social decay, and homelessness in the United States by way of social welfare and subsidised housing have had mixed effects at best and may well have exacerbated the problems they were supposed to eliminate (Borjas, 2016; Dunworth & Saiger, 1994).

This worsening of a problem may well not be entirely accidental. Those who claim to offer a balm to the panicked and despondent can substantially benefit from the existence of the very threat they attempt to manage. Consider that the Global War on Terror has included a great many acts of violence against civilians by the United States—including the bombing of wedding processions and unarmed convoys in Afghanistan. These actions have done much to increase resentment of the American people and military, and have been proven to facilitate the recruitment of young men to fundamentalist Islamic organisations while decreasing the credibility of Western-aligned organisations that are *nominally* more liberal (Polychroniou, 2021). Decades of confinement at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base likely radicalised some detainees,

making them more dangerous than before they were imprisoned and actively encouraging them to fight against the United States after their release (Bauer, 2009; Thompson & Hart, 2021). Finally, the congressional attention given to heavy metal and satanism likely helped *sell* records, with some musicians suggesting that the increased publicity was a boon to their reputations (Fisher, 2016). And the satanic panic proved that crusaders need not have enemies: They can call them forth from distorted memories and nothingness.

This suggests a dangerous cycle—the more *heroic*, extraordinary, and aggressive the solutions offered by leaders and would-be saviours, the worse a given problem becomes. As obstacles grow (or *are cultivated*) so does the perceived helplessness, passivity, and fragility of a people. And this allows for a select few to gain ever more power at the expense of the public welfare and the fortitude and self-direction of the majority.

This toxic synergy is exactly what the teacher must struggle against if determined to produce capable students, well-equipped with the psychological tools—the *grit*—to adapt and overcome life in a dynamic world.

2. Every Cradle is a Grave: Fragility and Denial of Death in an Atomised Society

As much a risk to the strength and mental health of students as is learned helplessness, an inability to assess risks and proportionately respond to them is no less so. And no mortal can effectively assess risks without an understanding of *mortality*—without an understanding of the certainty of death and an approximate understanding of when and how it may occur. In a highly atomised society (such as is the United States) young people may be denied the same understanding of death that their forebears had and that the citizens and residents of less-developed nations have today. The purpose of *mortality education* should not be to frighten students but to help them construct a more realistic worldview so that they can place hazards into perspective and make the best use of however much life they have remaining.

2.1 The Concealment of Death and the Necessity of Mortality Education

Until the 20th century, most deaths in the United States occurred at home. Deaths in hospitals and almshouses—predecessors of the modern nursing home—did happen, but such was not the norm (AMFM, 2018; Birnstengel, 2021). And deaths were different from those frequently encountered in the modern world. More likely to befall newborns and the young, occur suddenly, and happen without much in the way of obvious explanation or reason—death was ever-present and palliative care was nearly non-existent. The latter meant that there as neither much ability to alleviate the suffering of one's demise nor any practical way to conceal death and the pain attendant (Coates, 2011; Dvorsky, 2012).

Figure 3: *La Miseria* by Cristóbal Rojas—1886 Depiction of a Tuberculosis Patient

And there was the matter of farm life. The number of farms in the United States has sharply declined since the 1930s, and the size of the remaining farms has grown. There are fewer farms and fewer farmers in the United States than in years past, and farmers constitute less than 2% of the United States workforce (Ferdman, 2014; Lepley, 2019). Farming accidents, the death and slaughter of farm animals, and the presence of ageing extended family members—these all provided reminders of the impermanence of existence and the indifference of death to the desires of the living. Experiences of this sorted are had by but a few modern people.

Thus, a great many of the men, women, and children of the present are not acclimated to death to the extent they would have been a century ago. There are exceptions to this: Physicians, paramedics, nurses, soldiers, law enforcement officers, coroners, and morticians cannot avoid reminders of the brevity and fragility of the human condition. But the more gruesome aspects of their work are rarely in public view.

While being shielded from the inescapability of death may be superficially comforting, it does nothing to fortify the mind. Courses designed to correct this deficiency by taking students on tours of funeral homes, crematoriums, and graveyards, and holding structured discussions on the processing of dying and how it is considered in different cultures stand to help students mature without being unduly traumatic (Hannig, 2017). A people better acclimated to death and its ineluctability are almost undoubtedly *less* easily made to panic.

At its most extreme, this notion was presented in the 1991 American black comedy *What About Bob?* Starring Bill Murray and Richard Dreyfuss, the film follows the interactions between a mental health professional, Doctor Leo Marvin (as played by Dreyfuss) and his admiring, likeable, and highly annoying patient—Bob Wiley (Bill Murray). While the entire storyline is too involved to summarise herein, the most salient narrative point is that Wiley, as well-meaning as he is, tends towards codependency and follows Marvin to the community where Marvin and his family spend their summers. Marvin does not appreciate this, nor does he appreciate Wiley's (largely successful)

efforts to befriend Marvin's family. Towards the end of the film, Marvin grows so irritated with his ever-present patient that he decides to tie Wiley up and kill him by way of a large explosive device, which he misleads Wiley into believing is part of a revolutionary new treatment—*death therapy*. Murray's character gamely accepts, seeing the bomb strapped to him as a metaphor and the process of freeing himself from it as a symbolic liberation from his mental health problems and anxiety. Wiley successfully removes the device before it detonates, and he discovers that the therapeutic benefits of the process are quite real. He is a better person for the experience and eventually returns to school to become a psychologist and promote the revolutionary treatment he underwent (much to Marvin's chagrin).

While one should exercise caution when evaluating popular media as a source of inspiration for psychotherapeutic and educational experiences, *What About Bob?* does contain a kernel of wisdom—*death focuses the mind*. It *recalibrates* one's thoughts and priorities as well. For legal reasons, binding an explosive device to a student—even a *simulated* explosive device—is not advisable in most jurisdictions. Yet many of the same benefits can be had through less drastic means. And non-alarmist, age-appropriate discussions of mortality—such as those already mentioned and many others not addressed—have the added benefit of correcting the spiritually corrosive thanatophobia that is endemic to the American mindset.

2.2 Thanatophobia, Distorted Perception, Disproportionate Caution, and Generativity

Fear of death—*thanatophobia*—is not unique to any one culture. And efforts to either postpone death or prevent it entirely are as old as the historical record. Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, spent years and a considerable amount of the state treasury searching for an immortality elixir. Agents of the emperor travelled throughout China, questioning local villagers and sending back reports of their findings on slivers of bamboo. Ultimately, the emperor was both successful and unsuccessful in his quest. He died at the age of 49 (259 BCE to 210 BCE), likely from a mercury-based tonic intended, ironically enough, to prolong his life—a failure. Yet by unifying his country and commissioning the Terracotta Army, Qin Shi Huang achieved an enduring fame of more than 2,000 years—an immortality of sorts, if not the sort he wanted (Gannon, 2017).

The list of people who have attempted to achieve immortality is long and ever-growing. And the methods used in such attempts are varied—including everything from cryonics (cold preservation of either the entire body or—for the cost-conscious—the head) to self-mummification to intentional exposure to nuclear radiation (Molinari, 2019). That *some* people would believe they could live forever is not surprising. That an *entire culture* would go out of its way to deny the inevitability of death—the death of the physical person if nothing else—is worthy of comment.

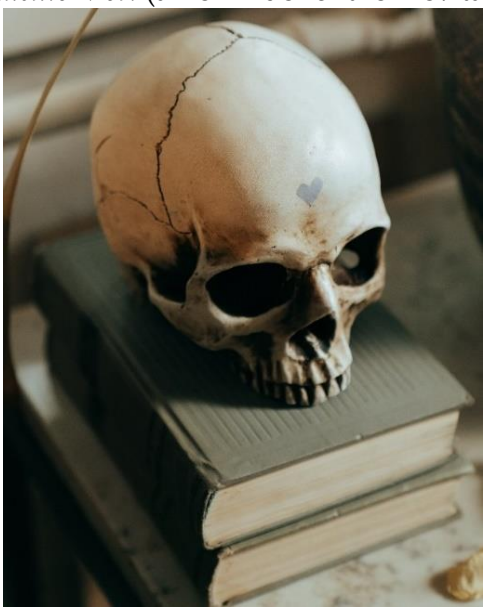
A belief that one can achieve true immorality might well be deluded, but it is unlikely to lead to a state of fear. Logically, the immortal has nothing to fear: Death is an impossibility. Any number of punishments—incarceration, injury, or futile attempts at limb removal (presumably an immortal would also be mechanically indestructible, lest

he risk spending his eternity in pieces) or disfigurement—would have the potential to be unpleasant. Yet suffering, regardless of duration or intensity, would consume no more than a finite portion of *forever*—making anything relatively transient from the immortal's perspective. Any immortal, regardless of initial inclination or neuroses, is bound to achieve introspection after seeing people, nations, and (eventually) planets pass into nothingness.

Belief in an *indefinitely extendable life*, while superficially similar to immortality, offers the opposite outcome. To lack an expiration date—a known maximum possible lifespan—is a great misfortune. A single misstep risks being *infinitely expensive*. The man (or woman) of 70 who knows he cannot live much past 80 can take a phlegmatic comfort in the understanding that whatever he (or she) faces today—whatever ill omens reveal themselves or hazards appear—can rob him of but a few tomorrows.

Such time-aware thinking is what encouraged a group of Japanese retirees to form the *Skilled Veterans Corps*, an organisation of more than 250 engineers and experts over the age of 60 who volunteered to work to stabilise critical systems at the Fukushima nuclear power plant after its 2011 failure. The logic of these volunteers was simple: High radiation exposure would seriously increase their risk of cancer. However, they would likely either die of old age before they could develop cancer or would be so close to the end of their natural lives that cancer would be but one more ailment vying for attention. One volunteer articulated this thinking quite clearly, saying, "*We have a feeling that death is waiting for us. This doesn't mean I want to die. But we become less afraid of death as we get older*," (Buerk, 2011; Lah, 2011).

Figure 4: A *Memento Mori* (a Reminder of the Inevitability of Death)



In the United States, where the definition of *old* has been pushed back ever further, largely by the *Baby Boomers*—one of the first cohorts to have a distinct *youth culture*—such

a pragmatic and selfless consideration of mortality seems virtually unutterable (Samuel, 2013).

For the *victim* of never-ending life prolongment, caution is the order of *every day*. The immortal can lose nothing. The ageing mortal has but so much to lose. But the *unageing* mortal has an *infinite amount of time to lose*. And *unlimited potential loss justifies unlimited care and risk avoidance*. At present, medical technology is a long way from offering would-be Methuselahs lifespans approaching the biblical. As of 2023, the oldest living person (María Branyas Morera of Spain) is 115—old, but below 125, which has been thought to be the natural upper limit of human survival (Barbuti, 2023; Scharping, 2016). But perception and reality may imperfectly align. Americans consistently overestimate the power and benefits of medicine (Belluz, 2015). So long as people *perceive* themselves to have an unlimited amount of time remaining, they will act accordingly.

It is this perception of an infinitely extendible life, fuelled by magical thinking, technomania, and a deep and unaddressed thanatophobia, that leads to a more egotistical, indecisive, and weak-willed people. Distorted perceptions of one's potential longevity lead to excess caution, which is a psychological paralytic. And the paralysed mind is an inefficient one, incapable of setting goals or establishing meaningful timelines, just as it is incapable of doing anything of consequence. Finally, there is the matter of *generativity*—the desire and willingness to help younger people as a way to increase the likelihood that species will long survive (Flett, 2018).

Without some pressing sense of *the end* being neigh, there is little reason to invest oneself in the young as a way to leave a lasting mark. After all, the eternally young *will always be here* (or so they suppose). Nor are those who think themselves unageing inclined to do as did the Skilled Veterans Corps of Fukushima—offering themselves and the little time they have remaining for a greater good.

The *death denialists* and the *death ignorant* are the fragile products of an atomised society—connected to nothing more than themselves. They are lacking in purpose beyond delaying for another brief moment that which can be delayed for but so long. And they are easily bullied, frightened, and manipulated by those who hold out the promise and peril of an indefinite number of tomorrows.

By providing education and encouraging critical and rational thought, a teacher can do little to extend students' lives. But he can do something no less substantial—help them make the most of the time they have and live, for however long they do, without terror.

In a later section, this paper will provide a list of suggested content to enable teachers to provide such critical lessons in a way that will invigorate and motivate students rather than cause misery. Until then, another equally important topic must be addressed—*the right to be unhappy*.

3. The Right to Be Unhappy: Old Media, New Media, and Airbrushed Reality

In Aldous Huxley's 1932 dystopian classic *Brave New World*, Mustapha Mond, *Resident World Controller of Western Europe*, encounters John—a man raised outside the confines of a lifeless, pleasant modernity, and known as *the savage* for his decidedly out-of-date, Shakespeare-inspired behaviour. John's thinking and actions are singularly misaligned with those of civilised people (at least as defined by Mond and his community), and his desires are perplexing to them. To Mond, John asserts that he wants *God*, *poetry*, *real* (unsimulated) *danger*, *freedom*, *goodness*, and *sin*.

Mond's response: "*In fact, you're claiming the right to be unhappy*," (Huxley, 1946, p. 288).

Depression is not mere unhappiness, and to suffer is not always to be unhappy *or* depressed. But the concepts are closely enough related that an examination of one, particularly from a historical perspective, necessitates an examination of them all.

3.1 Depression, Unhappiness, and Suffering: Defining and Pathologising Misery

Reported rates of depression in the United States have been increasing for years, with the COVID pandemic and subsequent lockdowns accelerating this trend, and the end of lockdowns doing little to reverse it. In 2021—after most COVID restrictions had ended in the United States—almost one-third of adults claimed at least some depressive symptoms (Ettman et al., 2021). Teens and young adults appear to be doing not much better. *Globally*, about one-fourth of teens are said to have shown symptoms of depression during the COVID lockdowns, and one-fifth, symptoms of anxiety (Racine, 2021). And there exists the distinct possibility that established rates of depression and anxiety will not drop for young people as life returns to normal, as they have not dropped for adults.

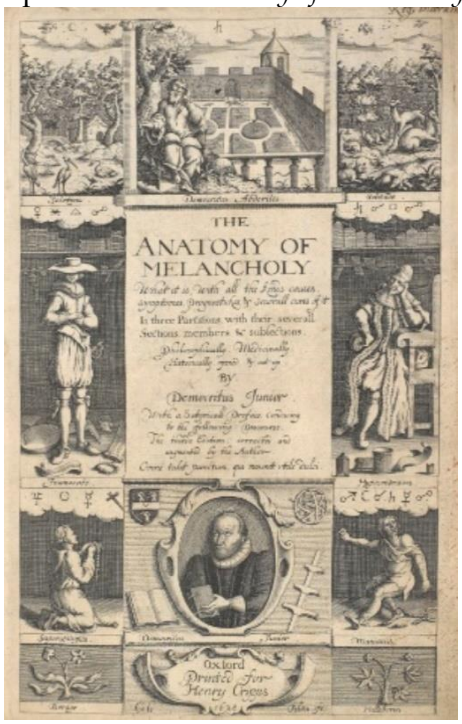
Determining historical rates of depression is difficult. Researchers can track depression over the decades, but not centuries, so knowing how unhappy or happy modern citizens of the world are compared to their ancestors is impossible. The post-COVID mood *appears* to be a less happy one than that of the pre-COVID era. And at least within the United States, the 2010s *appeared* to be a less joyous era than the preceding decade (Jackson, 2017). The limited (50 years' worth of) research available suggests that American happiness levels peaked in 1993 (Ingraham, 2019). How much one can make of this data in terms of *depression* is open to debate. Presumably, higher average levels of unhappiness would correlate with higher levels of depression. But they might not, depending upon how one defines and distinguishes these two concepts—a non-trivial task.

Until fairly recently, the concept of *clinical depression* did not exist. Rather, there was *melancholy*, which shared some of the symptoms of depression, but like many older concepts, is not entirely interchangeable with its younger relative. (*Depression* itself has changed both titles and definitions more than once over the last century.) Attitudes towards melancholy and the broader concept of *suffering* have varied considerably over

time, but none of this is to say that melancholy and suffering were blindly accepted as being inevitable and unresponsive to corrective action.

Since at least the 17th century, when British author and scholar Robert Burton wrote *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, long-term unhappiness without a clear cause was recognised as being a problem for which there were potential solutions (Ferguson, 2021). The complete title of Burton's book—*The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up*—is revealing. From it, one can reasonably assume that at Burton, if no one else, recognised melancholy as being worthy of contemplation at length and from different perspectives, rather than a purely cursory treatment. Burton's book, developed entirely before the framework of modern counselling, may more closely resemble a self-help text than a psychological reference, but one dismisses such writings at his peril. The self-help genre is still wildly popular, with 10.5 billion USD of sales in 2020 in the United States alone and 41.81 billion USD of sales around the globe as of 2021, and considerable growth expected for years (Grand View Research, 2023; Dunne, 2022).

Figure 5: Frontispiece of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628 Edition)



More broadly than depression (or melancholy), *suffering* and the causes of suffering have been subject to examination for more than 2,500 years. Siddhartha Gautama—the Gautama Buddha—saw suffering as a part of life, and unhappiness was an integral component of this suffering (O'Brien, 2019). And the Stoics, much like the Buddha, saw suffering as a thing to which one should adapt one's thinking and mental development (Kamtekar, 2017).

Suffering—be it physical suffering, melancholy, the suffering of existence (*sankhara-dukkha* in the Buddhist Pali-language terminology), the suffering of having expectations that do not align with reality, or some other form of suffering—has plagued humanity for millennia. Human efforts to overcome, accept, or adjust to its presence have continued for no less time. And amongst these many forms of suffering *mental anguish* and malaise (however defined) have always been present.

But is an abundance of suffering, including great suffering, a crisis?

This question is what separates modern thinking from that of days past.

The notion of an *epidemic* of depression is gaining currency. All the public health connotations, medicalisation/pathologisation, and need for government intervention this language implies, makes clear our current mindset—that people should be, by and large, happy, with little (or strictly limited) suffering permeating their lives (Rottenberg, 2014).

Here is an alternative hypothesis, potentially alien to present-day Americans and which this paper will consider at some length: *There is no crisis of unhappiness. There is a crisis in seeing unhappiness as a crisis*. *And the solution to this crisis is not joy, but education as to the nature of life.*

Certainly, there are real, organic cases of depression and mental illness that require attentive psychiatric care. But there stands to be considerable conflation of depression, sadness, and broader forms of psychological discontent.

Some, if not necessarily all, of the apparent increase in rates of depression in the United States since the 1980s may well be the result of a changed definition. Before 1980, depression was defined by the major clinical texts almost exclusively in terms of *internal states*, meaning what the patient is feeling. Consider the definition below of *depressive reaction* (as depression was called at the time) from the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-I):

> "*The anxiety in this reaction is allayed, and hence partially relieved, by depression and self-depreciation. The reaction is precipitated by a current situation, frequently by some loss sustained by the patient, and is often associated with a feeling of guilt for past failures of deeds. The reaction in such cases is dependent upon the intensity of the patient's ambivalent feeling toward his loss (love, possession) as well as upon the realistic circumstances of the loss*." (American Psychiatric Association, 1952, pp. 33–34)

This text served as the standard reference for mental health evaluations from the time of its publication in 1952 until its replacement in 1968. In the second edition of the text (DSM-II), depression was given a new name—*depressive neurosis*—and its definition was updated accordingly. The newer definition states, "*This disorder is manifested by an excessive reaction of depression due to an internal conflict or to an identifiable event such as the loss of a love object or cherished possession*," (American Psychiatric Association, 1968, p. 40).

While these definitions are not *incorrect*, both are lacking in a critical point—a list of symptoms. The clinician is told the nature of the problem, but not how to diagnose it. The first (1952) definition describes how the *anxiety in this reaction is allayed* and what

precipitates it, but what exactly the reaction *entails* is not clearly articulated. The second (1968) definition is clearer in that describes the disorder as being manifested by *an excessive reaction of depression*, but what constitutes *excessive* is left to the determination of the clinician.

Subjective assessments of depression based on what the patient *appeared* to be experiencing were replaced with a list of symptoms in the DSM-III, which was released in 1980. The purpose of this change was to reduce inconsistencies in diagnoses and to move psychiatric assessments from a purely clinical/experiential model to one grounded in research. As well-intentioned as this might have been, it greatly increased the number of people recognised as having depression. The DSM-IV and DSM-5 (the authors of the DSM dropped Roman numerals from the title of the fifth edition of the text) use similar list-based assessments. The most recent edition of the text (DSM-5) states that a patient must suffer from at least five of the following symptoms over two weeks (or longer) to be diagnosed as having a depressive disorder:

1) Depressed mood, most of the day, almost every day
2) Diminished interest in/pleasure from all or almost all activities most of the day, almost every day
3) Significant unintentional changes in weight/appetite: weight loss when not dieting or weight gain
4) Externally observable slowing down of thought/reduction of physical movement
5) Fatigue or loss of energy almost every day
6) Feelings of worthlessness/excessive guilt almost every day
7) Reduced ability to think/concentrate almost every day
8) Recurrent thoughts of death and recurrent suicidal ideation, with or without a plan of action (Truschel, 2022)

The problem with this list is not that it is bad—one suffering from five or more of these symptoms is not in a state of unmitigated joy—but that it makes no allowances for context. Consider the matter of someone who has recently lost a loved one, a job, a home, or a favoured pet. Consider the person who has survived war, natural disaster, violent crime, or prolonged pain. Consider the person who has received a terminal medical diagnosis or who has a family member with weeks to live. Consider someone in chronic pain or who is recently disabled. Any of these people could (1) be in a depressed mood, (2) suffer from a lack of pleasure in life and (3) a slowdown in thoughts or actions, (4) feel fatigued, (5) and suffer from a reduced ability to concentrate every day for more than two weeks. Such would not necessarily indicate an underlying mental health problem. In the case of compounded misfortune—losing one's home, children, car, livelihood, and family in an earthquake, tsunami, or war—*not* feeling emotional pain would seem abnormal. Yet the DSM-5 makes no accommodation for loss or bereavement (although the DSM-IV did), meaning that an entirely normal grieving process stands to be miscategorised. There is a compelling scientific reason for this apparent omission—the mechanics of bereavement, including how intensely it is experienced or how long the bereavement

process should be considered normal, have yet to be established through research (Pies, 2012).

Yet this poses a problem of its own. A perfectly rational, scientifically consistent premise—that diagnoses should be based on observable metrics and that factors that cannot/have yet to be assessed by research should be omitted from inclusion—can lead to deeply flawed outcomes. First, this research-informed, *practically ignorant* approach to assessing the human condition can lead one to believe that a crisis exists where one does not. Such risks encouraging the misallocation of resources and may well cause the public to perceive life as being worse than it is. *Unnecessary panic* or despair for the state of society does little to make the world a better place. If anything, it promotes a hopeless suffering of its own, and it may well make for a more easily manipulated people—a point explored in Section 1.1 of this paper.

Second, it may well lead to both the clinical and personal misunderstanding of normal behaviour and responses to trauma. By making people *believe* they suffer from an essentially medical condition—that there is something wrong with them—there is the distinct possibility that they will fail to take corrective actions of the non-clinical sort to make their lives better. For instance, one might well feel despair at the loss of a close friend. In some cases, clinical treatment to reduce this trauma may be in order, but taking the time to mourn or commemorate and celebrate the life of the departed might stand to be *more effective* in reducing emotional suffering and increasing the resilience (and *grit*) of the afflicted.

Third, there is the potential loss of emotional range and variability—normal parts of the life experience. The *medicalisation of unhappiness* stands to lead to over-prescription of psychiatric medication—a non-trivial concern (Dowrick & Frances, 2013). While treatment with antidepressants can stand to help some people, they are not without complex effects, one of them being that they consistently blunt emotional responses (both positive and negative), resulting in an overall lower affect for the person taking them. And antidepressants are best-suited to short-term use, doing little to improve the lives of the chronically unhappy in the long term (Devlin, 2023; Mozes, 2022). Ineffective long-term, medically advocated treatments may not do much for the patient, but they stand to greatly profit the pharmaceutical industry—a point worth keeping in mind as ever more misery is declared to be the result of *chemical imbalances* in need of correction (Gross, 2019).

Finally, there is the matter of *rights and resilience*. So long as human beings are to exist as *fully human* (rather than chemically altered, emotionally flattened versions of themselves), they are bound to suffer. This is the aforementioned truth recognised by the Buddha thousands of years ago, which is not to say the Buddha had exclusive claim to it during his life, much less today.

As John claimed the *right to be unhappy* in *Brave New World*, so can the modern man and woman. But why is this right—rarely articulated or addressed in the popular and historical discourse—worthy of presentation, and what does it encompass?

3.2 The Freedom to be Unhappy: Thomas Szasz and Misery as a Human Right

Freedom and responsibility are organically linked. With the freedom *to try, to endeavour, and to succeed* comes the freedom *to try and fail and try again*, the freedom to be disappointed, to lose faith in oneself and one's mission, and the freedom to lose hope. The right to the pursuit of happiness comes with oft-ignored counterparts: the right to *not* pursue happiness and the *right to be unhappy*—to either be left alone with one's misery or to *actively chase unhappiness*. Without the freedom to be unhappy, one has two choices—to be happy or to feel nothing at all. Such a potential reality is not far off from the present. Antidepressants flatten affect (a point already mentioned), making them not so different from the *Soma* of *Brave New World*—a drug used liberally throughout the story that pacified the people, numbed them to discomfort, and denied them a part of the human experience.

To believe that one has the freedom to feel (and the right to be unhappy) is not to believe that someone should be *made* to feel. For someone to *choose* to consume substances that distort or reduce their perceptions, emotions, or awareness of reality is not necessarily of concern to anyone but the drug/pharmaceutical user. The critical point is that no one should be *coerced* into accepting numbness.

And this is where Thomas Szasz and his views on psychiatry come into play. Thomas Szasz, professor, psychiatrist, and well-known critic of modern mental health practice, argued for the *right to be unhappy*, observing that *freedom* "*gives you the opportunity to be unhappy and not to be molested for it*," (PsychotherapyNet, 2020).

This—the opportunity to be unhappy and *not to be molested for it*—is critical to the development of the complete person, the complete society, and the cultivation of *grit*. The belief that pain—be it of the physical, psychological, or spiritual form—can or should be eliminated is harmful. The belief that those who suffer are inherently and without exception in need of punishment, correction, or improvement is more so. *We all have a right to be as miserable as we choose, regardless of the extent to which others understand or care for (or about) it*. But this is not to argue that anyone need care. *Just as anyone may choose to be miserable, anyone else may choose to be indifferent to that misery.*

And this is where we consider the nexus of two critical concepts—*grit* and *stoicism*.

3.3 Grit and Stoicism: Comparing Two Critical Ideas and Their Teachability/Utility

Initially popularised by research Angela Duckworth, *grit* has been defined as "*perseverance and passion for long-term goals . . . [and] entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress*," (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087-1088). Thus, *grit* functions *in opposition*. It is demonstrated when faced with obstacles. It *might* exist *in its latent state* without challenges, but determining if this is the case is impossible in an environment of perfect ease and leisure.

Can grit develop without stress? Is it learned or innate? Duckworth asserts that grit is teachable (CBS News, 2016). Despite her confidence in this belief, research is lacking. If grit is an integral part of *personality*, then there is little chance of changing it to a

substantial degree. Personality traits are *mostly* stable over time, with limited adjustments possibly occurring as a person ages—typically, reductions in neuroticism and psychopathy and increases in self-control (Allemand et al., 2013; Gorvett, 2020; Nuwer, 2014; Rantanen, 2007). A considerable amount of research suggests that *resilience*—a concept closely related to grit—correlates strongly with certain personality traits and inversely with neuroticism (CBS News, 2016; Friborg et al., 2005; Nakaya, 2006; Robins et al, 1996). From this perspective, *any* efforts—including the use of media and popular culture—to increase grit in learners appear to be doomed to amount to nothing more than wasted effort.

Yet one should not the grit/resilience-personality relationship as a settled matter.

Rather than being a personality trait, grit might be a *learnable skill*, suggesting that appropriate experiences, stimuli, and education have the potential to promote its development. Previously, this paper noted that grit and resilience are closely related concepts, which is not to say they are identical. This leads to the possibility that grit may be *more teachable* or *less innate* than resilience. *Resilience* is defined as "*the psychological quality that allows some people to be knocked down by the adversities of life and come back at least as strong as before*," (Psychology Today Staff, 2023). Note the differences between grit and resilience. Grit is defined as *perseverance and passion* and by what the person with grit *does—working strenuously toward challenges*, whereas resilience is a trait one *has*. This distinction may seem trivial, but it is not. It is one with a difference.

Presumably, one could be more motivated to *work strenuously toward challenges* by some circumstances than others. If necessity is the mother of invention, it is no less so the father of hard work. And how one perceives circumstances—as being easy, challenging, or impossible—meaning the extent to which they are *motivating* or *overwhelming*, ties closely to *frame of reference.*

To the inexperienced mountain climber, a hike up Pikes Peak (4,000+ metres) in the United States may seem overwhelming, despite the Peak being considered an appropriate challenge for beginners (Leonard, 2017). But to a truly experienced climber, such as Alex Honnold, scaling 915 metres of the nearly vertical rock wall of El Capitan without the use of harness or safety equipment—a famously challenging feat—is difficult but entirely manageable (Gray, 2021).

Innate differences play a role in the perception of difficulty—some people are better suited to mountaineering than others. But experience is equally indispensable. And as it goes with mountains, so it may well go with the many challenges of life. Mental conditioning and preparation, either derived from direct experience or by way of simulations and training, are also integral to learning to overcome challenges.

The second view of grit—that of it being a pattern of learnable behaviours or a teachable skill—suggests a relationship to stoicism, at least as it is understood in the modern era, in the popular sense. The stoic learns to distinguish what is under his control from what is not, to be accountable for his actions, and to see misfortunes as an opportunity to improve himself and cultivate virtuousness. Without hardship, so argues the stoic, a person can never know what he is truly capable of achieving or not achieving.

Discomfort is something to be embraced to an extent so that one can be better prepared and acclimated to it in times of struggle (Kreiss, n.d.).

Learnable grit and stoicism would seem to have more in common than not. Both demand that one *embrace* challenges and difficulties, rather than simply *recover* from them. With this comparison made, two questions logically follow: *What is the importance of grit and stoicism, and how do they relate to the right to be unhappy, as described by Huxley and Szasz?*

Researchers established a relationship between grit and completing an Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) selection course, ongoing employment in a commissions-based sales program, graduation from Chicago's notorious public school system, and avoidance of divorce (Eskreis-Winkler et al, 2014). Research on the relationship between stoicism is more limited, but the apparent overlap in stoicism and grit suggests that those who have an abundance of one are likely to have a considerable amount of the other.

If stoicism cannot be cultivated without discomfort and grit must be demonstrated by *maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress* and *is a teachable skill* (as Duckworth asserts), the right to be unhappy is essential to the development and demonstration of both. Without unhappiness, without challenge, without one both being *allowed to suffer* and learning to see suffering, not as a sign that one should quit, but that one should *try harder*, grit and stoicism have neither consequence nor application.

Looking back over the topics addressed in this paper—fear, panic, domination through terror, mortality and thanatophobia, unhappiness and the freedom to experience it, and grit and stoicism—a theme emerges: Suffering is inevitable and efforts to eliminate it bring about suffering of their own—the suffering of the weak. This is not to say that one must *accept* pain passively. Rather, one should strive to understand it, to adapt to it, and to overcome it if he is to be anything more than less than completely human and do anything more than live hollow life in a brave new world. One should strive for *grit*.

Art and culture influence behaviour and social norms, which in turn influence art and culture. In the next section, this paper will present lists of content (suitable for high school students and adults) touching upon the relevant and challenging themes explored herein and ideas for using such content to provide students with a framework of robust, gritty, and stoic thinking. Not all of the suggested content will demonstrate *exemplary behaviour*. Such is neither an accident nor an oversight. Students must learn to spot errors in thinking, emotional manipulation, and miscalibrated responses to stressors, just as they do equanimity, grit, and strength under pressure.

4. Learning from Art, Media, and Popular Culture

In this section, three major themes will be discussed:

1) Panic, Power, Anger, and Revenge (regarding Section 1)
2) Death, Its Inevitability, and What to Do About It (regarding Section 2)
3) Misery and Maturity (regarding Section 3)

Each section will include multiple subsections and recommendations for films, television shows (both live-action and animated), or songs. Some of the material suggested (*What About Bob?* being one example) has already been mentioned in this paper. However, most have not. Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion (with the questions placed as the author deems appropriate, in **bold** and bulleted) will accompany each recommendation or cluster of recommendations. And material the author believes to be potentially unsuitable for audiences more sensitive to violent or sexual themes will be indicated by an asterisk.

Finally, the suggestions herein are neither intended to be definitive nor beyond argument. The educator should personally review each suggestion for audience, content, and theme suitability. This section is intended to serve as a starting point for varied and customised media and culture lesson plans.

4.1 Panic, Power, Anger, and Revenge

The Age of Terror: (Films and Television Shows) 24 (2001-2010), Air Force One (1997), American Sniper (2014), Die Hard (1988), Homeland (2011-2020), Richard Jewell (2019), Team America: World Police (2004), United 93 (2006), Unthinkable* (2010), Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Consider the changing portrayals of terrorism and terrorists over the decades in American film. In *Die Hard*, the terrorists are definite threats and decidedly ill-intentioned, yet they are not closely connected to reality (meaning modelled after real people or organisations). In *Air Force One*, the terrorists are likewise largely fabrications of the screenwriters. Compare these pre-9/11 portrayals of threats to the United States to post-9/11 portrayals.

- **Are the terrorists in *24* and *Homeland* more credible or nuanced than those portrayed in pre-9/11 media? Do the latter television shows have a greater sense of immediacy?**

Also, note the differing portrayals of the protagonists. *Die Hard* and *Air Force One* both present the viewer with functionally singular heroes—men who act alone and with extraordinary heroism to save the world. Later films and television shows, such as *American Sniper*, *24*, and *Homeland* have principal protagonists, but they are almost always working as parts of larger groups. *United 93* has many heroes, not one. Somewhat in the same vein, *Team America: World Police* showcases a collection of *heroes* (or *would-be* heroes, depending upon how charitable the viewer is feeling) who attempt to save the world.

- **What, if anything, does *Team America: World Police* suggest about how the American people view the Global War on Terror and its legitimacy?**

Next, consider the ways that film and television portray the unintended consequences of fighting against terrorism.

- **Do American values appear to have been changed by the fight against external threats (terrorism) since 2001? If so, how?**

The Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution banned "cruel and unusual punishments," which has broadly been interpreted as a prohibition on torture by the government *during the interrogation process as well as after conviction* (Rumann, 2004). Yet torture is an integral part of the antiterrorist process in both *Unthinkable* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, with the portrayal in *Unthinkable* being both graphic and prolonged. Consider both the tortured and torturing**.**

- **What effect is the act of torture likely to have on the person inflicting it?**
- **Do the films mentioned address this effect?**
- **In *Homeland*, how does the Global War on Terror change the two main characters?**
- **What effect does the Global War on Terror have on the protagonist and his comrades in *American Sniper*?**
- **What price do the characters in the aforementioned pay for their use of/exposure to violence and upholding (or abandoning) their values?**
- **Do the changes portrayed in the last two decades of media suggest a stronger and more resilient American people, or do they hint at fearfulness and fragility?**

Cops and Robbers/Law and Order: (Films and Television Shows) Brooklyn Nine-Nine (2013-2021), Dirty Harry (1971), Dragnet (1967-1970), The F.B.I. (1965-1974), Homicide: Life on the Street (1993-1999), In the Clutches of the Gang (1914), Law & Order and Law & Order: SVU* (1990-2010, 1999-Present), The Other Guys (2010), Serpico (1973), The Thin Blue Line (1988), We Own the Night* (2007), The Wire* (2002-2008)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Portrayals of law enforcement have varied over the last century. *In the Clutches of the Gang*, a short silent film, police are presented as buffoons. In *The F.B.I.*, *Dragnet*, and the *Law & Order* series, police are certain forces for good, protecting the weak and fighting for justice with every episode. In *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *The Wire* (both set in Baltimore) and *We Own the Night*, police are flawed, sometimes corrupt, inclined to rivalries and infighting, but generally better than the alternative of lawlessness. Ponder the timeline of this variation in character development. First, law enforcement officials are buffoons, then they are saints, and finally, they are fallible characters that stumble towards something better, if haphazardly.

- **Do the varying portrayals of police in media demonstrate a Hegelian evolution of the law enforcement narrative—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis?**
- **If so, what does that suggest about the American view of law enforcement now and in the future?**
- **If not, what do you consider to be responsible for the oscillation in American perception of police? Is this cycle likely to be an unending one?**

Next, consider *Serpico* and *The Thin Blue Line*. These films address issues of police incompetence, indifference, or malfeasance. In *Serpico*, a law enforcement officer tackles the corruption in his department. In Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, there is not so much corruption (in the sense of bribe-taking or malicious acts of criminality) as there are poor policework and reliance upon questionable experts and procedures.

- **Consider the tone of *Serpico* and *The Thin Blue Line*, do these films suggest occasional and isolated problems in the law enforcement and criminal justice systems or larger, more endemic problems?**
- **Where does the rule-breaking tough guy protagonist of *Dirty Harry* fit in the police good/police bad spectrum?**
- **Is *Dirty Harry* an answer to the slowness, inefficiency, and injustice of the legal system, or is he a sign of a loss of faith in law and order and a turn towards vigilantism?**

After that, consider the modern comedies—*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Other Guys*.

- **How do the well-intentioned would-be heroes of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Other Guys* compare to their counterparts from *In the Clutches of the Gang*?**
- **Does the gentler, more sympathetic treatment of police in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Other Guys* indicate anything about the present American attitude towards law enforcement?**

Finally, consider the sheer *abundance* of police-centred shows.

- **Does the ongoing popularity of police-centred shows provide insight into the American mind?**
- **And does the message these shows project—that law enforcement is necessary for the orderly function of society—hold?**
- **Is a *thin blue line* all that separates an orderly world from a chaotic one? If not, what else divides these?**

The first police department in the United States was founded in the city of Boston in 1838. Before that, law enforcement was performed inconsistently, oftentimes by poorly trained volunteers or would-be criminals (Waxman, 2017). With such in mind, consider this question:

- **Historically, how might order have been maintained in a community without a police department, and does the belief that police are central to a functional society make a people more (or less) resilient, more (or less) fearful, and more (or less) capable of working with other members of their community?**

Vengeance is Ours—When the Law Has Failed: (Films and Television Shows) The Crow (1994), The Dark Knight (2008), Death Wish (1974), Escape from New York (1981), Fist of Fury (1972), Joker* (2019), Joran: The Princess of Snow and Blood (Anime, 2021), Lady Snowblood* (1973), The Last House on the Left* (1972), Law Abiding Citizen* (2009), The Man from Nowhere (2010), Oldboy* (2003), Seven Samurai (1954), Straw Dogs* (1971), Super* (2010), Superman: The Movie (1978), The World of Kanako* (2014)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Turning away from the ideal of *law enforcement as saviour* is that of a society in collapse—one where the law cannot (or will not) protect the people. In the previous subsection, a critical question was asked—*Historically, how might order have been maintained in a community without a police department?* And this question leads to a modern counterpart:

- **Could social order be maintained or restored without the law? If so, how?**

Whatever the answer to the first question, the answer provided by the content considered herein to the second seems to be that order—and no less importantly *justice*—is the responsibility of the *individual* in a failed society.

The first individual to restore justice is the *vengeance seeker*. *Death Wish*, *Escape from New York*, and *Law Abiding Citizen* all overlap in their narrative message—that when order collapses, *one man must restore justice*. None of the leading characters of these films are superheroes, but they might well be described as *super-heroic* in that they overcome great odds to enforce justice and annihilate their enemies.

This is not an entirely American dream. *Joran: The Princess of Snow and Blood*, *Lady Snowblood*, *The Man from Nowhere*, *Oldboy*, *Fist of Fury*, and *The World of Kanako* all have similar leading characters with an equal (if not greater) desire for vengeance. That said, their narratives take a different turn. Most of the protagonists of these films either die in the course of their mission (*Fist of Fury*, *Joran*, *Lady Snowblood*, and *Kanako*) or suffer great psychological trauma (*Oldboy*). A single lead—that of *Man from Nowhere*—is left relatively unscathed during his film. But having suffered the loss of his family *before* the major events of the story take place (with this trauma being a major motivating factor), inflicting another injury on this unfortunate soul would have likely seemed intolerably cruel to a great percentage of the audience. The American counterparts to these characters suffer far less, with some—Charles Bronson's character in *Death Wish* and Kurt Russell's hero/antihero of *Escape*—surviving for sequel films. *Straw Dogs*—a film with an American protagonist (Dustin Hoffman) but set in England—is an exception to the American model of cost-free, tough-guy violence, with Hoffman's character both shocked and disturbed by his capacity to engage in the sort of slaughter he had long condemned.

And then there are the superhero films—*The Crow, The Dark Knight*, and *Superman: The Movie*. Much like the *super heroic* films of the previous paragraph, the leads of these films go beyond the humanly possible (or to the *very limits* of human possibility, as is the case of Batman in *Dark Knight*). Two of these have tragic backstories—*The Crow's* hero was killed and resurrected, and Batman saw his parents shot by a thief. But being driven by sorrow or a desire for revenge appears far from a universal superhero motivator. *Superman* is a Christ-like figure driven to do good for its own sake and without any desire for recognition or compensation.

Some films deviate from the *one-man-saves-humanity* narrative, but rarely in the superhero genre. In *The Last House on the Left*, the elimination of *baddies* is a family affair. And in *Seven Samurai*, an entire village (with the help of ronin—masterless samurai) stand up against bandits. *Seven Samurai* is a Japanese film. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) has the same foundational narrative of townspeople fighting against a common enemy, but it is

an American remake of the former, which does much to explain its collectivist/ community approach to restoring order.

The prevalent theme in American films is *one against many*. The exceptions to this are few and far between.

- **Is the *one-against-many* mindset an inevitable and inseparable part or product of American individualism?**
- **Why do American vigilantes/vengeance seekers appear less traumatised by their acts of violence than their international counterparts?**
- **Does the aforementioned difference in apparent trauma levels likely reflect a core difference in American and non-American values? If not, why does it exist?**

Finally, there are movies more about the mindset of the hero/superhero than the actions of the hero. *Super* is a film about a man who *wants* to be a superhero and tries to will this into being. *Joker*'s protagonist is an antihero/nemesis of Batman, but a sympathetic one, subject to many of the isolating and cruel forces that make for heroic characters, while lacking any of the support system or internal fortitude. In both of these films, social outcasts *react*, desiring to *make a difference* and desiring *to do justice*. That their sense of justice is seriously distorted does not mitigate their intent. Rather, their confusion channels their *good intent* to *less-than-good ends*. And that draws to the culminating questions of this subsection:

- **Can the superhero or the super-heroic person (initially) be sane?**
- **Can such people *stay* sane, despite the burden they carry?**
- **Can the *one man standing against injustice* achieve anything of note?**
- **Is this individualistic myth one that strengthens and empowers the American people or divides them and makes them weak?**
- **How can the knowledge gained from studying and considering this myth be used to one a stronger, more resilient person?**

Hate the World, Fear the World: (Films) Hated: GG Allin and the Murder Junkies (1993), Lords of Chaos (2018), Rampage* (2009) (Music) "Bodies" (Song, Drowning Pool, 2001), Fear of the Dark (Album, Iron Maiden, 1992), "Killing in the Name of" (Song, Rage Against the Machine, 1992), De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (Album, Mayhem, 1994)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Music (and films about music) convey different information and convey information differently than conventional films and television shows. Excluding those in the genre of folk—in which complete stories may be told—songs rarely have the same level of detail. Rather, they rely on a more direct transmission of emotion.

Anger is no invention of modernity, but songs conveying it in singularly unambiguous terms appear (as best as can be gathered from a limited review of the available media) to be of recent vintage and popularity. *But why?* GG Allin, the subject of *Hated: GG Allin and the Murder Junkies*, was the product of peculiar circumstances. Born *Jesus Christ Allin* to an intensely religious (and likely violent) father, Allin was raised with little access to modern amenities or conveniences. Despite his mother eventually leaving his father (and changing Allin's legal name to *Kevin Michael*), Allin maintained a

rebellious disposition, which, combined with his interest in music, led him to form his band. Throughout his career, Allin developed a reputation for engaging in vulgar and sometimes criminal acts both on and off stage and accumulated a considerable arrest record. He was violent and destructive, frequently attacking audience members, bandmates, and girlfriends. Allin was equally *self-destructive*, being known for severely injuring himself on stage and bleeding profusely afterwards (Dome, 2022; Serena, 2022).

More outwardly violent (and equally self-destructive), was Mayhem—the Norwegian black band subject of *Lords of Chaos* and the artists of *De Mysteriis Dom Sathan*. As famous for the criminal conduct of its members as for its music, Mayhem has changed its line-up for appropriately violent reasons. The band's best-known lead vocalist, Dead (his stage name), committed suicide, and the band's best-known guitarist, Euronymous, was stabbed to death. Were this not enough to establish Mayhem's sinister bona fides, its members were also responsible for a series of church burnings throughout Norway (Pattison, 2016).

Musical acts have been known to exaggerate their behaviour or personal traits to gain attention. *Performative anger* has its place in the publicist's and attention-seeker's toolbox. Yet the level of violence and true *hatred of everything* that Allin and Mayhem demonstrated almost certainly exceeded the bounds of novelty acts. In short, *the rage was real*.

Rampage, one of Uwe Boll's best-reviewed films, presented as fiction a similar level of anger against everything, but nothing in particular. Centred around an apparently unambitious young man living the in American Pacific Northwest, *Rampage* portrays just that—the methodical slaughter of a community by a person on a rampage. There is an implied financial motive for these acts. (The protagonist robs a bank, amongst other things.) But this appears to be less for the sake of comfort or a desire for wealth and more so that the lead character can fund *more rampages in the future*.

Considering the songs and albums listed, one sees the recurring theme of violence, fear, and anger. "Bodies," "Killing in the Name of," and *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* all address fear, violence, or anger at length. Defining these works is the *persistency and generalised* nature of the fury. The musicians and songwriters are *angry at the world*. There is also an undercurrent of *disgust*—at life, at humanity, at modernity. And from these observations, flow the questions for this section:

- **Is there a common source of anger for the abovementioned movies and songs?**
- **What role (if any) does the radical individualism and social isolation of the West play in feeding this anger?**
- **Do the same forces that lead Westerners (Americans most of all) to identify with the superhero and the super-heroic and to shun the collective/group effort lead them to the path of non-specific anger, misanthropy, and the antihero?**
- **Finally, how might someone desiring to be more resilient use the listed media to understand anger (both that of others' and his own) and channel it to better ends?**

4.2 Death, Its Inevitability, and What to Do About It

You Do Not Own This Thing—Losing the Self, Losing the Mind, and the Dispossession of the Body: (Films and Television Shows) Alien (1979), Body Snatchers* (1993), Final Destination* (2000), Infinity Pool* (2023), Inuyashiki: Last Hero (Anime, 2017), Jacob's Ladder (1990), The Lobster (2015), The Prestige (2006), Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: To the absolute individualist, death is the ultimate thief. It takes *everything* from the person. Body, memories, autonomy, and will—these are seized from the victim and *destroyed*. And this is *horrifying*. In Western culture (and likely many others), this is an assault upon the core of one's very identity. The genesis of the Western understanding of this loss is *mind-body dualism* and its apparent contradiction with science-based thinking. Dualism holds that the person is made of two separate components—the mind and the body. The mind is fundamentally noncorporeal. *What part* of the mind is noncorporeal varies from one brand of dualism to another, with *Cartesian dualism*—probably the most popular form of dualism for several centuries—holding that *the consciousness* exists outside the realm of the physical (Robinson, 2020). While advances in anatomy, philosophy, genetics, and neuroscience have diminished the importance of dualism (and the matter of *free will* as well), the distinction has not entirely faded from the occidental concept of *self* (Bear, 2016; Nichols, 2011; Klemm, 2016).

Faced with death—loss of the possession of the human machine—one has a few possible ways to consider the matter. For the spiritually inclined dualist, the loss of the body is a mere inconvenience. The soul will go elsewhere. This place may be better, it may be worse, or it may simply be a different body. But *something carries on* afterwards. For the non-spiritually inclined dualist, a paradox presents itself: *If I regard* ***my actual self*** *as being different from* ***my body****, but I do not believe in a heaven, hell, or clearly defined afterlife, what will happen to me—my consciousness?*

This is not an easy question to answer without addressing the inconsistencies of one's beliefs. And for the non-dualist (monist) raised in a culture that reinforces an implicit belief in dualism, there is a certain trauma to accepting that one is merely a slowly decaying piece of meat, governed by neurochemical processes and delusions of grandeur.

Alien and *Body Snatchers* address this sense of horror and fear most directly—they embrace it, presenting the body as something to be stripped from oneself by a destructive *outside* force. That these threats are both *alien* (in the extra-terrestrial sense) adds to the initial shock value of some imagery while simultaneously making it less traumatic to the viewer due to its disconnect from reality. *Final Destination* takes a slightly different tack. The malevolence in *Final Destination* (and its many sequels) is *fate*—an idea almost certainly less *alien* to many people than *aliens*. But *Final Destination* relies on exaggerated horror-show deaths with a gruesomeness that provides the audience with a psychological out—*something as gory as what was presented on screen could never happen*.

Infinity Pool poses another question to the viewer no less disturbing than the previous one: *What is the person?* In this film, those who commit serious crimes have their choice of two punishments—death or the sacrifice of a clone of oneself with identical

memories and (as far as can be determined) an identical consciousness. As one would expect, such body/memory clones are not free—leading to some valid questions about class and how the wealthy can avoid serious repercussions for their actions—but those questions detract nothing from the question of *self*.

In *The Prestige*, an almost perfect mirror of the aforementioned film is presented. Two magicians—one wealthy and one working class—are in a great rivalry. The wealthy magician develops a teleportation trick in which he appears to go from one side of a performance hall to the next at impossible speeds. His working-class competitor desires to do the same but is unable to figure out how the former magician's trick operates. Enlisting the help of Nikola Tesla, he develops an improved version of the teleportation performance. Unlike his wealthy competitor, his performance relies not on visual manipulation or a body double, but on duplication of the person performing the trick. The performer enters one box and activates Tesla's device, and in mere seconds, a duplicate is created in a different box on the opposite side of the theatre. The *sacrifice* inherent in this trick is that the original person (the performer) is immediately drowned, lest there be too many copies of the same person walking about.

Plot oddities aside (such as why the working-class performer did not simply create *one* copy of himself and pass said copy off as an identical twin and fellow magician, rather than repeatedly committing suicide), *The Prestige* has a disturbing question integrated into it. *If I were replaced with a perfect duplicate, would anyone know? Would it matter?*

Inuyashiki: Last Hero contains related questions of duplication and transformation. In this anime, two men are accidentally killed by an alien spacecraft. Intent on not leaving evidence of their destruction, the aliens operating the craft produce robotic copies of both men. Although these robots are vastly superior in strength and power to a human being (a fact that plays an integral role in the narrative), they carry identical memories and—as far as can be ascertained—complete human consciousnesses. These robotic simulacra may begin their story as more or less interchangeable with their organic predecessors, but they do not remain as such. The principal questions of the series are thus: *What does one do with nearly unlimited power (such as that held by the robotic replacements for these men)? What does one's use of power reveal about him? And how does power change someone and how people treat (and perceive) someone?*

But at the heart of these questions is one related to death and the self—*How much of a person is defined by his choices and how much simply by the limits of what he can do?*

The Lobster, in which a select group of single people are given the choice of either finding mates or being transformed into the animal of their choice (with *a lobster* being the choice of one of the film's protagonists in case his amorous efforts fail), flips the premise of *Inuyashiki* on its head. Rather than transforming from *mere human* to *near immortal* (as was the case in *Inuyashiki*), *The Lobster* offers one the choice of remaining human or being transformed into a lesser version of oneself.

Both *The Lobster* and *Inuyashiki* tackle the matter of death through considerations of *generativity*—the desire to defeat death by leaving a mark—by passing something down to others—that exceeds the lifespan of the mortal person (Havey, 2016).

The Lobster implies that those without romantic relationships and the offspring that follow are regarded as being less than fully human. While the film presents this idea in its most absurd form (as satires often do) so that it can be attacked, such does not diminish the importance of the age-old question: *If I have no children, what will remain of me when I am gone?*

Inuyashiki answers this question by suggesting *self-sacrifice*, when one of the men-machines trades one form of immortality for another, destroying his nearly indestructible body to save the planet. Both *The Lobster* and *Inuyashiki* tackle the problem of the loss of self in ways that reflect their respective cultures and consider the matter of the individual versus the collective (and reach different answers).

While the films mentioned thus far in this subsection address the matters of *how to avoid death*, *how to face death without living in fear*, and *how to cheat death by way of generativity*, the last two films to be mentioned do not. *Jacob's Ladder* and *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* both consider the matter of *accepting death* and (if a bit less directly) *accepting impermanence*. This radically different theme, shared by these two films, is almost certainly a product of their foundation on Buddhist thought. The narrative of *Jacob's Ladder* was inspired in part by the Bardo Thodol—the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Hartl, 1990). And *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* is permeated with Buddhist themes, taking place at a Korean monastery and dedicating much of its attention to the life of a monk.

After considering the different perspectives on death, questions come to mind:

- **What lessons do the referenced films offer about death and loss?**
- **What is the self and what does the loss of the self-entail? What should one do in the face of death?**
- **What strategy—denial, acceptance, consideration from a distance, embracing generativity, cultivating non-attachment—or combination of strategies can make for a more resilient and capable person?**
- **Can contemplation of death and the horror of it promote grit? If so, how?**
- **Finally, how can awareness of impermanence and the loss of the self-lead to more effective goal-setting and priority assessment?**

Worst Fears Realised! The End of the World and the Fate of the Few Who Remain: (Films and Television Shows) 12 Monkeys (1995), Armageddon (1998), The Book of Eli (2010), Deep Impact (1998), Ever Since the World Ended (2001), Girls Last Tour (Anime, 2017/Manga, 2014-2018), Godzilla (1954), Godzilla: King of the Monsters (2019), I Am Legend (2007), The Postman (1997), The Road (2009), The Stand (1994), Terminator 2 (1991), The Quiet Earth (1985)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: This subsection is centred around four questions: *1) What do we do and can we do to prevail in the face of doom? 2) Is it better to die alone or have a few billion friends along for the final ride? 3) What happens after the end of everything humanity knew? 4) What should one make of a future unbound from the past?*

This section begins by considering the matter of avoidance. *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*, both released in 1998, are asteroid movies. Their premises and story outlines are enough alike to suggest that the old saw that *Hollywood has but a single brain—shared by*

all—and it is not an overwhelmingly large one may well be true. In both films, the world faces disaster. In both, humanity mounts an extraordinary response. And in both, the United States (with varying degrees of help from other peoples) heads off oblivion. There are some differences. In *Armageddon*, a ragtag oil drilling crew led by their heroic, no-nonsense boss (as played by Bruce Willis) saves the world with a bit of help from the decidedly geeky staff of NASA, demonstrating the greatness of the American working man in the process. In *Deep Impact*, scientists, engineers, astronauts, and the benevolent United States President Tom Beck (Morgan Freeman) do the same, but with more mathematics and planning and less machismo. Products of their time, these films project a deep optimism, not that there will be no problems or pitfalls, but that in the end, humanity (as guided by the fundamentally noble United States) will overcome. *Terminator 2*, although focused on a different threat, argues that the greatness of mankind and the human spirit will be no less successful in their fight against killer machines.

But what if we cannot save the world? What if everything ends? In light of the limited efficacy of worldwide efforts to control COVID, these questions seem all the more worthy of being asked.

12 Monkeys hits close to home in this regard, with a manmade disease killing much of the world's population and only a colony of scientists remaining. In *I Am Legend*, one scientist tries to undo the civilisation-destroying harm of another (well-intentioned) researcher. And in *Ever Since the World Ended*, science has nothing to do with survival, with a tiny population the naturally immune surviving an equally deadly plague, living out their days in a slowly decaying San Francisco. In the first two, science is both the problem and the potential solution. And in the third, science is irrelevant.

Presumably, these films are correct about major disasters: Some people will survive. (And scenarios in which no one survives are difficult to turn into films.) And for the survivors, one must wonder: *What does a person do after the end of the world?* Both *The Book of Eli* and *The Postman* consider the difficulty of communicating across great distances and rebuilding civilisation without ordinary means of sharing information and ideas. Their solution—the introduction of couriers of great determination and fortitude—makes one consider how reliant our modern world is on the ability to traverse great distances, both physically and virtually, with the use of technology.

But if one survives, what is there to fear? In the films included in this subsection, the survivors do not immediately starve to death, nor are they left mangled by disease. On the most personal level—that of their bodies—they are spared. In some, *The Road* being the best example, the thing to fear is *other survivors*. It is not the empty world that is terrifying, but what sort of people remain on it, and what they are willing to do to live to die another day. In others, humanity is guided to rebuild (although not necessarily by the forces of light). In *The Stand, two* camps of survivors emerge, one guided by goodness and the other by evil. And the *thing to fear* is what comes when these two camps face their final battle.

Another common theme—a thing commonly feared—is *being alone*. No film better demonstrates this than *The Quiet Earth*, which ends on a radically reshaped planet with

(presumably) one inhabitant. *Girls Last Tour* is slightly more hopeful in that the protagonists have each other. They may soon freeze to death, but they are not lacking in the comfort of companionship until then.

Man's dangerousness and destructiveness, both at the individual and collective level, is something to fear both before and after the end of the existing order. *Godzilla* was originally a metaphor for the atomic bomb and the threat it posed to the world (Yam, 2020). He evolved from threat to ally, eventually becoming a saviour in *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. But even in the more recent film—with its underlying environmentalist themes—the potential violence of humanity and modern civilisation remains. *The Quiet Earth* also considers the possibility of novel technology ending humanity. And any film about manmade diseases (including *The Stand*) does so as well.

In all but the most hopeful of disaster films (*Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* being two good examples), the narratives reveal man's fear of man. The individual is afraid of being alone—of himself—or of *not being alone* (depending upon the survivors). And then there is the fear of the collective—*Will we destroy ourselves? Will we destroy our world?*

And that leads to critical questions to consider for this collection:

- **Why are audiences drawn to films and television shows centred on disaster? (Is the spectacle the attraction? Do misanthropy and a desire for chaos come into play? Do these films make our daily problems seem small in comparison? Or is there something else beneath the surface of conscious awareness?)**
- **To what extent do audiences desire disaster? And why do they desire it?**
- **How can contemplating disaster give one a more robust sense of the severity/triviality of our daily problems?**
- **If a people (both individually and collectively) are to become more resilient, perhaps grittier, how should they regard disaster, its potential occurrence, and the role science, technology, and environmental policy stand to play in it?**
- **Which characters in the above films and television shows demonstrated grit, and to what extent can one emulate them?**
- **Finally, is death and loss more frightening when presented at a grand scale (the end of the world), or presented as a personal loss? Why?**

With the last question, this paper segues to its next topic.

Up Close and Personal—Death of the Individual, Death of Friends and Family: (Films and Television Shows) The Bucket List (2007), Dead Like Me (2003-2004), Death Becomes Her (1992), The Descendants (2011), Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011), The Fault in Our Stars (2014), Field of Dreams (1989), Ghost (1990), Kagemusha (1980), Meet Joe Black (1998), Moon (2009), Up (2009), What Dreams May Come (1998), World's Greatest Dad (2009)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Depersonalising death—turning individuals into numbers or targets and their deaths into *events*—has the potential to provide a mental barrier to trauma. Identifying with one person (or a few people) is possible. Identifying with a sea of faces and a mountain of skulls is not, and this greatly alters the way we perceive (amongst other things) crimes versus state actions. Such has

long been known, hence the words of 18th-century scholar, Beilby Porteus (**bold** added to emphasise the most relevant text):

> "*To sate the lust of power; more horrid still,*
> *The foulest stain and scandal of our nature*
> *Became its boast—**One Murder made a Villain,***
> ***Millions a Hero.** —Princes were privileg'd*
> *To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.*
> *Ah! why will Kings forget that they are Men?"*
> (Quote Investigator, 2010)

- **In light of the information and concepts presented above, how does one endure and grow stronger when faced with the terror of non-existence without the detachment afforded by the depersonalisation of statistics or the comforting absurdity of improbable events?**

The answer to this question varies from one movie or television show to the next. In *Dead Like Me* and *Death Becomes Her*, the answer is *humour*. *Dead Like Me* kills its protagonist in an improbable way—with a toilet seat from a decaying space station. In *Death Become Her*, mortality is presented repeatedly, with the immortal protagonists facing extraordinary injury time and again, patching themselves up (with some help) and immediately resuming their activities. That the lead of *Dead Like Me* is a teenager and that *Death Becomes Her* embraced the goth style traditionally associated with young adults is not coincidental. All three—the listed media and the goth aesthetic—reflect youthful adjustments to awareness of mortality. The morbidness they embrace has a defanged theatricalism and a touch of adolescent irony. The grim reapers (of which there is a team) in *Dead Like Me* are eccentric and surprisingly likeable. And the many horrible injuries of *Death Becomes Her* are bloodless, painless annoyances.

The Bucket List considers the matter of two men's impending demise with a different, gentler humour. When faced with terminal diagnoses, the lead characters, played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, decide to fulfil their shared *bucket list*—the list of goals they would like to achieve before they *kick the bucket*—by way of an international adventure paid for by the wealthier of the two. Death is not denied in *The Bucket List*, but the potential for end-of-life suffering is minimised to the point of it being of no real concern for either character until the very end of the film. This soft-focus on the misery of cancer drew some ire—from film critic Roger Ebert, amongst others—but such was an essential element of the story's premise (Ebert, 2008). Had either man been overwhelmingly ill, their travels would have been impossible.

The Fault in Our Stars has the same premise—two cancer patients meeting in a hospital and forming a relationship at a greatly accelerated tempo. Granted, there are significant differences between the films. The protagonists of *Stars* are a young man and woman who fall into a romantic relationship, not two old men who become friends. But the films share enough in theme and structure that their differing dramatisations of slow

cancer deaths can be contrasted to each other, with *Stars* offering a far less anodyne view of the illness.

The Bucket List embodies a variation of the mechanisms of the denial of death. Death is present throughout the story, but *pain* is pushed into the background, possibly reflecting the concerns of an older audience who have come to accept their rapidly approaching ends, but would prefer that getting there not be a miserable process.

Turning from humour (of the angsty teenage and older buddy-films varieties alike), one sees another common method to address one demise—humanising death and wrapping it in sentiment. *Ghost* and *Meet Joe Black* do this to varying degrees. *Meet Joe Black* presents death as such a gentle, likeable, artless, and handsome man (a young Brad Pitt, in fact), that one wonders why Death, charming fellow that he is, need be avoided at all.

In contrast to *Meet Joe Black* (if only in contrast to it), *Ghost* is a frightening film. There are moments of passion, sadness, anxiety, and fear, but the overwhelming message is that loved ones, while gone, long remain with the living—that some part of them will stay with the survivors for the rest of their days. *The dead will not be forgotten. And they will not forget you either, dear mourner*. A more or less identical message is encapsulated in *What Dreams May Come*, a story of a family whose members die in relatively short sequence. Like *Ghost*, it has its moments of despair, but the underlying Hollywood optimism—that *death is not the end*—shines through.

From the perspective of the dead and dying to that of those who are left behind, *Ghost* provides an easy transition. Sharing a theme of communication from beyond the grave is *Field of Dreams*. Not so much about a man mourning the loss of his father as it is about the death of the man's father forcing him to reconsider his own mortality, *Field of Dreams* takes as tender an approach to contemplating the brevity of life as one could hope to find. Still, reminders of the transience of the human condition and the film's sincerity are reminiscent of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*, but more palatable to American audiences.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close turns away from the humourous to the quixotic, and given that film is about a boy who lost his father in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, such was a good choice on the part of the filmmakers. Still, the colourful characters the young protagonist meets along the way enliven his journey to make sense of loss—a more literal journey than some, but a common theme throughout many of the works examined in this paper. *Extremely Loud* serves as an interesting bridge between large-scale and personal tragedies, a reminder that there are stories behind each statistic.

The Descendants is an interesting film that asks the viewer to consider how to mourn those that are dead in all but name, especially when the one dying is ordinary, less-than-heroic, and unsympathetic. The dying person in question—an adulterous mother of two daughters, neither of whom appears to care much for her, just her lover cared little for her either—is not the centre of the film. The effects of her misdeeds and her impending death on those around her are relevant. She, however, is not. *Up* is structured around the absence of a wife as well. And although *Up* is a children's movie

lacking in the same complexity and undertones of some of the other films thus mentioned, its message is the same—*Life is short. Time is fleeting. Make good use of the time you have with those for whom you care*. And like *The Descendants*, it invites one to contemplate the *absence* of the dead and the void it leaves.

Kagemusha considers the absence of the leader in medieval Japan and the role of his replacement. In this film, there is an interesting question as to how much *the man* is relevant versus how much *the role he plays* matters. The last two films to be addressed in this section do the same. *Moon* is about a clone trapped in an isolated lunar mining colony, where he discovers that everything he believed about himself was essentially fiction. *World's Greatest Dad* considers the role the already-dead play and how the way people claim to remember them can have almost no resemblance to what they really were—a transition from loser or nobody to heroic symbol, based on a mutually agreed upon lie.

Aside from that, *World's Greatest Dad* is an exemplar of black humour as a tool for addressing loss.

With that, this paper turns to some worthwhile discussion questions:

- **Of the multiple tools presented in this subsection—light or black humour, defanging/humanising death, and envisioning life as a journey with a natural endpoint—which can be most easily applied in real life?**
- **How can awareness of the void one will leave (or not leave) upon passing help a person gain perspective and resilience?**
- **Does contemplating one's death as a part of a larger trend (number of deaths per year, in a certain area, from a certain cause) make accepting its inevitability easier?**
- **Is the knowledge that anyone can ultimately be replaced (as was the case in Moon) useful to those wishing to develop a more realistic and grittier mindset? If so, how?**
- **Are there any death consideration strategies that simply do not work effectively? If so, what is wrong with them? Why are the harmful, and what might be a better alternative?**

Whistling Past the Graveyard—The Melody of Oblivion: (Music) "Dead and Lovely" (Song, Tom Waits, 2004), Death (Band, 1971-1977), "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" (Song, Blue Öyster Cult, 1976), "Everybody Dies" (Song, Billie Eilish, 2021), "The Future" (Song, Leonard Cohen, 1992), "People Who Died" (Song, Jim Caroll, 1980)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: Music, death, and perceptions of the afterlife have been bound together since the age of songs composed for the church, if not before. There is an abundance of songs that address the loss and the passing of loved ones, so much so that narrowing down a list to usable length is a challenge.

If only by the virtue of their distinct, deep and resonant voices (if nothing else), Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen and their works should be included in any discussion of death and music. "Dead and Lovely" is an *anti-romantic* song that attacks the idea of there being anything romantic about death or dying, no matter how seemingly poetic the setting. "The Future" descries one horror after another—environmental destruction,

nuclear weapons, and death (amongst other things)—warning "I've seen the future, brother/It is murder," (Cohen, 1992). Just as "Dead and Lovely" is anti-romantic, "The Future" could be said to be *anti-hope*. "People Who Died" tells of one death after the next, rarely pleasant and never from entirely natural causes. "Everybody Dies" delivers exactly the message stated in the song name with doleful vocals that leave no doubt as to the emotional content of the composition. And Death (the proto-punk band, rather than the 1980s band by the same name) based its entire brand around acknowledging the certainty of mortality. Probably the mildest, most encouraging song included in this list is "(Don't Fear) The Reaper," which advocates (predictably) that one *not fear the reaper*.

There is little ambiguity in these works. They all address death with unapologetic directness. The message in them is simple: *None are long for this world*. In this way, these songs and musicians serve as tonal memento mori more than anything else. Their existence and ongoing popularity pose certain questions:

- **What, if anything, is the benefit of listening to songs that directly address death?**
- **Can listening to such songs make help a person to become more mentally centred or grittier? If so, how?**
- **Can songs about mortality motivate someone to reassess his (or her) life priorities in a way other media might not?**
- **Would listening to the songs mentioned be bound to make a person less happy, or might someone find hope or inspiration in them? If so, what would be inspiring?**
- **Can persistent reminders of the temporal constraints of life make one more mature? If so, how?**

With those questions considered, this paper turns to the notion of cultivating mental maturity and fortitude.

4.3 Misery and Maturity: Suffering, Its Inexorableness, and Its Teaching Potential

Growing Up and the End of Innocence: (Films and Television Shows) 8 Mile (2002), The Basketball Diaries (1995), The Breakfast Club (1985), Full Metal Jacket (1987), The Last Emperor (1987), Leon: The Professional (1994), Superbad (2007), The Sweet Hereafter (1997), The Wild Ones (1953)*

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: What does it mean *to grow up*? What does it mean to *put away childish things*? And when is one *grown*? The process of maturing from child to adult is traumatic. The loss of protection, innocence, and the concern of others—being cast out of the home and into the coldness of an unforgiving world—these are hardening experiences, save for those with the best or worst fortunes. For the luckiest, the road from child to adult has been graded and paved by the efforts of others. For the least lucky, the pressures and torments of maturity are trivial in comparison to those of surviving at the hands of cruel or indifferent parents, communities, or institutions. It is debatable if the luckiest ever *become* adults, living as they do without the tempering effects of struggle (an idea explored in *The Last Emperor*,

about China's last monarch), just as it is if the least lucky were ever children, have never had protection from the severity of life. In between these extremes are the experiences of those who face varying degrees of difficult as they move from child to adult.

Leon: The Professional is a story of a girl who is thrust into adulthood as quickly as one could manage. Raised in an unstable and violent home, Mathilda (Natalie Portman) returns to her apartment building to discover that her family has been killed by a corrupt Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent. Realising that her life is at stake, Mathilda continues past her apartment, quietly begging her way into the residence of her neighbour, Leon (Jean Reno). Leon, a hitman, reluctantly takes Mathilda into his home and begins training her as his protégé. Throughout *The Professional*, there is a distinct and occasionally uncomfortable dynamic. Both characters were forced by life circumstances to mature at an accelerated tempo. As a result of this, they both retain a certain childlikeness in their respective ways. And this leads to the first round of questions for this subsection:

- **Aside from chronological age, what is the dividing line between child and adult? Is it a certain level of moral sophistication?**
- **Is adulthood predicated on having particular experiences? If so, what are they? Is adulthood something else entirely? Can one simultaneously be a child (in certain regards) and an adult in others?**
- **How does the timing of negative life events—the age at wish we are exposed to trauma—affect one's ability to be strengthened or fortified by them versus being damaged by them? And can one be both strengthened in some ways and weakened in others by early life trauma?**

For reference, compare *The Professional* to *The Man from Nowhere*—a film with more or less the same premise (tough guy befriends girl, tough guy saves girl) but a radically different execution and narrative focus. Contrast the treatment of the relationship between the two lead characters in each film and the negative experiences they suffer.

Full Metal Jacket provides more insight into the process of being christened an adult in a bath of blood. With older (young adult) characters and fewer uncomfortable themes and messages, the film might be said to be easier to watch than *The Professional*. And there is the added distinction that the violence of *Full Metal Jacket* takes place within the state-sanctioned context of war, not that of crime. Still, both films are fundamentally coming-of-age works, with the maturing mechanism being violence.

Other films about growing up at an accelerated rate—*8 Mile*, *The Basketball Diaries*, and *The Sweet Hereafter*—share the notion of sexuality, instability, hedonism, and violence forcing the young into adulthood (or something like it). In *8 Mile*, a combination of poverty, crime, enthusiasm for music, and determination to better his circumstances compel Jimmy Smith Jr. (Marshall Bruce Mathers III), an aspiring rapper, to hone his craft and achieve a level of notoriety. While the experiences of the protagonist are not substantially traumatic, the film shows something of the environment in which a considerable number of economically unprivileged Americans live and come to develop their understanding of the world. *The Basketball Diaries* explores the effects that the loss

of a friend, a heroin addiction, economically necessitated prostitution, and crime have on a young man, transforming him from boy to artist. A loosely autobiographical work, *The Basketball Diaries* is based on the life of Jim Carroll (who wrote "People Who Died," a song mentioned in a previous section). The violence within the film foreshadows the late 1990s and later rash of school shootings in the United States, possibly giving some insight into the minds of the young men who commit such slaughter, and allowing one to speculate on what process of development either allows such young men to mature into productive citizens or turn towards mayhem.

Of the three films, addressed in the previous paragraph, *The Sweet Hereafter* stands apart. First, it is the sole Canadian film in the lot. Second, it is without a hopeful message or conclusion. Taking place in the aftermath of a school bus disaster, *The Sweet Hereafter* considers how a community—parents, siblings, and neighbours alike—processes and attempts to recover from the loss of many children. Other elements of the story (including that one of the surviving girls had been molested) complicate these efforts at recovery. And the film suggests that pain may not so much mature people as either *change* them or leave them in a state of shock or paralysis, possibly forever.

Darker themes having been addressed, this paper turns to more stereotypical coming-of-age films. *The Wild Ones*, starring Marlon Brando at his most iconic, encapsulates the emerging post-Second-World-War notion of youthful rebellion and something of the motorcycle (biker) culture forged by men left rootless and occasionally damaged by the great carnage of the 1940s. Brando's lead character is a *rebel*, but against what he is rebelling is never clear.

The Breakfast Club and *Dazed and Confused* consider the tensions and troubles of the young less dramatically than have the other films thus far considered. The five main characters of *The Breakfast Club* all hail from different social groups, with their sole initial connection being that they are attending Saturday detention sessions. The obstacles faced by these students are of the ordinary sort—family tension, small acts of abuse and mistreatment, and academic and social pressure—but the film does much to suggest that the characters are capable of growing, and they *do grow* through the course of their interactions. *The Breakfast Club* is an obvious product of its times. Much of the anti-parent teenage angst of the 1980s has diminished in recent years, with parents now being more involved in their children's lives and young people being less rebellious and inclined to drink, have sex, or use drugs than were young people decades ago (Norton, 2017; Wallace, 2016).

Coming-of-age films saw something of a heyday in the 1980s, suggesting that the era had patent forms of discontent and anxiety, probably related to the recent entry of women into the workforce and the slow-motion collapse of the conventional family (the same factors that contributed to the satanic panic of the decade) and family roles. In contrast, the protagonists of *Superbad* harbour no such animosity towards their elders, with a few of the adults (two police officers) rising to the level of *cool*. Rather than being strict authoritarians or foils to teenage hijinks, the adults in *Superbad* are largely benign or fun. By studying these two films, one can look for common challenges in the process

of reaching adulthood and identify what problems were specific to a singular time and place.

The above films having been noted, several discussion questions come to mind:

- **What, if any, struggles of reaching adulthood are common to all the films in this subsection?**
- **What methods of surviving and adapting to the pressures of maturity did the characters in these films use? Are any of them applicable outside of film? If so, which ones and how can they be used?**
- **Consider the greatest traumas faced by the characters in these films. How did they adapt? Were their methods effective? If not, how might these methods be improved?**
- **Does rebellion ever play a role in building grittiness? If so, when and how?**
- **What do the changing portrayals of adolescence and adulthood in the West say about Western culture?**
- **What role, if any, does violence—either literally or metaphorically—play in the development of grit and the cultivation of mental maturity?**

Midlife Changes, Traumas, Transformations, and Second Chances: (Films and Television Shows) Ash Is Purest White (江湖儿女; 2018), Better Call Saul (2015-2022), Breaking Bad (2008-2013), Defiance (2008), The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (2007), Groundhog Day (1993), The Hunt (2012), The Shawshank Redemption (1994), There Will Be Blood (2007), True Detective (Season 1, 2014), Unbroken (2014), What About Bob? (1991)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: There is no static person. One changes throughout life, rapidly during one's youth, incrementally through middle years, and slowly towards the end. This is what we expect: Knowledge for the young, experience for the middle-aged, and wisdom for the elderly. But what happens when a life breaks from the probable story arc? The previous subsection lists several films in which childhood was cut short and the young protagonists gained, frequently at great expense, experience beyond their years. In this subsection, this paper will consider adulthood transformations, some gradual and predictable, some fuelled by extraordinary events and circumstances. In all cases, the subject of these experiences will have changed, possibly for the better, possibly for the worse, but always into someone different.

Trauma as transformative is a recurring theme in the films listed. *Breaking Bad* tells of a high school chemistry who is given a terminal cancer diagnosis and how this diagnosis changed him. Initially meek, beaten down by life, and domineered by his wife, Walter White finds an imperative to seek success in his illness. And throughout the series, White slowly transforms (or *transmogrifies*) into a drug kingpin. White's knowledge of his imminent demise is not a burden. It *frees him* of the burden of conformity, mediocrity, and concern for others' feelings. White may not be a better man by the end of the series, but he is unquestionably a more liberated one, one who has taken control of his destiny. *Ash is Purest White*, directed by Jia Zhangke (one of China's more respected arthouse directors), follows a more subtle process of maturation. The film's lead, Zhao Qiao, is the long-term girlfriend of mob boss Guo Bin. After a street altercation in which she

discharges an illegally possessed, Zhao Qiao is sentenced to several years in prison, effectively taking the fall for her boyfriend, who was the actual owner of the weapon. Zhao Qiao's process of transformation does not happen during her time in prison, but afterwards. Upon being freed, she immediately begins her journey to reunite with Guo Bin to find that he is no longer the powerful, impressive, and intimidating man he once was. He has no gang, no connections, and seems to have given up on life. *This* is the beginning of Zhao Qiao's development. Having lost faith in her hero, she cultivates her abilities and achieves success independently of him, adopting the virtues and moral code of the underworld and moving from accessory-girlfriend to fully capable person. With one of the more graceful story arcs to be addressed in this subsection, *Ash is Purest White* is a coming-of-age film of sorts.

Groundhog Day is another film of slow-motion personal development. Centred around a television personality forced to repeat a single day—the eponymous Groundhog Day—until he achieves a certain level of learning, the film suggests that *anyone* can mature and better himself if given enough time. *Better Call Saul* tackles the matter of fate from a different angle. Whereas Bill Murray's lead in *Groundhog Day* was bound to grow up, accumulating wisdom and decency along the way, *Better Call Saul* suggests that escaping one's true self and true nature may well be impossible. A *Breaking Bad* spinoff, *Better Call Saul* follows small-time crook Jimmy McGill's (played by Bob Odenkirk) efforts to straighten himself out and become an attorney. Although bright, competent, and likeable, McGill's professional accomplishments and ambition are forever shadowed by his past, both by way of constant reminders from his older brother and by his own imperfect tendencies. And for all his hard work, McGill transforms himself into Saul Goodman (a lawyer of the seediest sort) and ends up exactly where he was in the beginning—as a criminal.

Equally on the wrong side of the law (through no fault of his own) is Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), the protagonist of *The Shawshank Redemption*. Like Jimmy McGill, Dufresne remains fundamentally the same character throughout his film. He adapts to awful circumstances—being imprisoned for two murders he did not commit—but his underlying system of values remains unchanged. Watching these films, two questions arise:

- **Considering their different takes on adult maturity and development, what do *Ash is Purest White*, *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *Groundhog Day*, and *The Shawshank Redemption* say about the human capacity to adapt to overcome adversity?**
- **Does adversity change the fundamental nature of an adult or does it merely reveal what was already there?**

Following a similar arc of redemption tried and failed is *There Will Be Blood*, a film about someone dedicated to getting what he wants but is not necessarily happy with what he gets. Protagonist Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) is a singularly determined miner and businessman who adopts the child of a dead colleague, intending to use the boy as a marketing tool—for Plainview to humanise his persona and present

himself as a family man to investors and members of the communities where he intends to construct oil wells. Plainview is an unsympathetic character—intensely misanthropic, violent, and unpredictable—yet his connection to (and concern for) his adopted son is real. And it is the loss of this which diminishes his already finite compassion for others.

If the message of *Better Call Saul* and *There Will Be Blood* is that one can rarely escape himself, the message of *Unbroken* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* offers a hopeful corollary—just as the worse parts of one's nature cannot easily be destroyed, nor can the better parts. *Unbroken* is the story of Louis Zamperini, an American held as a POW by the Japanese. And *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is that of Jean-Dominique Bauby, a French journalist left paralysed after a stroke. Both films are based on true stories, and in them, the lead characters demonstrate a tremendous ability to *endure*, retaining surprising levels of equanimity despite great suffering.

Endurance of a different form a suffering—the psychological rather than physical sort—is demonstrated in *The Hunt*. The main character, Lucas (Mads Mikkelsen), is a teacher falsely accused of sexually molesting a child. Mirroring the satanic panic mass hysteria, the small Danish town in which Lucas lives turns against him almost immediately. The lesson of the film is an unpleasant one—collective emotion can easily overpower individual loyalty and when a community turns on someone, it can do so abruptly, leaving him entirely alone.

What About Bob? tells of an abandonment of a different sort, with a famous psychiatrist discovering that the is quickly replaced in popularity and affection by his charming patient. Far lighter than that of *The Hunt*, the message of *What About Bob?* is different in presentation and degree, but the same at heart: *No one is above being cast out*.

The last two items (one film and one season of a television series) to be considered in this subsection ask: *What happens to those who leave the community? Where do they go and what do they do?* The first, *Defiance*, is about exactly. Set in the Second World War, the film is about a group of Polish partisans who *defied* the efforts of the German occupying force to exterminate the Jewish population, saving many potential Holocaust victims throughout Belarus. The second, *True Detective* (Season 1) follows the life of Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey), a detective with the Louisiana State Police who spends many years hunting a serial killer. Both the major characters of *Defiance* and the lead of *True Detective* are (to varying degrees) outcasts. The first characters are such in the most literal sense—they fled their homes and communities and the certain death they faced therein, moving into the forests. And while Cohle is not fleeing those who would eliminate him, his deeply flawed personal background (including a substantial history of drug abuse) and philosophical inclinations and perspective metaphorically quarantine him from the larger community. None of the aforementioned characters would qualify as *conventionally good in conventional circumstances*, yet they rise above their apparent limitations in times, places, and situations in which more ordinary men would likely fail.

And with those considerations, this paper turns to relevant questions for this subsection:

- **Consider the different types of isolation of the characters in *Defiance*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, *The Hunt*, *There Will Be Blood*, *True Detective*, and *What About Bob?* Does their isolation make them stronger or weaker? Why and how?**
- **Certain religious beliefs (Buddhism amongst them) encourage their adherents to live in isolation for a time, occasionally for years. Thinking back to the films mentioned above, what can be learned about the potential of isolation as a tool to promote strength and grittiness?**
- **How much can a person deviate from his true nature? Are those who fight against their personalities bound to lose? If not, what can they do to best prepare themselves for the battle?**
- **In *True Detective* and *There Will Be Blood*, the protagonists demonstrate a lack of concern for social mores and conventions. They are also focused on their goals and put aside ordinary concerns for what they deem to be of greater consequence. Does the single-mindedness of these characters make them more of less resilient or grittier? If so, what can one learn from them?**
- **Thinking back to *The Hunt* and the sudden (and undeserved) ostracism the protagonist faces, what can be gained by studying his response? How can one become more resilient (or increase grittiness) to sudden drops in social relationships and levels of connection?**
- **Why did the mental health care provider (Doctor Leo Marvin) in *What About Bob?* feel threatened by the presence of his odd, but decidedly non-violent, patient (Bob Wiley)? Was his response to his patient's presence ideal? If not, what could he have done differently? Would more grit have helped him bear his patient's intrusions more effectively? If so, how?**

Old Age, Acceptance, Dying, and Defying the Odds: (Films and Television Shows) About Schmidt (2002), Banshees of Inisherin (2022), Dancer in the Dark (2000), Ikiru (1952), The Whale (2022), The World's Fastest Indian (2005)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: What should one do in the face of death and suffering? This is a trick question in a way. Everyone is always faced with death and pain. From birth, all that is certain for any living thing is that it will not long endure and that its life will not be without dissatisfaction. And the better part of us realises as much from the time we are reasonably young. Yet one may spend a good many years in denial—pushing death's icy hand away, if but a few millimetres, and numbing oneself to the pain of life. The films in this subsection address the matter of impending mortality for those in their middle years and the elderly alike.

About Schmidt has the most conventional narrative of the films listed. The eponymous *Schmidt* is a recently retired actuary living in Omaha, Nebraska. Schmidt's retirement thrusts him into a minor existential crisis—he had lived to work and worked to live—which is exacerbated by the sudden death of his wife. Without any particular plans, necessary work, or objectives, Schmidt sets out on a road trip, planning to see the United States before arriving at his daughter's upcoming wedding. Implied in the film is

a question many men, particularly those of the American Baby Boomer generation, find unavoidable if they live long enough: *Without work and the title and responsibilities that entail, what am I?*

The World's Fastest Indian portrays the true story of Burt Munro (played by Anthony Hopkins), a New Zealand motorcycle enthusiast and builder who desires to compete at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. If *About Schmidt* is a story of *accepting* one's age, *The World's Fastest Indian* is one of defying it. Even before he departs New Zealand, Munro faces serious age-related medical problems, and his journey is complicated by his limited financial resources. Despite these obstacles, Munro prevails, setting a land speed record with his motorcycle.

Neither of the aforementioned show ageing harshly. And that may well be due to the lead characters approaching the end of their lives and having had time to contemplate the inevitable. *Accept, adapt, or persevere*—death may be closer than it was in days prior, but one need not resign himself to misery. *Dancer in the Dark* has no such light within it. The story of Selma Ježková (Icelandic musician Björk), an immigrant factory worker in the American Northwest who is gradually going blind and saving for a medical procedure so her son does not do the same, *Dancer in the Dark* is an exercise in bleakness. In addition to her impending blindness, Ježková faces a death sentence after killing the man—nominally a friend—who stole her savings. Ježková does not so much triumph over misery or accept it as she *absorbs* it. There is no revelation, and little in the way of redemption aside from when Ježková learns (at the very end of her life) that her son has successfully undergone his operation and that his vision has been restored. Ježková is defined by *passivity*, which is not to say she is lazy or lacking in direction, but that she is led by circumstances, rather than proactively addressing them. And her frequent flights of fantasy, mentally removing her from the pain of existence, do her little good.

In *Ikiru*—the third film by famed director Akira Kurosawa to be referenced in this paper (with *Seven Samurai* and *Kagemusha* being the other two)—the protagonist, Kanji Watanabe, a Japanese bureaucrat nearing his retirement, is diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Coming to understanding the he has few days remaining, he struggles for meaning, wanting to leave a legacy beyond an indifferent family and an unfinished stack of paperwork. Watanabe decides to dedicate himself to the construction of a park—a project members of the community have wanted to see built for some time, but have been unable to see undertaken due to inefficiency in government. The difficulties Watanabe faces are considerable, but he prevails, seeing the park to completion and dying not long thereafter. Somewhat in contrast to the popular American sentiment of the present (the 2020s), family is neither the be-all nor the end-all of Watanabe's life. And he is stung by the coldness of his relatives (a theme in both *Inuyashiki: Last Hero* and Yasujirō Ozu's *Tokyo Story*) rather than embraced by them as he approaches his end.

But unlike the case of *Dancer in the Dark*, death is not bleak for Watanabe. Yes, a life without love or appreciation can be difficult, but *with purpose,* one can find a legacy. While *Ikiru's* Watanabe and *Breaking Bad's* Walter White choose radically different paths when faced with terminal diagnoses, there is an overlapping concept insofar that both

long-ignored and underappreciated men find tremendous strength in their mortality and vigour in their missions. This highlights the most significant difference between the leads of *Dancer in the Dark* and *Ikiru*—one is passive in the face of death and loss, and the other is not. That both characters are seemingly mild and easily abused makes this difference all the more striking, highlighting the role of *will*.

The final two films considered in this subsection are as much about isolation as death itself. The protagonist of *The Whale*, a morbidly obese college teacher (played by Brendan Fraser) who works remotely, rarely leaves his home, and has lost contact with his daughter, is one of the few cases of *self-isolation* considered in this paper. The teacher has committed no great crimes, been accused of nothing of consequence, and has remained financially independent. Rather, he has been brought close to the death to which he will eventually succumb through of years self-destructive overeating and has pushed *himself* away from his family. He has *embraced suffering* to the point of wallowing in it. And in *Banshees of Inisherin*, two old friends (played by Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson) grow apart after one decides he has better things to do with his remaining years than associate with the other. *Banshees of Inisherin* is about the ageing and dying of men, but it is no less so about the death of a friendship and the pain that causes.

With that, one is invited to answer these questions:

- **Consider the way the characters in these films face death and suffering—acceptance, adaptation, denial, passive inactivity, humour, et cetera—do some methods serve them better than others? If so, why and how?**
- **Some characters in these films are broken (or at least severely weakened) by their understanding of the impending demise and the pain they endure. Others are not. What separates them aside from circumstances? And what can one learn from their differing mindsets?**
- **Can a direct acknowledgement of death serve as a motivator? If so, how?**
- **Consider the role of the *memento mori* (mentioned earlier in this paper). Can any of the films listed in this subsection serve as a memento mori of sorts? Can they serve as mementoes of pain, suffering, and their inevitability? If so, do they offer any lessons other mementoes do not?**
- **In addition to death, several protagonists in these films face complete isolation. In what way is the loss of connection to others like death? Is the nature of the suffering similar? Can strategies for mitigating the trauma of one be used for the other? If so, which strategies, and how can they be adapted?**
- **Think back to the characters in these films who were least adept at addressing the problems they faced. What, if anything, could they have done differently to have a better outcome?**
- **Can watching the films in this subsection improve one's outlook on life or sense of hopefulness? If so, how?**
- **What, if any, is the role of grit in accepting death and suffering? How might it be applied?**

Swan Song—Finding Strength in Suffering and Mortality: (Music) "Crying" (Song, Roy Orbison, 1961), "Fix You" (Song, Coldplay, 2005), "Hurt" (Song, Nine Inch Nails/Johnny Cash, 1994/2002), "Love Will Tear Us Apart" (Song, Joy Division, 1980), "Tears in Heaven" (Song, Eric Clapton, 1992)

Prompts, Questions, and Suggestions for Discussion: One might argue that a life without hurt is not a life at all. It is an incomplete thing, a sanitised simulacrum (and impossible to maintain).

With that in mind, "Hurt" seems the most obvious song to begin this subsection. There are two versions of the song—the older version by Nine Inch Nails and the newer one by Johnny Cash. The lyrics tell of drug addiction and its effects—a common enough theme, but Cash's singing in his rendition is what sets this song apart. Cash's voice, still resonant despite his advanced age at the time of the recording, is inflected with a vulnerability and pain a less experienced, younger man would be hard-pressed to offer. "Crying" is an equally self-evident choice. Telling of a man who is putting on a brave face despite the pain of a failing relationship, "Crying" may not have the same depth of emotion as Cash's version of "Hurt," but Orbison's vocals convey a smooth melancholy of their own.

Following "Crying" is "Love Will Tear Us Apart," a composition about the slow death of a relationship as the partners mentally prepare to go their separate ways. The melody of the song is deceptive—it does not *sound* unhappy, and the drum and bass sections *might* qualify as upbeat (or nearly so), yet its affectless vocals and dolorous lyrics hint at a depression fuelled by a loss that is not easily extinguished.

"Tears in Heaven" tells of the singer's loss of his young son. With Eric Clapton's distinctly mellow stylings, the seriousness of the topic might be lost on one not listening closely. Still, the song serves as an emotional balm—soothing pain, if never taking it away. Finally, "Fix You" offers an attempt at healing of a different sort, with the singer claiming he will *fix* the pain of his beloved.

In each of these songs, pain, suffering, and loss are addressed in different ways, some embracing them, others suggesting a solution. Listening to them, certain questions come to mind in the context of this subsection:

- **How do the different songs in this subsection express suffering and the singer's reaction to it? Is there a common theme to them all? If so, what is that theme?**
- **Does listening to these songs offer any insight into how one can effectively manage and express suffering? If so, what are these insights?**
- **How can one channel pain—possibly of the sort expressed in these songs—to productive ends? Can pain be used as a foundation for grit? If so, how?**

5. Conclusion

Accepting the inevitability of pain, loss, suffering, and death is not easy. It is a challenge and burden each person must undertake in the process of becoming a fully formed adult. It is also an opportunity. For the learner, there are chances for growth, the accumulation

of wisdom, goal setting, the cultivation of mental discipline, and the development of character and *grit*. For educators, there are opportunities as well—to guide the mind, temper the character, and nurture the spirit of those under the teacher's tutelage. And in doing so, educators may commence mental journeys of their own. The very process of helping students grower stronger and more capable is an exercise in generativity, passing down something that will long outlive any one person.

This paper is a starting point, both conceptually and in terms of suggestions. No one author can single-handedly develop a perfect, universally suitable program to teach students how to *adapt to and overcome* the suffering and loss all will experience. It is debatable if *any* course, no matter how well-designed, could do all this for all people at all times and places. Nevertheless, one must begin at the beginning—where there is much work to be done. And the suggestions and concepts herein—limited, flawed, and founded upon a decidedly Anglo-American worldview—are intended to serve as inspiration for other, more dedicated, more capable educators and course designers.

Despite these caveats, the author stands firmly behind the premise of this paper—that media and popular culture *can and should* be used to promote grit, mortality awareness, and goal setting in our age of panic, fear, irrationality, uncertainty, and anxiety.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the Author
Brant von Goble, Ed.D., teaches educational research methodology and cross-cultural communications at Jilin International Studies University, P. R. of China.

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