Sigmund Freud introduced the fear of death concept as a component of his psychoanalytic approach. Freud conceptualized the denial of death as a mode to cope the reality of our own mortality. He contended that no one could imagine his or her death; consequently, within the unconscious everyone is a fervent believer in his or her own immortality (Lifton 1976:30). Others expanded his theory of the denial of death, most notably Robert Jay Lifton. His paradigm of death and continuity within a psychohistoric perspective is not only riveting but also relevant to our times, particularly the current environment we have created and struggle through. Through Lifton’s paradigm, we as not only researchers but as protean people are provided with a new model to critically analyze the foreign policy of the current American regime—the War on Terror and the Occupation of Iraq.

THE FEAR OF DEATH PARADIGM: ITS INCEPTION AND ITS SHIFT

Sigmund Freud argued that along with or counter to the Life Instinct or Eros a Death Instinct or Thanatos exists and operates. It is drastically different from the Life Instinct: an inherent destructiveness and aggression directed mainly against the self. In fact, the Death Instinct is continuously moving towards death—ultimately a return to an organic state free of tension and conflict (Brown:27). The compulsion of repetition is an attempt to prevent further development in order to achieve the original organic state; thus, the aim of life is ultimately death. Because humans are the only beings to attain a high-level of consciousness whereby becoming aware of mortality, denial of death is immediate (Lawless). Freud contended that it was impossible to imagine one’s own death. When one does strive to do so, he or she still exists as a “spectator”. Freud thus maintained that within our unconscious we are certain of our own immortality (as quoted within Lifton 1976:30).

Robert Jay Lifton has shifted the Fear of Death paradigm within a psychohistoric perspective. He views the paradigm within the theory of symbolic
immortality (Lifton 1976:29). Lifton states that we are not convinced of our own immortality; “we both ‘know’ that we will die and resist and fail to act upon that knowledge (Lifton 1976:31).” The desire or need to overcome death is not purely denial but signifies a universal yearning to preserve an inner sense of continuous symbolic relationship with a person’s kin and history—past and future. His idea of symbolic immortality is based on Otto Rank’s suggestion that humans have an un-ending want for an ‘assurance of eternal survival for his self’ (quoted within Lifton 1976:32); indeed, Rank proposed that in order to preserve a person’s spiritual self culture was created through alterations of natural conditions (Lifton 1976:32).

Lifton elaborates the process of symbolization by describing what he defines as five modes of symbolic immortality. One mode is biological whereby we live on through our children and subsequent generations. Lifton states that is not merely biological but also social as expresses through kinship and social relations. Another is the theological concept of immortality of transcending death through spiritual attainment. The third mode of symbolic immortality is accomplished through what Lifton calls ‘works’. These include artworks, one’s influences on others, etc. The fourth mode of symbolic immortality is the theme of eternal Nature—being survived by Nature. The final mode is the state of ecstasy or ‘experiential transcendence’, which may be attained through sexual pleasure, mysticism, battle or the use of drugs (Lifton 1976:32-34).

Through the employment of symbolic immortality theory, Lifton suggests that changes in cultural emphasis on certain modes of symbolic immortality from one historical period to another can be explained. He claims that we, particularly in the West, exist now in state of doubt of viability of these modes following the horrors of World War II—the atomic bomb on Japan and the Holocaust. The realization of our dilemma due to such calamities as environmental destruction and the dangers of nuclear weapons have generated imagery of extinction (Lifton 1976:34-35).

THE PROTEAN SELF: MALLEABILITY OF SELF AND OF A NATION

Lifton further illustrates the effects of the dramatically changing social landscape of modern times in his book entitled The Protean Self. The protean self receives its name from the Greek sea deity Proteus. Proteus is known as great shape-shifter. The protean self is significantly distinct from that of the past due to its ability to alter itself by use of available knowledge and resources. It has emerged as result of mass confusion, which is a result of uncontrollable historical forces and social uncertainties (Lifton 1993:1-2). The historical forces or influences are the displacements of swift historical change, the mass media revolution, and the threat of human extinction. All of these forces have accelerated dramatically within the last
half of the twentieth century; thus causing a traumatic collapse of former group identities and former bases of authority. However, means of altering the self within extreme ambiguity have also changed. The protean self is a “mode of living”, especially in the United States (Lifton 1993:3).

The United States is described as the protean self embodied as a nation. Lifton considers the “shape-shifter” to be a fixture of the nation for three reasons. One is that we are displaced from our origins. Our nation is composed of continued influx of immigrants (ourselves included). The new arrivals are constantly ‘re-estranged’. The last reason is that we perceive ourselves as people of metamorphosis (Lifton 1993:32).

The United States as a protean nation is maintained due to the intensification and expansion of confusion within the society. When the Cold War ended, the United States and its citizens were no longer enabled to view themselves as stable. The world-clarifying enemy had disappeared. The Soviet Union was a constructed ‘other’ that provided us with the capability of defining ourselves in contrast with the perceived Soviet evil and created a sense of cohesion (Lifton 1993:32-33).

SUPERPOWER SYNDROME AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Lifton describes the United States as suffering from Superpower Syndrome. The syndrome is the national mindset that has become omnipotent. A mindset perceived as unique, which entitles it to weld control over all other nations. The events of 9/11 reinforced the sense of claim to power and domination. Because, Lifton argues, at the center of superpower syndrome exist a prevailing fear of vulnerability, the attacks rendered the United States an “aggrieved superpower”. Because of this exposure of weakness, a livid resolve to restore or extend the domination of the superpower ensues (Lifton 2003:3-4).

The Superpower Syndrome and America’s apocalyptic mindset can be described and analyzed within Lifton’s concept of death and continuity. Lifton proposes that we yearn for meaning and are aware that we will eventually die; thus feeling the need to place our deaths within the cosmic order. When individual death is connected to the death and rebirth of the world, there is potential for greater importance. A person who believes and is involved in an apocalyptic ideology internalizes the feeling of a transcendent cosmic order; as a result, he or she is no longer merely immortal but linked to a deity. Due to this association, omnipotence substitutes vulnerability and anguish. (Lifton 2003:19-20). Lifton insists that what the individual believer:
...shares with all of us is the universal impulse to spiritualize death, to find some larger meaning in the continuity of life... Whatever its extremity, the apocalyptic imagination has its beginnings in ordinariness, in the conundrum we human beings experience in the face of death. This is why there is always the potential for a version of the apocalyptic imagination to appear (Lifton 2003:21).

Lifton argues that the “apocalyptic imagination” transforms into violent mission of purification when the group of believers becomes overwhelmed with death anxiety due to constant paranoia. Because evil is perceived as the cause of this anxiety, a fervent desire for the realization of the apocalypse develops in order to eradicate this evil. The malevolence is envisioned as a rival army who must be exterminated. The violent apocalyptic believers are enabled to accomplish this feat by amalgamating themselves with God or history—claiming the ownership of death by deciding who must die. Lifton further argues that the violent behavior of apocalyptic believers is an extreme mode of aggregate renewal or transcendence beyond death. Death is immortality; killing and dying achieve rebirth. The omnipotence generated by the alliance with God manifests grandiosity and even megalomania. Apocalyptic leaders and ardent supporters strive to replace the world with the self. The world must be obliterated in order to redeem it—to purify it of the evil contamination (Lifton 2003:22-24). The proliferation of nuclear weapons, particularly in the hands of the last superpower, have created a new dimension of the ownership of death—“ownership of the death of the world” (Lifton 2003:46).

The Vietnam War is a prime example that illustrates Lifton’s concept of apocalyptic ideology in practice and national foreign policy. The American war in Vietnam was a component of the global mission of destroying the expansion of Communist “evil”, a zealous mission of purification. A soldier’s statement exemplifies the mentality of the invasion and mission:

We had to destroy it [the village] to save it (Lifton 2003:46). The “War on Terrorism” is a form of apocalyptic ideology. Terrorism has been transformed by the Bush Administration and their mouthpieces in the media into a formidable enemy army. Indeed, Bush has revealed it as God’s mission to obliterate evil in the form of omnipresent terrorists. Warmongering, which was extensively utilized, is a form of collective transcendence (Lifton 2003:109-111).

The events of September 11, 2001, caused all Americans to become survivors. We all shared a specific psychological event. Geographical removal did not exclude us; television images and the feeling of suffering through a national...
ordeal created social cohesion as survivors. If one examines the common themes in the psychology of the survivor, one will learn how Americans have responded to the events on September 11. The five themes identified by Lifton are death anxiety, death guilt, psychic numbing, suspiciousness, and construction of meaning (Lifton 2003:137-147).

The death anxiety of survivors consists of the fear of a similar disaster. The forms of human-induced catastrophes similar to what occurred on September 11 seem possible. Not only have those directly affected by the events felt vulnerable but all citizens of the United States, including leaders. Death guilt is sometimes referred to as survivor guilt; however, Lifton provides a clear distinction between the two: survivor guilt can be misunderstood as actual wrongdoing while guilt feelings are psychological expressions of self-condemnation and may be undeserved. Death guilt arises when others die while a certain individual survives. Termed failed enactment, one fails to act in a manner one expected or hoped. Another form of failed enactment is one feels he or she failed to experience the self-proscribed emotions. While death guilt can be transformed into animated guilt (such as anti-war Vietnam veterans), it is potentially unpredictable and dangerous if suppressed, which may lead into violent urges (Lifton 2003:140-141).

Lifton defines the theme of psychic numbing as:

…the inability, or disinclination, to feel, a freezing of the psyche… a temporary death in the service of remaining psychically or even physically alive (Lifton 2003:142).

The theme of suspiciousness entails how survivors may subsequently become wary of others' intentions. The ultimate theme is construction of meaning in the wake of a disaster. The constructed meaning is infused with life-and-death dimensions and possibly with essential cultural values. Drastically different meanings can be formed from the same disaster. A passionate mission may derive from the meaning. The mission is a “form of witness” (Lifton 2003:144-146). The form of witness may be false whereby it is:

drawn narrowly, manipulatively, and violently, in connection with retribution and pervasive killing (Lifton 2003:147).

The act of false witness is evident in the My Lai massacre. Five hundred innocent Vietnamese were slaughtered as a form of retribution for the dead American soldiers who were killed the day before by ambushes and minefields. Now, American policy is a form of false witness again but this time as revenge for the American victims of September 11 (Lifton 2003:146).
The war and ensuing occupation of Iraq is another example of the apocalyptic ideology in action. Like Vietnam, Iraq is an:

“atrocities-producing situation”—a setting in which ordinary soldiers, men no better or worse than you or me, could readily commit atrocities: shooting prisoners, randomly killing civilians, mutilating corpses…[The] environment…was particularly conducive to atrocities: counterinsurgency warfare in unfamiliar physical and cultural terrain; an enemy with support from the people (whether in common cause or out of fear) who could strike and kill but was hard to directly engage: fighting in which civilians were often impossible to tell apart from military enemies; the “body count” of enemy dead as virtually the only measure of success; “free-fire zones” in which one was permitted to fire virtually at random; and encouragement from officers to avenge the deaths of buddies and to deal with feelings of angry mourning by killing anyone or anything in sight (Lifton 2003:46-47).

The atrocity-producing environment, including the erroneous war policy and constant warmongering, has inevitably produced egregious acts against humanity. The various incidents generated by the invasion and immediate occupation of the dilapidated country are due to psychologically and militarily structured situation of the Iraq War and the War on Terrorism in general. The torture unveiled at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay has demonstrated the dire situation we are all in due to both the Superpower Syndrome and apocalyptic ideology of the war architects. As Lifton states that, the scandals are not the actions of ‘a few bad apples’ but are systematic of the war waged (Lifton 2006:339-340). While Abu Ghraib is an example of the atrocity-producing situation (and compared by Lifton to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam) (Falk et al. 2006:339), Al-Falluja known as the kill-zone by Iraq civilians (Falk et al 2006:418) and the Haditha massacre of November 2005 are more appropriate comparisons to the My-Lai slaughter.

CONCLUSION

While Lifton’s analysis of the United States as a survivor nation suffering from a syndrome of megalomania and apocalyptic ideology and violence seems very dire, hope exists to remedy the syndrome. We as members of the superpower must recognize that the American superpower is artificial and very dangerous not only to others but ourselves. We, including our leader must be willing to exercise empathic imagination regarding violent acts. Victimization must discontinue as a totalized condition that renders us as the absolute victims. The most essential (and possibly the most effective) is to reconstruct symbolic immortality by recognizing
limits as human beings. We have no claim to dominating death or history. If the citizens of the United States are willing to subvert authoritarian ideology that perpetuates apocalyptic violence, the American superpower will be recognized as a weak and illegitimate giant trying disastrously to rule and control the world and ultimately history (Lifton 2003:190-200).

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