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THE GRATEFUL TERRORIST:

Folklore as Psychological Coping Mechanism

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A friend of a friend was shopping in a popular grocery store, and in front of him/her was a Middle-Eastern—possibly Iraqi—man who did not have enough money to pay for his groceries. He refused to replace any of his groceries and was holding up the line. The friend offered a few extra dollars for his order to the stranger, who then left the store with his groceries. When the friend left the store, he/she found that the Middle-Eastern stranger was waiting outside. The man thanked the friend for the money and warned him/her not to drink Coca-Cola products after a specific date.

—Legend of the Grateful Terrorist
(2005)

The folktale of the grateful dead was once widely known and passed on through both religious and secular traditions. Today most people would conjure an image of the popular rock band, which is said to have found its name from this story, as well (Cohen 2000). The story has evolved throughout history in response to society's psychological coping needs during times of crisis. This mythic theme has resurfaced from the earliest Judaic scriptures to contemporary urban legends.

According to Linda Dégh, "Brief and 'factual' statements about horrible criminal acts, devastating natural catastrophes, alien invasions, life-threatening conspiracies against common people by powerful interest groups or governments . . . have spread

like wildfire because they mesh perfectly with the anxieties of ordinary people, who are alienated by the sober and banal reality of everyday existence in a technological age" (2001, 126). Such anxieties of daily living call out for comforting. Those who lived through the angst of monumental events such as Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassinations, and September 11, 2001, carry with them an indelible imprint of the events. The "I remember where I was when" statements that arise when individual survivors congregate point to the long-lasting significance of the event and the "flash-bulb memory" effect. Storytelling and sharing of legends by and about those who lived through such events through luck, serendipity, or the kindness of others provide a context in which others who pass on the legends come to grips with the shared trauma that has befallen them. The process can be a positive cathartic event and instill a sense of gratitude that those who tell the tale—like those the legend describes—are also survivors (Dégh 2001).

It was difficult for individuals experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress to escape constant reminders of September 11, 2001. Every television station aired coverage of the attack. Rumors began to surface, spreading through e-mail, web sites, the media, and word of mouth. These urban legends included an unburned Bible found in the wreckage, taxis avoiding the

World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11, terrorists planning to poison candy and attack malls on Halloween, Ryder and U-Haul trucks stolen by terrorists, a picture of a tourist on the roof of the tower with a plane in the background, and demonic faces seen in the smoke from the Twin Towers (Heimbaugh 2001). Perhaps one of the most popular stories was the legend of the grateful terrorist, quoted at the beginning of this article.

The grateful terrorist rumor became so prevalent following 9/11 that Coca-Cola posted a response on the company's web site in 2002:

These rumors are absolutely false and are causing needless worry. The Coca-Cola Company has an uncompromising commitment to product safety, and our products are produced and distributed through secure facilities. We use a number of processes to assure the safety and quality of the water and ingredients used to make products of the Coca-Cola Company. To ensure the effectiveness of our safeguards, we do not discuss the details of these processes.

The product changes and can include any popular soft drink. The location of the incident changes as well: a grocery store, a gas station, or a restaurant. A date is always set, such as July 4. After the date passes, a new date emerges to keep the rumor

current. Sometimes the friend is a man, other times a woman—but the friend is never available to be questioned about the event. This article will explore this narrative's thematic attributes, the psychological coping mechanism that perpetuates the tale, and the legend's historical evolution.

Thematic Attributes of the Narrative

The unique aspect of this urban legend and its historical predecessors is that specific themes arise through the narrative. Differing from other urban legends, they provide a positive outcome for the primary characters and participants:

1. A stranger is in a state of need or helplessness.
2. A favor is provided by a friend of a friend, a Good Samaritan.
3. The stranger unexpectedly repays the Good Samaritan by providing information, warnings, prophetic predictions, or wisdom.

The positive outcome also offers a moral for the narrative: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” As a result, the story models altruistic behavior for those who hear it, while providing a coping mechanism for those who want to believe.

Psychological Coping Mechanisms

When the narrative is viewed as a coping mechanism, people react and participate in the story to different degrees. Taking part in the psycho-narrative through belief and sharing of the story with others can result in comfort, hope, or a lowering of the individual's death anxiety. Participation in the narrative experience provides a sense of ownership for the individual, without actually experiencing the event. One person might believe that the scenario actually occurred, passing the story on to others wholeheartedly. Another may see the legend as mere entertainment. Others may simply

Unfortunately, the favorable theme may be ignored, and listeners may focus only on the negative warning, “Do not drink Coca-Cola after” This may raise their anxiety and refocus attention on the troubling social context and personal concerns.

Belief in a Just World

According to Jean Piaget (1932), the developing child goes through a stage of moral autonomy characterized by a strong belief in “immanent justice.” In this stage, the world is perceived as a place where “good” is rewarded and “bad” is punished. Perhaps in a roundabout and mysterious way, this urban legend reflects immanent justice at work. There is experimental evidence that most people maintain a degree of belief in a just universe. The belief in a just world allows us to self-servingly interpret negative events (Lerner 1980). If bad things happen to people, in short, it's because they deserve it. The protective role of the belief in a just world is clear: “Since I am a good person, I am not in danger.” Tragedies like somebody's arbitrary death in an accident or an act of terrorism may have particularly negative effects on a person who is a strong believer in a just world.

Chasteen and Madey (2003) found that participants with a high belief in a just world viewed arbitrary death of victims as more tragic and unjust than those with a low belief. Events with the magnitude of the September 11 attack can have a devastating effect on the belief in a just world. Individuals may think, “People were killed for no reason. It could have been me, and may happen to me in the future.” Normally, individuals are protected by their self-esteem against awareness of their mortality (Greenberg et al. 1992). Self-esteem is obtained via identification with one's cultural values and the performance of good deeds. Doing good is rewarded by the cultural system. For this buffer mechanism to work, basic beliefs—such as the belief in a just world—are necessary.

Terror Management Theory

The urban legends originating from the September 11 attack can be understood

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The most prominent theme seen in this urban legend is that acts of kindness and good deeds are rewarded in unexpected ways. Even though there is a hint of threat in the warning itself, this is one of few urban legends that provides a positive outcome regarding the good deed and the advice. Other legends tend to create anxiety through fearful scenarios where someone is often injured or escapes from harm in the nick of time.

pass on the legend without any investment in the story, emotional or otherwise (Dégh 2001).

Responses can be seen as healthy or unhealthy. The coping mechanism becomes positive when an individual's anxiety is lowered. It may be unhealthy, however, for someone to place too much faith in a narrative that is untrue. Identifying with the greater moral theme of doing good for others may increase positive interaction with others.

through the psychological context of terror management theory. This theory originated from studies of emotional responses when people are faced with the knowledge that they will die. The awareness of one's own mortality causes psychological terror, leading the individual to participate in "terror management" behaviors. These behaviors act as a buffer to this existential angst. In an attempt to protect the self, individuals construct belief in a cultural system and worldview. They then measure their sense of worth by how well they are living up to the expectations of their cultural beliefs. People with higher self-esteem have lower death anxiety, according to this theory.

The 9/11 stories convey a need for an explanation, express emotions about perpetrators or victims, and offer information about future events. As an attempt at terror management, these mythic tales try to reestablish a sense of control and restore belief in an immanent, universal justice. The legend of the grateful terrorist describes a future terrorist event, manifesting and expressing fear. Rumors circulated regarding an impending attack planned to occur near Halloween (Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg 2003), expressing the same fear and anxiety as the grateful terrorist legend. Such stories also provide information that transmutes free-floating anxiety about potential terrible events into a fear of a concrete event over which one has some control. The informative and emotional function are complementary, acting together to restore a sense of control (Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001). It is significant that the Good Samaritan's act of kindness is rewarded with information. It symbolizes a victory of good over evil, thus restoring belief in the cultural system and protecting against fear and anxiety.

Rumors and urban legends are sometimes produced to enhance negative stereotypes. Allport (1954) emphasized the role of rumor in enhancing prejudice and hostility, resulting in the triggering of violence. Negative reactions toward "out-group members" constitute one of the basic predictions of terror management theory (Greenberg et al. 1990;

Nelson et al. 1997). In the grateful terrorist urban legend, a person of Middle-Eastern descent is planning, or at least knows about, the Coca-Cola poisoning. The terrorist in the story is not depicted as completely evil, nor is he impervious to acts of kindness. The urban legend not only evokes fear or panic (Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg 2003, 136), but also restores basic hope that the principles of good and immanent justice are at work. The altruistic gesture of the person who offers the stranger money demonstrates the tendency of helping behaviors to increase after catastrophes such as September 11. Altruistic action increases self-worth and acts in the service of terror management, reducing death anxiety.

Narratives and Constructive Meaning

Facing the fear, anxiety, and chaos that profound loss or trauma brings, an individual creates a personal narrative. This replaces a state of shock and meaninglessness. Niemeyer stated that a person must move from the absence of meaning to the meaning of absence, acknowledging the loss and assigning to the loss a meaning that they can incorporate into their lives. When confronting difficult events, people attempt to weave an account of the events in order to make sense of them.

Following the California wildfires of October 2007, Mark Lepore was a member of a mental health team in the Los Angeles County area that accompanied residents back to the neighborhoods affected by the fires. Many of the residents had begun assigning meaning to the loss of their homes and possessions. One victim stated that he had lost much of his antique business that he had worked at since he was sixteen years old. He explained that this must have happened for a reason. For the past ten years, he had vowed to scale down his work but did not. Now he would have time to spend with his children and grandchildren. Another person was spared, but his friends' and family's homes on the block were destroyed. He owned a construction business and planned to work to repay them for their years of sup-

port. He looked at this event as an opportunity to help others. People who had previously experienced significant loss knew that their reaction to the event was pivotal, now and in the future. Only in hindsight, as the effects of the event are processed, will the trauma carry meaning. The life narrative, the self, and the world then become comprehensible again.

Stories constructed by survivors as coping mechanisms vary. The actual event and observable behaviors that follow are less important than the underlying psychological dimensions. Creating stories or narratives is a method people use to express the psychological processing of an overwhelming event. Heroic appraisals of events act as a protective factor to some individuals, providing a sense of purpose and a symbolic way to transcend the horrific experience. Such is the case with survivors of September 11. In some cases, individuals create healthy narratives based in reality; in other cases, people incorporate urban legend and folklore in creation in their reconstructed narratives.

The unique themes of the grateful terrorist narrative can be traced historically across two thousand years. Gordon Gerould and Norm Cohen (1908/2000) have provided extensive research on this topic. The themes remain consistent, but the names, context, and storyline have evolved. During times of stress and anxiety, the rumors and themes resurface.

The Vanishing Hitchhiker

The tale of the vanishing hitchhiker is one of the best known urban legends. The time is always evening. A driver sees a man or woman standing on the side of the road. The driver stops and invites the hitchhiker into the car. The passenger always sits in the back and gives the driver a strange message. When the driver turns around to ask the passenger about the statement, the person has vanished from the back seat. Sometimes the hitchhiker has left a sweater behind, or the seatbelt is still fastened where the person had been sitting (Jacobson 1948; Brunvand 1981 and 2001).

The legend has many different variations, yet all share common characteristics. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and throughout World War II, this urban legend began to flourish. Tales spread of people picking up hitchhikers who gave prophetic warnings about how long the war would last, and then vanished. Sometimes the passenger was a nun; other times it was an elderly man with no money. In each case, the stranger thanked the driver for the ride and offered information as repayment. Jacobson (1948) noted that this theme “had appeared in every military conflict since the Napoleonic Wars,” and variations may stem back to the Middle Ages.

In other versions, the hitchhiker is performing an act of kindness by saving a person's life or leading a doctor to a sick relative. One common theme is that the audience never fully discovers who—or what—the hitchhiker was. It is implied that the figure was a ghost of someone deceased or an angel that returned to do an act of kindness. This is revealed by the recognition of the figure through photographs; later the driver stumbles upon the stranger's headstone in a cemetery or is told that the person passed away on that same date many years ago. The anniversary date plays an important role. The figure usually died one year ago on that date, or it was his or her birthday. Each detail adds depth and drama to the story, holding the audiences' attention and assuring it will be believed and passed on again (Jacobson 1948; Brunvand 1981 and 2001).

The Story of Tobit

The story of Tobit is part of Hebrew apocryphal literature written between 200 and 100 B.C.E. Gordon Gerould (1908/2000) noted that this story combines two separate folklores: the tale of the poison maiden and the tale of the grateful dead.

When the Jewish people were persecuted in Nineveh, a righteous man named Tobit buried the bodies of the executed. Despite his good deed, Tobit was arrested, later becoming blind and losing his wealth. He sent his son, Tobias, to collect an unpaid

debt from his relative Gabael. On the way, Tobias was joined by a stranger (disguised as Azarias, another of Tobit's relatives), who later reveals himself to be the angel Raphael. The angel encouraged him to do two things. First, Tobias caught a fish, preserving its heart, liver, and gall. Second, he asked for the hand of Gabael's daughter, Sara, in wedlock. Seven previous suitors had been killed attempting to consummate their marriages with Sara. Using the heart and liver of the fish, Tobias exorcized a demon, Asmodeus, which had possessed Sara. He then used the gall of the fish to cure his father's blindness (Gerould 1908/2000).

The Story of the Grateful Dead

Gerould was one of the first scholars to identify the theme of the grateful dead in early literature and folktales. The first of two primary characters is usually a destitute person who has died without any personal resources or one who has committed a sin and was condemned by contemporary society. For these reasons, the person was left unburied. The second character is a kind and altruistic person who donates his last bit of money so that the body can be buried. As the charitable person continues on his journey, he meets a stranger who offers to help in any way he can. Later, it is discovered that the stranger is actually the ghost of the deceased person he had helped to bury—hence the title of the “grateful dead” (Gerould 1908/2000).

This story evolved across history, incorporating new cultural motifs while maintaining the core theme of a kind act to a stranger and repayment for the good deed in an unexpected way. The grateful dead theme also incorporates tales of a grateful stranger, as Gerould noted. Another early depiction of this theme is the tale of Simonides in Cicero's *De Divinatione*. Simonides buried an exposed corpse and was warned by the deceased in a dream not to board a specific ship for his own safety. All who sailed on the ship were lost in a shipwreck (Gerould 1908/2000).

Gerould also noted three additional early variations on the theme: Jewish, Annamite, and Survian VI. The Jewish theme is quite similar to the story of Simonides. After his father's death, a young man from Jerusalem was traveling and found a Jewish corpse hanging in chains. The man had been suspected of stealing money, and his body would not be buried until his debt was repaid. The young man paid the debt and buried the body. He was later saved during a storm at sea by a magical rock that carried him back to land, and then carried by an eagle back to Jerusalem. The ghost of the deceased man appeared to him and explained that it was he who was both the rock and eagle and that he would continue to reward the young man in the future for his kindness. The other variants follow the theme more loosely. Each tale incorporates the burial of a corpse by an individual who is a faithful friend or a compassionate stranger. Ultimately, the primary character is rewarded for his altruistic actions (Gerould 1908/2000).

Similarities among Narratives and Psychological Implications

Some may argue that this common theme occurs in every culture as a result of the human condition and societal milieu. A Jungian psychological view attributes recurring themes to humanity's collective unconscious, in an archetypal sense, or to the common human experience. An archetype is a primordial image or form of universal thought that responds to the world. According to Jung, “The archetype is a kind of readiness to produce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas. Hence it seems as though what is impressed upon the unconscious were exclusively the subjective fantasy—ideas aroused by the physical process. We may therefore assume that the archetypes are recurrent impressions made by subjective reasons” (Jung 1953, 87). A recurring archetype may appear in dreams, myths, ritual, or art and be projected into cultural folklore. Whether the tale is passed from one culture to

another, evolving over time, or is a recurring archetype originating from societal contexts or the collective unconscious, the universal theme remains fascinating.

There are some obvious differences among the grateful terrorist story, the vanishing hitchhiker, and the older stories of the grateful dead. In all of the stories, however, gratitude is expressed in a life-and-death context during a period of social anxiety. This context constitutes the general backdrop for the story: September 11, the Pearl Harbor attack, or the death of an individual who is eventually buried. The symbolic nature of the burial, as an act that restores dignity and perhaps prevents a state of no repose for the dead (Gerould 1908/2000), parallels the altruistic kindness to the Middle-Eastern man in the modern urban legend of the grateful terrorist. In both cases, symbolic or purely altruistic acts have the psychological effect of restoring a sense of justice, fulfilling a protective function, or acting as a coping mechanism against death anxiety.

Folklore has acted as a means to ease this anxiety for as long as humans have existed. Belief in an urban legend can be a healthy—or unhealthy—way for people to participate in terror management. Mortality assures that we will continue to experience disruptions to our belief in immanent justice, guaranteeing that the legend of the grateful dead will continue to evolve. What form will it take next? ▼

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The authors would like to thank Amanda Cisler, a graduate of California University of Pennsylvania and currently a school counselor, for her help in editing this article.

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