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THE WALKING DEAD

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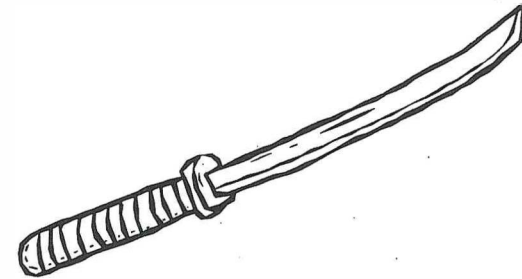
Psych of the Living Dead

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#TWDpsych





The Psychological Process and Cost of Killing in an Undead Wasteland

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"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."

—philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Many people see the possibility of a civilization-crippling zombie apocalypse as the perfect opportunity to become the ultimate badass. We all make ourselves out to be experts on tactics and strategies when an event has occurred in the past or is far removed from reality. Just listen to anyone discussing the previous evening's sportball match or the actions of a character in a Hollywood blockbuster. This form of armchair quarterbacking even extends to more serious topics; everyone can think of someone who claims to have the perfect plan for how

he or she would have thwarted the most recent mass shooting, bank robbery, or attack on national security. The zombie apocalypse is no different.

When one takes a thoroughly unscientific poll of Internet forums, water cooler talk, and friend and family ramblings, it seems that everybody has a zombie plan these days. These plans all have a common theme: People plan to do what it takes to survive. However, anyone who has been in a real crisis situation will tell you the same thing: What you do when the chips are down is often not what you planned. Killing is not easy, and even if you bring yourself to do it, it comes with a cost.

If the zombie apocalypse were a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book and the question on the first page was "Do you decide to be a pacifist or are you willing to kill to survive?" the result of the first option undoubtedly would be your death. Sure, you might stick to a moral code and refuse to kill survivors or kill only in self-defense, but sooner or later you would have to defend yourself, whether from survivors or from walkers, or die. Hershel Greene begins the story as a peaceful individual who refuses to kill walkers. However, he eventually comes to realize that he needs to do whatever is necessary to protect those he cares about. Those actions ultimately require a decision and exact a cost.

The Decision to Kill

Our bodies are designed to make decisions for us efficiently when we are faced with dire situations. Think of your brain as being similar to the computer in a modern car. Even though you may have read what to do when you start to skid, your car often takes the first actions automatically, modulating the brakes and transferring power to whichever wheels still have grip. Beyond

that, our bodies enter a heightened state of arousal in anticipation of such an event.

Imagine what it's like to be someone, anyone other than characters we've seen in *The Walking Dead*, struggling to survive in a world of constant conflict and danger:

Davin crawls through the broken storefront window of the abandoned grocery store, careful not to make a sound. His reconnaissance suggests that this part of the city is safer than most, but walkers might be anywhere. His eyes slowly adjust to the low light provided by the afternoon sun, casting the rows of shelves in deep shadows. His heart starts to beat a bit faster and his muscles tense up, forming a near death grip on the trusty M9 he pilfered from the corpse of a soldier back in Atlanta. He's been on edge since he evaded the cannibals that took the rest of his crew. Hypersensitive to his surroundings, he seemingly cues in on every creak, every shifting shadow, as if any one of them might be a potential threat. If it were just him, he might take his chances in the country, living off the land. But now he has Belinda to look after, and soon there'll be a baby. His eyes dilate, letting in as much light as possible, as he takes another cautious step into the store.

With few exceptions, humans enter a "fight-or-flight" state when experiencing situations that require immediate action: We are programmed to either confront a threat or flee from it. Our bodies typically begin to move before rational thought even enters the picture.

CRASH! A pile of cans to Davin's right topples over. His heart kicks into overdrive. Davin feels blood pump to his arms and legs, preparing him to make a quick retreat or fight.

off an assailant. His vision narrows as he focuses on the origin of the sound. Unknown to him, many of his bodily functions grind to a halt, whereas other processes kick in, preparing to deal with conflict and injury. Shakily, Davin raises his Beretta toward the potential threat.

Glenn undertakes similar missions during the initial days of *The Walking Dead* and faces similar perils. Confronted with an immediate and close threat, he might lash out defensively, whereas a more distant threat might lead him to flee back through the entrance to the adjoining street.

A walker shambles out from behind a display of toppled cans of corn. Its name was Ashley, at least according to the badge on its chest. Davin's finger twitches on the trigger, but his legs take him back toward the window. Ungracefully, he dives through the window into the afternoon light.

Dave Grossman, a retired lieutenant colonel from the U.S. Army and a former professor of psychology at the United States Military Academy at West Point, has studied the subject of killing, which he has termed "killology," extensively.² Grossman concluded that the concept of fight or flight is overly simplistic and not representative of the full range of options available to individuals facing members of their own species. Rather, humans encountering other armed humans are wired to fight, flee, posture, or submit. Grossman suggests that the major decision made by a combatant in an intraspecies conflict is whether to flee or posture; that is, should he run away or intimidate the other party to flee or submit? In *The Walking Dead*, we typically see the main protagonist, Rick Grimes, Colt Python in hand, staring down a new potential adversary, hoping to end a confrontation without firing a shot. Conversely, we also see the survivors flee

and ultimately submit in the face of an overwhelming adversary upon entering Terminus.

Davin rises to one knee, realizing he is not alone on the street. Another survivor stands mere feet from him, rifle pointing at his head. Davin raises his pistol, squaring off against this new foe. The man's rifle is shaking, and he seems as uneasy as Davin.

"Back off. No one needs to get hurt!" Davin yells, hoping to avoid conflict.

Humans do not like to kill other humans and usually will do whatever is necessary to avoid it. Even soldiers have had difficulty doing this throughout history. Military historians hypothesize that the majority of American soldiers did not fire at their enemies in combat situations until the Korean War, when fire rates reached approximately 55 percent. Based on an analysis of evidence³ collected from the Battle of Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle of the American Civil War, as well as known information regarding the effectiveness of the weapons and tactics used at the time, Grossman concluded that a large proportion of soldiers in the battle did not fire at enemy soldiers and may have even pantomimed firing. Grossman concluded that a number of soldiers also elected to serve in support roles, such as providing aid and supplies to other soldiers, suggesting that the killing that did occur was done by a relative minority of the soldiers.

Why have fire rates increased throughout armed conflicts, and why have some people shown themselves to be better at killing than others? First of all, some people are better at emotionally divorcing themselves from the act of killing or, for lack of a better term, are simply psychopathic like the Governor or Negan. Beyond simply being wired to kill, training and programming play important roles in making the decision to kill. This is different

Ready. Aim . . .

Most people know of war as it is portrayed in movies and on television, often with individual soldiers serving as one-man armies, dispatching hordes of enemy combatants. However, historical data suggest that soldiers in combat situations often declined to fire their weapons. The data suggest that somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of American soldiers fired their weapons at enemies during World War II. Fire rates increased with new methods of training and conditioning, reaching approximately 55 percent during the Korean War and between 90 and 95 percent during the Vietnam War.

from simply drilling or practicing. Many people spend time at the gun range or practicing martial arts, but few actually will take a life when faced with a conflict situation.

The military has put significant resources into developing ways to make soldiers more effective at emotionally distancing themselves from the act of killing. Common advice dictates that hostages should make themselves appear more human, showing a complete picture to their captor rather than just nameless faces. Theoretically, doing so will make it harder for a captor to kill a hostage. Combat training can be seen as largely the opposite. Rather than killing another human—a person who might have a family, friends, hobbies, and a life outside of war—an effective combatant eliminates a threat. Unlike a firearms enthusiast who spends time shooting at stationary targets, a soldier trains in full gear in a setting that resembles the battlefield; targets are in motion and appear only intermittently. Thus, a trained combatant is rewarded for reacting quickly in selecting and engaging a target. Furthermore, the training received by effective soldiers combines psychological conditioning, both classical and operant in nature, to make the acts of combat second nature. These differences (above and beyond the “To Serve and Protect” motto of law enforcement) explain why Rick Grimes is typically more hesitant to fire on a new potential threat than is Abraham Ford, a trained soldier. Although both are obviously experienced with

firearms and conflict, Abraham’s training allows him to act more instinctively in threat situations.

The point is that if you think killing will be easy even when you are facing a life-or-death situation, you are probably wrong. Chances are, you lack the conditioning to easily take the life of another human being. Many of you would hesitate. The luckiest of you will face an opponent who is equally averse to killing. Given enough time, a minority will learn to kill, though a greater proportion probably will die or realize that their role is to support those who possess the necessary killer instinct.

“Ronnie says no one enters his realm and lives,” the young survivor shakily proclaims.

Davin notices the kid’s finger tightening ever so slightly on the trigger of that old rifle. Everything drowns out around him as he squeezes the trigger of his Beretta, putting a neat hole in the forehead of the only person aside from Belinda he’s seen in months. Davin begins to shake even more uncontrollably, dropping to both knees. He begins to sob.

What about walkers? Should they not be easier to kill? By nature, they would seem to be already dehumanized, mere nameless hunks of rotting flesh with a singular desire to consume the flesh of the living. You might argue that killing a walker would be no different from defending against a hungry wolf. If only it were that easy. Imagine the nature of that hungry wolf but substitute its appearance with that of a five-year-old girl. Or your neighbor. Or your significant other. Can you honestly say you would not hesitate to pull the trigger then? A walker represents one of the most difficult adversaries imaginable as it can be humanized easily. Father Gabriel struggles to defend himself against walkers he knew in life. Even the otherwise bloodthirsty Governor has a soft spot for his daughter, keeping

her around after she becomes a walker and defending her by any means necessary. Unless you are able to work past your attachment to the ways of old and divorce yourself from the emotional burden of having to slay those who once lived, you are destined to join the ranks of the undead. The survivors in *The Walking Dead* have shown themselves to be adept at killing walkers, even doing so nonchalantly at times. However, it would be ignorant to suggest that this comes without a cost.

The Cost of Killing

You did it. You managed to overcome human nature. Through training or sheer will to survive, you pulled the trigger, thrust the spear, or swung that really sweet rock attached to a rope you rigged up, but at what cost?

It may come as a surprise to some people, but research consistently identifies having to take a life as the most traumatic experience for law enforcement personnel.⁴ Perhaps even more surprisingly, it ranks as more traumatic than having to witness another officer killed in the line of duty. Grossman suggests that the act of killing is the pinnacle of trauma for soldiers. If those best programmed and equipped still see killing as the most stressful experience imaginable, the average survivor is certainly not immune.

Trauma from such situations sometimes presents in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder. PTSD involves reexperiencing traumatic events, avoidance of similar situations, psychological distress when involved in analogous situations, hypervigilance, changes in behavior, and feeling detached from reality. PTSD also is associated with developing other psychological problems, including depression, substance use, psychosis, and suicide. Despite psychologists' best efforts, no one has developed an effective

method of inoculation against PTSD. The most researched form of inoculation, *critical incident debriefing* (the immediate discussion and processing of a stressful situation), does not appear to prevent the onset of PTSD or other stress reactions and may even produce worse outcomes.⁵ PTSD is pervasive among individuals returning from combat situations and is a likely result for many individuals who take lives in a zombie apocalypse. Indeed, research has shown that the act of killing significantly increases the likelihood of developing PTSD among soldiers.⁶

Trauma symptoms could play out in a number of ways for survivors of the zombie apocalypse. Survivors who killed other survivors might blame themselves and ruminate on ways they might have avoided killing; those who killed walkers who were family members, friends, or acquaintances might tell themselves they should have restrained the undead until they found a cure. Undoubtedly, survivors would become hypersensitive to their surroundings and jump at any noise that might resemble a potential threat with which they previously had to deal. Perhaps most prevalent would be feelings of sadness, loss, hopelessness, and regret, especially since the events of killing undoubtedly would play out in the survivors' minds repeatedly. Grossman additionally describes a correlation between the range of killing and the severity of the trauma, with individuals in control of long-range weapons such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) experiencing the least amount of trauma, individuals killing at firearm range experiencing more trauma, and those killing at intimate ranges, such as with knives or their bare hands, experiencing the most. Tyreese's experience outside the cabin,⁷ where he kills multiple walkers with his bare hands, surely takes a significant psychological toll. In the world of *The Walking Dead*, most killing takes place with firearms, melee weapons, and hand-to-hand combat; thus, it is unlikely that anyone killing to survive could avoid significant trauma.

Symptoms of PTSD and its correlates are not difficult to spot among the characters of *The Walking Dead*. The Morgan Jones of the television series, once a loving father and husband, has to kill his reanimated wife after she bites their son, Duane. When the survivors next meet him, Morgan is a changed man who is (1) detached from reality, (2) hypervigilant against potential threats, and (3) seemingly incapable of positive emotion.⁸ Even Michonne, the ultimate post-apocalyptic samurai, has been rendered seemingly incapable of forming emotional attachments with other survivors. Headstrong Rick is not immune from such effects either, becoming disconnected from reality and even swearing off violence for a time.

PTSD and its correlates are unlikely to abate on their own, especially in an environment where no one truly goes home and a respite from the horrors of the world is not an option. People experiencing PTSD often require years of therapy and even medication. It would be naive to believe there would be room in the world to develop a comprehensive system of mental health treatment after the turn. Even if some practitioners were still alive and did not have more pressing concerns (such as surviving), they would be few and far between. Additionally, one would assume that a much greater proportion of the population would be exposed to killing in the world of *The Walking Dead*, and thus PTSD would be much more prevalent. With limited access to treatment, survivors undoubtedly would be left to their own devices in dealing with the trauma resulting from their actions. Some would wallow in self-pity, becoming useless to society. Some would become increasingly paranoid, becoming reclusive. Some would resort to self-medication and, like Bob Stookey, a former military medic, rely on alcohol to numb their pain and help them sleep at night. The sad truth is that a number of survivors undoubtedly would take their own lives, unable to

live with their actions. However, some simply would soldier on with a heavy psychological burden.

Davin sits on a stump, gripping his Beretta, alert to every cricket, owl, and bat piercing the silence of night. For the third night in a row, he contemplates turning the weapon on himself, hoping to finally be rid of the image of that young man and his scared look as he realized he was about to die. However, he realizes he could never do that to Belinda and their baby, so he quietly removes the bottle of Wild Turkey hidden at the bottom of his rucksack, hoping that another shot will still his nerves and quiet his mind.

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Notes

1. Nietzsche (1886/2014).
2. Grossman (2014).
3. Military rifles at the time were muzzle loaders. One shot could be effectively loaded at a time, and the vast majority of the time would be necessarily spent reloading. However, of the 27,574 rifles recovered, nearly 90 percent were loaded. Half the loaded rifles had been loaded with 2 to 23 rounds.
4. Violanti & Aron (1994).
5. Roberts et al. (2009).
6. MacNair (2002).
7. Episode 5–1, “No Sanctuary” (October 12, 2014).
8. Episode 3–12, “Clear” (March 03, 2013).